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Exploring Social Influences on Self-Identity Formation through English Language Proficiency

(*Mengeksplorasi Pengaruh Sosial terhadap Pembentukan Identitas Diri melalui Kemahiran Berbahasa Inggris*)

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Abstract

This research aims to explore the social influences on self-identity formation through English language proficiency, utilizing a qualitative approach. English proficiency plays a significant role in forming individuals' self-identity, particularly amid the academic enivourment. The study involved a questionnaire distributed to 20 students major of English Language Education Program in Gorontalo state university students from diverse social backgrounds and varying levels of English proficiency. Data analysis was conducted using a thematic approach to identify key patterns and themes that illustrate the impact of social factors on the identity formation process. The findings indicate that social environments, including peers, and educational institutions, play an essential role in shaping how individuals perceive themselves through the lens of their English language abilities. However, family factor not significant forming student's self-identity, because they do not have an educational background or understanding of English. These findings are expected to provide deeper insights into the role of English proficiency in self-identity formation and this research provides significant benefits for educational institutions in understanding their strategic role in shaping students' self-identity.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pengaruh sosial terhadap pembentukan identitas diri melalui kemahiran berbahasa Inggris, dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif. Kemahiran berbahasa Inggris memainkan peran penting dalam membentuk identitas diri individu, khususnya di lingkungan akademik. Penelitian ini melibatkan kuesioner yang disebarkan kepada 20 mahasiswa Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris di Universitas Negeri Gorontalo yang berasal dari berbagai latar belakang sosial dan memiliki tingkat kemahiran bahasa Inggris yang berbeda. Analisis data dilakukan dengan pendekatan tematik untuk mengidentifikasi pola-pola dan tema utama yang menggambarkan dampak faktor sosial terhadap proses pembentukan identitas diri. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa lingkungan sosial, termasuk teman sebaya, dan sekolah, memainkan peran penting dalam membentuk cara individu memandang diri mereka sendiri melalui kemahiran bahasa Inggris mereka. Namun, faktor keluarga tidak berperan signifikan dalam membentuk identitas diri mahasiswa, karena mereka tidak memiliki latar belakang pendidikan atau pemahaman bahasa Inggris. Temuan ini diharapkan dapat memberikan wawasan yang lebih mendalam mengenai peran kemahiran berbahasa Inggris dalam pembentukan identitas diri dan penelitian ini memberikan manfaat yang signifikan bagi institusi pendidikan dalam memahami peran strategis mereka dalam membentuk identitas diri mahasiswa.

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1. INTRODUCTION

At the university level, achieving a high level of English proficiency is crucial for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students to succeed in their academic pursuits (Yu, 2022). Proficiency is described as students' ability to effectively use English to express and communicate meaning in both spoken and written contexts while completing their university coursework (Renandya et al., 2018). A correlational study by Sahragard and Baharloo (2009) involving Iranian university students majoring in English Language and Literature revealed that those with stronger English skills performed better academically. However, despite its importance, many EFL students struggle to achieve adequate English proficiency, which can hinder their academic success, social interactions, and future career opportunities. This raises concerns about the factors influencing students' English proficiency and how these factors contribute to their self-identity formation.

A person with strong English proficiency is likely to develop an identity that differs from those with lower levels of proficiency. Thus, a person who is proficient in English is often perceived as having a strong identity. Differences in identity are shaped by various internal and external or social factors. Internal factors include motivation to learn, interest in English, intelligence, and other personal drives. External factors, such as influence from friends, family, and schools, also play a significant role in enhancing one's English language skills. Since everyone comes from different backgrounds, their motivations for learning English can vary widely. This variation suggests the need for deeper exploration into the social influences that contribute to the development of English proficiency and identity formation.

English proficiency refers to an individual's ability to use English effectively in various communication situations. According to Bachman and Palmer (2010), English proficiency is defined as an individual's ability to effectively understand, speak, read, and write in English, meeting the communicative needs of everyday life or specific academic settings. In students, mastery of English is very important to improve their quality (Tulung, 2020). Therefore, proficiency can facilitate students majoring in English in the learning process. However, existing studies often focus on linguistic competence alone, overlooking the role of social influences in shaping both language proficiency and identity (Li & Zhang, 2021; Su, 2021; Aizawa et al., 2023). Addressing this gap, this study aims to investigate how social factors contribute to students' self-identity development through English proficiency.

Someone who learns a foreign language will experience changes in themselves over time. As described by Baker (1992), a person who learns a foreign language will experience several changes, for example, their perception of competence, communication style, behavior, or self-identity. Waterman (1984) describes identity as having a clear understanding of oneself, encompassing personal goals, chosen values, and individual beliefs. This self-identity evolves over time, shaped by life experiences, environmental factors, and social interactions. Given the increasing role of English as a global language (Bekou & Mhamed, 2023), understanding how students' self-identity is shaped through their English proficiency is crucial for developing more effective language learning strategies and fostering students' confidence in their linguistic abilities.

Norton (2000) argues that English proficiency plays a crucial role in shaping self-identity. Proficiency in English often leads to personal transformations, including increased communication confidence, deeper self-awareness, enhanced personal growth, and better academic achievement. According to Ghenghesh (2015), a correlational study by Sahragard and Baharloo (2009) involving Iranian university students majoring in English Language and Literature revealed that students with higher English proficiency tend to perform better academically. Despite such findings, studies exploring the direct link between English proficiency and self-identity, particularly in non-native English-speaking contexts, remain limited.

Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) research introduced a framework for examining identity within linguistic interactions. They highlight that identity is dynamic, continuously constructed and renegotiated through language use and social engagement. Their study adopts a sociocultural perspective. Norton (2016) similarly highlights that identity is an ongoing process, shaped by experiences across different times and places. Additionally, social factors significantly contribute to shaping students' identity in relation to their English

proficiency (Richards, 2023). Understanding this connection is crucial, as it can provide insights into how educational institutions and policymakers can create better support systems for EFL learners.

Block (2007) explains that identity is a fluid and ever-changing concept, particularly in the realm of learning a second language like English. He highlights that social elements, including family, school, peers, and the broader social environment, play a significant role in shaping how individuals develop their self-identity through English. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the intersection between social influences and self-identity formation in the context of English language proficiency. By exploring this relationship, the study contributes to the ongoing discussion on language learning, identity construction, and the broader sociocultural dimensions of education.

2. METHODS

This research was conducted using a qualitative method with a descriptive approach. According to Creswell (2007), qualitative research is an educational study that prioritizes the perspectives of participants. It involves formulating broad questions, collecting data primarily in the form of participants' words or texts, describing and analyzing the collected data, and conducting an inquiry that is inherently interpretative. The qualitative descriptive approach was chosen as it allows for an in-depth understanding of the social influences on self-identity formation through English language proficiency.

2.1 Data Collection

The data collection process in this study consisted of multiple methods to ensure comprehensive and reliable results. The primary data were obtained through questionnaires distributed to selected participants. The respondents consisted of students from the 2019 academic year who were actively engaged in learning English. The questionnaire aimed to gather information regarding their experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to English language proficiency and its influence on their self-identity.

In addition to questionnaires, researcher also conducted document analysis as a secondary data collection method. The student academic records (transcripts) were examined to assess their progress in English courses, achievements, and overall language proficiency levels. These records provided valuable insights into the correlation between their proficiency and their self-perception.

Furthermore, researcher engaged in observational methods by analyzing written responses in the questionnaires and identifying key themes that emerged from the students' narratives. This helped to capture both explicit and implicit perspectives regarding the role of English proficiency in shaping their self-identity.

2.2 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed systematically following the qualitative data analysis framework. The analysis process consisted of several stages:

1. Data Reduction: The researcher carefully reviewed the collected data, removing irrelevant or redundant information while focusing on key responses that addressed the research objectives. The most relevant responses were categorized according to emerging themes related to self-identity and English proficiency.
2. Data Display: The filtered data were then organized and presented in an easily interpretable manner. Tables, charts, and thematic summaries were used to visualize key findings, making it easier to identify patterns and relationships between different variables.
3. Conclusion Drawing and Verification: The final stage involved drawing meaningful conclusions from the analyzed data. Patterns and themes were examined critically to understand the influence of social factors on self-identity formation through English language proficiency. The findings were then verified through cross-referencing with academic records and existing literature to ensure reliability and validity.

By employing these rigorous data collection and analysis techniques, this study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how English language proficiency contributes to self-identity formation among students.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Proficiency in English can enrich students' self-identity formation process, especially among other learners. With increased English proficiency, students begin to see themselves as part of a global community, which gives them a new perspective on their own identity. The ability to communicate in an international language allows students to feel more confident. In this context, social factors act as a foundation that facilitates English language learning, while language proficiency helps form a more complex self-identity.

Proficiency in English significantly contributes to the process of self-identity formation among students. As their English proficiency improves, students develop a broader perspective of their identity, seeing themselves as part of a global community. This newfound confidence stems from their ability to communicate effectively in an international language. Social factors serve as the foundation for English

language learning, while language proficiency plays a crucial role in shaping a more complex self-identity. This section discusses the key social factors influencing self-identity formation, namely family, peer, and school influences.

3.1 The Role of Family in Self-Identity Formation

Family is often considered a primary factor in shaping students' self-identity, especially in language acquisition. However, the findings of this study indicate that family influence on English proficiency and self-identity formation is relatively minimal. The results of the questionnaire suggest that when family members are not proficient in English, their ability to provide linguistic and cultural support is limited. Without direct exposure to English at home, students rely more on external environments for language development.

Despite the limited direct influence, family support still plays an indirect role. Encouragement, emotional support, and financial investment in English education can positively impact students' motivation to learn. Parents who recognize the importance of English proficiency may enroll their children in additional language programs or provide access to resources such as books and online learning platforms. However, in comparison to other social factors, family influence remains secondary in shaping students' English-related self-identity.

3.2 The Influence of Peers on English Proficiency and Self-Identity

Peers play a significant role in shaping students' self-identity concerning English language proficiency. The study findings highlight that friendships serve as a crucial motivator for English learning. Interactions with friends who are proficient in English encourage students to improve their language skills and practice more actively. A peer-supportive environment allows students to engage in informal learning opportunities, such as conversations, group discussions, and collaborative learning activities, which reinforce their English skills.

Moreover, recognition and encouragement from peers contribute to students' confidence in using English. The social validation they receive strengthens their sense of identity as competent English speakers. Norton (2000) emphasizes that when individuals learn English and interact with peers who use the language, they not only develop language skills but also refine their self-perception and position within their social group. Consequently, strong friendships with English-proficient peers serve as a primary motivating factor for students to enhance their language abilities and shape their self-identity as English users.

3.3 The Role of Schools in Self-Identity Formation

Schools play a critical role in shaping students' self-identity, particularly in relation to English language proficiency. As formal educational institutions, schools provide structured environments where students receive systematic instruction, engage in practice, and refine their language skills. The curriculum, teaching methods, and learning activities implemented in schools greatly influence students' language development and self-identity.

One of the key factors identified in this study is the quality of teaching and instructional support. The majority of students reported positive contributions from their schools, particularly in terms of teacher quality, availability of learning resources, and effective teaching methods. Teachers serve as linguistic role models and motivators, encouraging students to integrate English into their daily communication. A well-designed English curriculum, supplemented with interactive and engaging learning methods, fosters a strong language-learning environment.

Additionally, the availability of supporting facilities, such as language laboratories, libraries, and extracurricular activities, further enhances students' exposure to English. These resources allow students to practice and immerse themselves in the language, reinforcing their confidence and self-identity. Based on the overwhelmingly positive responses, it can be concluded that schools significantly influence students' English language proficiency and contribute to shaping their self-identity as English speakers.

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusion

The study results indicate that among the three social factors examined, peer influence and school environment play the most significant roles in shaping students' self-identity related to English proficiency. While family support is beneficial, its impact is limited when family members lack English proficiency. In contrast, peer interactions and school-based learning provide direct opportunities for language development, confidence-building, and identity formation.

In conclusion, the ability to communicate in English allows students to perceive themselves as global citizens, fostering a sense of identity beyond their immediate cultural surroundings. Schools and peer groups serve as the primary environments where students develop their English proficiency and refine their self-identity in relation to the language. Encouraging a supportive and interactive language-learning environment is essential for enhancing students' confidence and self-identity as English speakers.

4.2 Suggestion/Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made to enhance students' self-identity formation through English language proficiency. Schools and educators should encourage greater family involvement by providing resources and strategies to help parents support their children's language learning, even if they are not proficient in English. Strengthening peer support systems through collaborative learning environments, such as English clubs, peer mentoring programs, and group projects, can further facilitate language acquisition and identity development. Additionally, schools should enhance their language programs by adopting innovative teaching methods, incorporating technology, and providing immersive experiences like debate competitions and exchange programs to boost students' confidence in using English. Lastly, future research could explore the long-term effects of English proficiency on self-identity, particularly in career development and social integration, while also conducting comparative studies across different cultural backgrounds to gain deeper insights into the role of social influences in language learning.

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