



The Impact of Social and Cultural Identities on the Development of Social Competence: A Case Study

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Introduction

English teachers are required to be able to make appropriate interpersonal and intercultural interactions or communication (Zhang, 2017). They shall be able to show, teach, and guide their students on how to make appropriate intercultural communication. They should have great social competence and intercultural interaction skill. Such a skill facilitates them in creating a positive and supportive learning environment. Furthermore, with strong social competence, they can effectively and efficiently respond to their students' needs and help them manage the dynamics of their learning challenges (Collie et al., 2017). It is, however, not a simple skill. Its development is complex. The process is multifaceted, and it involves aspects related to social, cultural, and ethnic identities, which vary among language teachers, and it continually changes throughout their lifespan.

Social competence is the ability to interact appropriately with peers and adults. It is 'the ability to engage in adaptive and positive social interaction' (Anme et al., 2014). This holds true, especially to multilingual and multicultural language teachers. In this regard, an English teacher should have high social competence. Otherwise, he may find it not easy to teach students how to use the language in a socioculturally correct manner. Social competence is beyond linguistics, but language teachers, unfortunately, are usually more concerned with the linguistics alone.

This research is important as it aims at informing language teachers on the importance of identity on the development of social competence, which is the ultimate goal in the language learning process. This study was conducted to investigate how social identity (education and profession) and cultural identity (ethnicity) impact the development of social competence. The research question of this study is, "How do social and cultural identities impact the development of social competence?"

Literature Review

Identity is a complex and multidimensional issue (Norton & Toohey, 2011). There are five concepts of identity: 1) identity is dynamic and constantly changing over time, 2) identity is complex, contradictory, and multifaceted 3) identity affects language use, and it is affected by language, 4) identity involves diverse relations of power in the form of either collaboration or coercion, and 5) identity formation is impacted by educational practices (Norton, 2006). Identities are intertwined. They are not developed in isolation. However, in this study, social identity refers to the respondent's education and profession. According to Tajfel and Turner (1986), social identity builds up from a person's memberships in a social class, family, sports team, or hobby clubs. These memberships can be a source of pride for the members. Feitosa et al. (2012) believed that social identity is closely related to work activities that vary among individuals and nations.

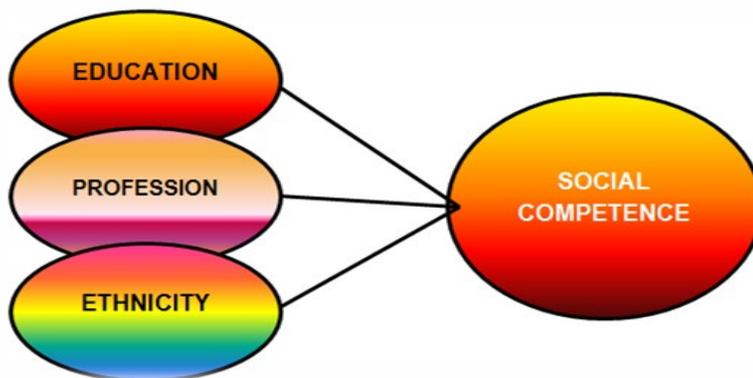


Figure 1. The flow of impact of identities on social competence.

Figure 1 shows that the three identities (education, profession, and ethnicity) are interdependent, and their impact on the development of social competence is mutually dependent.

Cultural identity is also complex and contextual. In this study, cultural identity refers to the respondent's ethnicity. Cultural identity plays a central role in the construction of identity through different factors such as *cognitive*, *affective*, and *behavioral*. Other factors, such as *ethnic origin*, *religion*, *race*, *language*, *education*, *occupation*, *age*, and *family*, also significantly affect language learning. Hakim-Larson and Menna (2016) introduced two psychological terms, *enculturation* and *acculturation*, to understand the concept of ethnic identity. Enculturation is a process of learning one's culture; whereas, acculturation is the process of learning others' cultures.

With regard to social competence, Anme et al. (2014) believed that it is not independently developed. It is socioculturally constructed. The ability to engage in adaptive and positive social interactions is developed in sociocultural contexts. Both identity and social competence are mutually dependent, and their development is facilitated by language, which is also rich with social and cultural values. Identity and social competence are 'complex and highly interrelated' (Cumming, 2012). Each of them is expressed through the use of language, and they are 'intimate and inseparable.' Anme et al. (2014) concluded in their study that the development of social competence can be observed and analyzed through six features of interaction: *Expressivity*, *Assertiveness*, *Sensitivity*, *Acceptance*, *Interpersonal Relations*, and *Self-Control*.

Related to language learning, Derderian and Cong (2012) mentioned *language*, *culture*, and *education* as three main factors that affect the process of language learning. Their findings emphasized that education (social identity) strongly affects learning. In China, Jordan, and Lebanon, the education system is teacher-centered, memorization, exam-oriented, and individual tasks. In the United States, however, the system is student-centered and problem-solving learning. This opposite system was quite a challenge for

the four immigrants learning English in the United States. They were faced with a challenge of understanding or developing a new identity while at the same time trying to learn the target language, which is culturally speaking a new way of thinking. As a result, their social competence did not develop well.

Methodology

The research question of the study is, “How do social and cultural identities impact the development of social competence?” The respondent was a 36-year-old, Balinese English teacher. She is active both academically and professionally. She is married and has one school-age son. Her husband is also a Balinese and a teacher, but not an English teacher. She was purposively selected since her life journey is related to this study. She learned and taught English in her hometown. The investigation is an ethnographic case study. The development of her three identities was observed and analyzed to see how they impacted the development of her social competence. The observation and analysis were based on the six elements of social competence features: *Expressivity*, *Assertiveness*, *Sensitivity*, *Acceptance*, *Interpersonal Relations*, and *Self-Control* (Anme et al., 2014). Each element features several statements that describe values related to the feature.

According to Angrosino (2007), an ethnographic study searches for ‘predictable patterns’ of human life experiences. In addition, Creswell (2008) stated that the ethnographic study is qualitative, and it usually describes, analyzes, and interprets a pattern of behavior, beliefs, and language. He agreed that an ethnographic study is an in-depth exploration of an individual case by collecting multiple forms of data through multiple forms of data collection methods. The data for this study were collected from interviews, observations, and reviews (self-review and peer-review). The interviews were done both in speaking (face to face) and in writing (written interviews). Self-review or self-evaluation and peer-review or peer-evaluation are also a valid and reliable research instrument (Ross, 2006) as long as the process is done by a knowledgeable adult who can do the process correctly. Ross (2006) supported the use of such a review as it consists of three aspects: *self-observation*, *self-judgment*, and *self-reaction*. On the one hand, the respondent observed, judged, and reacted to her social competence based on the provided questionnaire. On the other hand, her peers observed, judged, and reacted to the respondent’s social competence based on the same questionnaire. The peers in this study were the respondent’s classmates in the doctoral program of English Education. They were purposively selected as they were close and had interacted intensively with the respondent during their studies. The observations were facilitated by a 90-item statement about the respondent’s *expressivity*, *assertiveness*, *sensitivity*, *acceptance*, *interpersonal relations*, and *self-control* in her interactions with others. The first set of questions on Expressivity tries to find out how the respondent expresses her feelings (11 questions). The second set on Assertiveness seeks to know how the respondent states her own opinions or positions to others (15 questions). The third set on Sensitivity asks about the respondent’s ability to read in reading her interaction partner’s feelings and thoughts (12 questions). The fourth on Acceptance focuses on how the respondent understands and respects her interaction partner’s opinions or positions (18 questions). The fifth on Interpersonal Relationship tries to find out how the respondent works with her interaction partner in developing a good relationship (16 questions). The sixth set on Self-Control tries to understand how the respondent controls her behaviors (18 questions). The answer to each question is scored, and the total or overall scores reflect the respondent’s social competence (Linacre, 2011).

Findings and Discussion

Putu, the respondent of this study, is active both academically and professionally. Her first ten years of schooling were spent in a village in Bali. She was born in this culturally-rich village and grew up with her

parents. However, her next fourteen years of studying as a student (from high school to doctoral studies) were spent away from home. She described her schoolyears:

My school days were full of activities. My activities were not only academic, i.e., learning school subjects, but also joining organizations such as OSIS (High School Student Organisation), Bhayangkara Teens Club (Children of Police Organisation), and HMJ/Himpunan Mahasiswa Jurusan (Faculty Students Association). In addition, now I am also a member of TEFLIN (The Association for the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language in Indonesia), and MLI/Masyarakat Linguistik Indonesia (Indonesia's Linguistics Society).

Putu's Infancy, Early Childhood, Preschool, Middle Childhood, and Adolescence years were mostly spent with her parents. Thus, she grew up and developed her adolescent identity, mostly under the guidance and supervision of her parents. During her school-age and adolescent years, her environment influence stemmed from her parents, family, friends, school, and peers. Then, entering the stage of Young Adulthood and Middle Age, her environment changed significantly as she started to live outside the home (boarding house) and later got married and lived with her husband, also a Balinese, and son. Then the strongest influence shifted from mostly her parents to her new environment (husband, son, organization, and society).

During her teenage years, her interaction with people of other cultures was not extensive as she socialized merely with her community members. She did get along with some native speakers of English, but it was quite minimal. As a result, her cultural identity, unlike her social identity, grew much stronger during her school years. She was quite Balinese in the way she talked, thought, and did her life activities. Schools, along with home, as her daily forum of interaction with her peers, became the main source of her social activities and social interactions. However, at this stage, she said her social interactions were neither intensive nor extensive. Her English skills were quite minimal then.

Her social interaction became more extensive and intensive once she started living outside the home at the start of her senior high school years. This was the time when she decided to live in a boarding house, away from her parents.

Concerning her profession or work, she described:

I like dancing. I once worked as a dancer in some cultural events across Bali. However, after my undergraduate study in 2006, I started working as an English teacher. Two years later, I started my graduate study, which I finished in 2010. I became an English lecturer then. And now, I am an English student finishing my doctoral study in Semarang, a city which is socially and culturally different from my hometown.

Putu's education and profession have been mostly and strongly related to learning and teaching English. Her social identity has mostly developed in an English environment, and her social competence has accordingly been greatly influenced by her activities in learning and teaching a foreign language. "Yes, my education and work greatly influenced my interaction with my colleagues ... my communication skill was rated 3 out the scale between 1 and 5 by my lecturer when I was an undergraduate student. I seldom took the initiative to talk or communicate with other people. I was like a shy girl ..." Putu admitted in an interview. However, her social competence improved significantly, she disclosed further, after she finished her graduate study. Her membership (in-group) to several international academic associations such as TEFLIN and MLI contributed much to the development of her interaction ability. This membership has put her in a situation or position where she had to engage in a lot of interactions, both personal and professional, or academic.

Putu's identity and social competence development have thus far been in line with the claim of Norton and Toohey (2011) that identity is dynamic, complex, multifaceted, changes over time, and it is impacted by education practices. In addition, it also proved what Vygotsky (1978), Norton (1995), and Lantolf &

Pavlenko (2001) all agreed that both identity and social competence are sociocultural, and they develop through social interactions. Moreover, Putu’s membership in personal, social, and academic or scientific associations has even further intensified and extended her interactions with others. Tajfel and Turner (1986) believed that being a member of an association may make a person proud, especially when the association is well-known. Putu agreed to this belief, and she is now proud that she is able to interact socioculturally with her English competence. Her recent four-year stay in Semarang Central Java, during her doctoral studies, has even provided her with many more valuable opportunities to develop her interaction ability with people of different social and cultural identities. Her doctoral studies required her to make a lot of interactions in English seminars, conferences, discussions, presentations, and the like. Likewise, her teaching job also required her to engage in similar interactions with others.

Yes, my education and work greatly influenced my interactions with my colleagues.... The higher my education level is, the easier it is for me to interact. When I was younger and less experienced, my interaction with other people used to be one way. I usually answered only when asked. Very seldom did I take the initiative to talk with other people. Over the past ten years, my interaction ability has improved a lot ...

Putu’s classmates expressed similar remarks about her social competence. They all agreed that Putu’s interaction ability is much better now than it was in the past.

TABLE 1
Putu’s Social Competence as Viewed by Her Classmates

No	Statement	Score
1	Expressivity: She expresses her own thoughts and feelings precisely.	85
2	Assertiveness: She states her own opinions or positions clearly to others.	75
3	Sensitivity: She can read her interaction partner’s feelings and thoughts.	84
4	Acceptance: She understands and respects her interaction partner’s opinions or positions.	82
5	Interpersonal Relationship: She works with her interaction partners to develop a good relationship.	82
6	Self-Control: She can control personal emotions and behaviors.	84

Table 1 shows that Putu’s overall social competence is excellent (between 76 and 100 points) except for her Assertiveness. Surprisingly, the peer-review average scores are almost the same as that of the self-review:

TABLE 2
Putu’s Social Competence Self-review

No	Statement	Score
1	Expressivity: She expresses her own thoughts and feelings precisely.	80
2	Assertiveness: She states her own opinions or positions clearly to others.	80
3	Sensitivity: She can read her interaction partner’s feelings and thoughts.	83
4	Acceptance: She understands and respects her interaction partner’s opinions or positions.	77
5	Interpersonal Relationship: She works with her interaction partners to develop a good relationship.	96
6	Self-Control: She can control personal emotions and behaviors.	80

Both reports support Putu’s claim that her social competence has developed much better in line with the development of her education and profession. Putu also experienced an internalization process when joining and becoming members of some groups or in-groups. Firstly, she went through the process of *social categorization*. In this process, she ensured that the group she wanted to become a member of was really suitable for her expertise and mission. Then through this membership, she made further internalization in *social identification* and *social comparison* (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Intercultural interactions are indeed a key element in the development of social competence and identity (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Montero et al., 2014; Norton, 1995; Taborsky & Oliveira, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978). Putu agreed to this statement and responded:

The fact that I am pursuing my Ph.D. outside Bali, my cultural home, is an advantage to the development of my interaction skills. It gives me great opportunities to be more open-minded and interact with a new environment and new people ... When I returned to Bali for a holiday, I met my Balinese friends and they said that I am much more communicative ... My family also saw the same change, a better one, in the way I communicate ...

Putu's academic and professional activities in writing journal articles, doing research activities, writing learning modules and books, providing Societal Training Services, and presenting in both national and international seminars and conferences have all also contributed greatly to the development of her social competence.

Over the past ten years, I have written articles and presented them in national or international conferences. I was also involved in research activities related to my work. Such activities have taught me valuable lessons about communication, interaction, and cooperation ... I am well aware that I am academically obliged to be able to communicate well with the society in which I become part of, socially and culturally. For this reason, I did what was necessary in order that I could improve my communication skills ...

Putu's enthusiasm, determination, and perseverance in her academic or professional journey have reflected her strong ethnic identity as a Balinese. She strongly believes that 'Working is a form of service to God.' Besides, she also holds that '*Ilang luu, buk katah*' (*never stop learning*), and that '*Yadin ririh, liu enu peplajahan*' (*There are still many things to learn although you are already clever*). Interestingly, until now, Putu is still "*originally Balinese*." Her cultural identity as a Balinese is not affected by her English learning and teaching activities. "I am still an eastern woman, a Balinese despite my being an English teacher..." She said proudly. Her father is happy with her English ability, but he does not want her to look like a 'Bule' (foreigner). Putu's ethnic identity is still not affected by English cultures. She remarked:

I think learning English doesn't change my identity as a Balinese. I still find myself as a real Balinese when I speak, write, and act. As seen in my writing, I do not follow the straight forward style as native English writers do. This is because my culture still influences the way I organize my thoughts.

For Putu, learning English is one thing. Learning to communicate in English is another thing. However, not losing her ethnic identity, or adopting a new identity related to the language being learned, is quite something else. She learned the language in her environment as an EFL learner, although Bali is a region in which English is daily spoken. In this regard, she does not have to cope with ethnic identity cases since the context of her learning the language is still *home*.

Concerning the role that ethnicity plays in the development of her social competence, Putu recalled that initially, her strong motivation and enthusiasm to learn English came from her father. He learned English by himself at home, and he frequently took Putu to his office. There she often saw her father speaking English with foreign tourists. He also used to invite tourists to his home. Her dreams of becoming an English-speaking person were also very strong. Also, the Balinese values, norms, and beliefs that she holds strongly to also contributed significantly to the development of her Social Competence.

Conclusion

The development of social competence is complex. The process is unique, dynamic, lifelong, and multidimensional involving factors such as education, profession, and ethnicity. Each individual may undergo or experience a different process, and the location of the process may also be different between individuals. This study concludes that the development of social competence is strongly impacted by identity, and it is strongly impacted by educational practices. It is also closely related to work activities. This impact is individual in nature, and it is not generalizable. However, there is an evident pattern, which shows that social competence improves well in line with the development of education and profession (social identities) and ethnicity (cultural identity). This study is limited only to one respondent, an English teacher who learns and teaches English as a Foreign Language in her hometown. Further study involving respondents who grow up and learn English as a Second Language in an English-speaking country may provide richer information on the interactions between social competence and identity.

This research suggests that social competence is beyond linguistics. Other aspects related to Psychology, Sociology, and Communication also need to be considered and discussed. In so doing, English teachers may provide their learners with opportunities to develop a strong communicative competence. In this respect, it is recommended that English language programs be more concerned with learner identity and social competence. Language learners and teachers shall be fully aware that the ultimate goal of language learning is the ability to communicate or interact well with other people in real situations about real topics, regardless of the existing sociocultural differences.

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