

Shaping Identities through the Transformative Effect of EFL Learning

Construcción de identidades a través del efecto transformativo del estudio del inglés como lengua extranjera

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Abstract:

This research aims to contribute to the field of language learning with providing a deeper understanding of how the English language could influence the professional identity of a group of five students of a BA in English at a University in the Southeast of Mexico. The collection of data was carried through semi-structured interviews to explore the phenomenon of identity construction in depth. The findings are divided into four categories that emerged from the analysis: Background information, English perceptions, Professional Identity and Culture. Overall, various factors that influenced the participants' identities were discovered, along with the deficiency of the Mexican educational system when it comes to teaching languages. Additionally, the potential benefits for the participants' lives due to its proficiency in English are presented.

Keywords:

English as a Foreign Language, learning, students' professional identity

Resumen:

La presente investigación pretende contribuir al campo del aprendizaje de lengua a través de una comprensión profunda de cómo el aprendizaje del inglés puede influir la construcción de identidad profesional de cinco estudiantes de una Licenciatura en Lengua Inglesa en una Universidad pública en el sureste de México. La recolección de datos se llevó a cabo mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas con el afán de explorar el fenómeno de construcción de identidad. Los hallazgos del estudio se dividen en cuatro categorías principales que emergieron del análisis: formación previa del estudiante; percepciones del inglés como lengua extranjera; construcción de identidad profesional; y el papel de la cultura en la formación de identidad. Se concluye que diversos factores intervienen en la construcción de identidad del estudiante de lengua, así como se puntualizan las deficiencias del Sistema educativo Mexicano en la rena del aprendizaje y enseñanza de lengua. Finalmente, se discuten los probables beneficios para las vidas académicas de los estudiantes debido a su nivel de lengua.

Palabras Clave:

Aprendizaje, identidad profesional de estudiantes, inglés como lengua extranjera

Introduction

Being bilingual has become increasingly common nowadays, so finding a bilingual person could be quite easy. Grosjean (2022) analysed and presented different meanings of bilingual including his own definition: "those who use two or more languages (or dialects) in their everyday lives" (p. 11). In general, the literature emphasizes that being bilingual means having the skill to use two or more languages proficiently in different situations and that this ability is influenced by various social, cultural, and linguistic factors.

There could be a close bound between being bilingual and constructing a professional identity. How this bound is formed may depend on each individual's aspirations and goals. For example, if someone wants to become a

teacher, they must get involved in everything English language implicates, at what level also depends on the setting and the type of students they will teach. For instance, there could be a very different experience from someone who wants to become an interpreter, from the type of language they use to the way they behave while working. Professionals can have a complex identity due to the diversity of contexts in which they work.

Students who are learning the English language may submerge into the target language and culture. In fact, they may wonder to what extent becoming competent at the language impacts on their professional identities.

Students may have not observed that when they speak English as a Foreign Language (hereafter EFL) they may do different gestures, speak in a different register or use a distinct tone of voice. This can also happen depending

on the environment or the people we talk to, since there are many factors to take into account.

There is also an emotional dimension to bear in mind, according to Wierzbicka (2004), "Bilingualism provides a new perspective on emotions" (p. 94). It seems to be that speaking another language expands our horizons and allows us feel and see things with a different approach.

Culture also plays a major role on this contrast between languages and explaining why learners would feel a distinction in relation to their behaviour when talking one or another. Learning a foreign language always comes with learning a new set of cultural norms, values, and beliefs, which may sometimes be contrastingly diverse from our native ones.

Rationale

This inquiry seems to be relevant for the role that L2 has in our learning context in Mexico and there is a need to do research to echo the impact of a dominant language (English) on students' identity construction. Furthermore, there is scarce investigation on the topic in the context of public universities nationally. The problem under investigation arose by observing social and cultural related elements such as bilingualism and behaviour in the classroom. In addition to that, such phenomenon was identified by questioning: to what extent are students' identities impacted by learning EFL? How may the learning of a foreign culture influence students' behaviours? What are the pedagogical implications of students' professional identity construction process?

The study seeks to a) explore students' identity construction process when learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in a BA program; b) to identify students' perceptions of their own changes in relation to types of personalities, behaviours, and emotions; c) to understand the effects that a foreign culture may have on students' professional identity; and d) to shed light on the pedagogical implications of students' identity construction process.

Previous studies on language students' identity construction processes

Ortiz (2017) provides information about the identity construction of a beginner. It is a qualitative research. This exploratory case study took place in a private language and cultural institute in Medellin, Colombia. The participants were three learners enrolled in the beginner's course, however only the case of a female student was presented. Data was collected from different sources, including class video or audio-recordings, interviews, and diaries asked to the participants to have.

When analysing the information provided by the subject who was put through these different situations, Ortiz

(2017) noticed that one participant's identity as a new English speaker went through changes:

"The analysis of Vanessa's story showed that her identity as a speaker of English went through a constant transformation as she adopted different subject positions that were mainly determined by her assessment of her own and her classmates' competence in English during specific oral tasks." (p. 259)

What it may stand out and in this paper was the fact that the behaviour of the participant was different according to the position in which she was put and how she felt. "Vanessa's use or non-use of English in oral tasks was the result of an intricate process of negotiation of subject positions in a network of power-knowledge relations within the English classroom for which she resorted to a variety of discourses" (Ortiz, 2017, p. 259). This case is a good starting point in the area, since it shows how a new English learner evolves from the very beginning. In a context that is similar to the one to investigate in this paper.

On another note, a different study was carried out in Chile, by Salinas and Ayala (2018). Its objective was to explore the process of how two students of pedagogy in EFL constructed their professional identity from a sociocultural perspective. It was a qualitative case study; they made use of personal narratives, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group. The two students were female from a university in Viña del Mar, Chile; they both were on their last semester and going through their professional practices. The authors gave pseudonyms to the participants: Molly and Carol.

After analysing the data collected of students' interactions during their formation processes Salinas and Ayala found repeated patterns that have shaped the identity of the two students. The information from the participants allowed the authors to identify some factors that are interrelated in the process of identity construction: self-image, learning environment, and practicum experiences. In the last two categories they found another two dimensions: gratifications and obstacles; both impacted on the participants personalities.

Molly's and Carol's self-image changed through the process as a consequence of their learning environment and practicum experiences depending on the interactions in their contextual environment—namely, teachers in the study program, mentor school teachers, and students in the practicum. The dimensions (gratifications or obstacles) of these experiences and the meaning they gave to them, shaped Molly's and Carol's professional identities (Salinas & Ayala, 2018).

These dimensions are what seemed to impact the most on their professional identities. Gratifications as validation from their professors and peers; obstacles as unfavourable situations or interactions.

Salinas and Ayala reached the conclusion that the process coincided with the sociocultural vision of teacher's identity, seen as something complex that is in constant change and depends on the person's experiences and interactions. According to the results that their participants showed, they experienced positive changes in their personalities like developing "confidence, tolerance to frustration, and commitment to students" (Salinas & Ayala, 2018, p. 45).

Moreover, Castelán, Cinto and Xique (2015) investigated the construction of the identity of the language student-teacher in the open degree of the Faculty of Languages of the BUAP in Puebla, Mexico, as a response to the problem of desertion and academic performance. This investigation adopted a qualitative approach, constituted by a continuous process of action-observation-reflection. The results showed that the axiological base of the students leaves much to be desired because of the lack of real commitment to their training as language teachers. On the other hand, the majority of the student-teachers in the program had a low level of language proficiency even though they already had professional experience as teachers.

The studies reviewed provided a guideline to compare the results of this study in the future. In addition, it has been discussed how professional identity can be influenced by different factors, for example: cultural perceptions, the emotional dimension and work experiences. These factors must be taken into account when analysing the impact of English as a foreign language on the construction of students' professional identity.

The Study

Research design

This research employed a qualitative approach because this type of methodology is focused in understanding a problem from a humanistic point of view and the purpose of this study is to collect experiences and thoughts from students. "Qualitative method is used to understand people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behavior, and interactions" (Kalra, Pathak & Jena, 2013, p. 192). The description of this method fits well with the problem to be dealt with. Since it is focused on students' reality on how learning EFL could have shaped their professional identity.

Overall, qualitative research can be a valuable approach for exploring complex and subjective phenomena, and can help to provide new data for the future, seeking in-depth understanding, and prioritizing the participants perspective.

In the same way, the use of qualitative research in this case seeks to construct a comprehensive picture by integrating the ideas and perspectives of the informants. It aligns with the objective of building a rich and nuanced

understanding the effects of EFL in the professional identity of language students. By conducting a qualitative study, the aim is to explore this area and generate new insights.

Data collection method

According to Kvale (2012), interviews allow us to construct knowledge through the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. Talking to students through interviews provided firsthand information about their feelings and how the exposure to EFL could have possibly influenced in the way they behave.

Specifically, it was a semi-structured interview. Edwards & Holland (2013), describe a semi-structured interview as a method of qualitative research where the interviewer has a set of pre-determined questions, but also has the flexibility to explore topics that arise during the interview.

The interview was divided into four sections. Firstly, the background information, in this part of the interview the goal was to gather valuable data of the interviewees about their first contact with English language. Then, the second part was about English perceptions, the aim was to explore their beliefs and ideas about English before studying a BA on it and see if maybe these ideas changed over time. The third part explored their identities, how they felt with English, listened to their experiences while studying and overall what impact English has had on their lives in different areas, such as personal, professional, intellectually, and socially. The last section sought cultural aspects that may be relevant or made an impression in the interviewee's points of view.

By dividing the topics in the interview, it was possible to accomplish the interviews in a more dynamic way, additionally it helped to ease the subsequent process of categorization of the information given by the participants, since there is a clear division of topics.

Data Analysis Method

Once the data was collected through the semi-structured interviews with the research participants, it was necessary to carry out a rigorous and detailed review of the data. Prior to the analysis procedure itself, there were some steps that were followed.

1. Transcript the spoken words from the recorded interviews into written text.
2. Unravel the most common answers from the interviews and highlight it.
3. The classification of the information given in a chart.
4. Translate the quotes that were selected into English language.

It was important to choose a clear and systematic approach to analyze data in order to simplify the task of

organizing, categorizing, and interpreting the data in a rigorous and transparent manner.

The approach used to analyze the data has been the thematic analysis. Braun & Clarke (2006), propose a detailed guide to carry out the thematic analysis, and describe the approach as a flexible method for analyzing qualitative data.

“Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). This implies the identification of patterns and recurring themes in the responses of the participants.

Context

The study took place in a public university in the southeast of Mexico which employs a flexible educational model for students. The university has a School of Humanities with a Language Department, and this is where a B.A. in English Language is placed.

The BA program offers subjects about teaching, literature, culture, translation, grammar in Spanish and English. Regarding the English area, there are six different levels: beginners, elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate and advanced. Additionally, students also take common core courses like basic computer skills or thinking skills.

Participants

The participants in this study were two female and three male students of a BA in English Language whose mother tongue is Spanish and they have been learning EFL. They all were enrolled or already passed the advanced English course, which means that most of them were on the final stage of the BA. In addition, they were asked to have experience developing themselves in the language field, either by making internships or working as teachers. Therefore, they were selected based on the level of proficiency in English and their professional experiences. Their ages were between 22 and 29 years old.

A pseudonym was given to each of the participants: Carla, Iris, Roberto, Gilberto and Germán. Kvale (2012), highlights the importance of using pseudonyms in research interviews. The use of pseudonyms is a common practice in qualitative research and can be useful in protecting the identity and privacy of participants. In addition, the use of pseudonyms can help participants feel more comfortable and confident during interviews, which can improve the quality and reliability of the information that is collected (Kvale 2012).

Description of the data collection

Initially, the interview was created and put under scrutiny. After revising it, modifications were made in order to gather information that was going to be interesting and

useful. Following this, the interviews were then carried out.

The interviews took place between the months of November and December of 2022. Participants were informed of the purpose of the interview and they were told that they were going to be recorded. The interviews lasted an average of 30 minutes.

The language in which the interviews were carried out was Spanish. Gubrium, Holstein, Marvasti and McKinney (2012), state that the use of the interviewee's native language is essential to allow the participant to feel comfortable and express themselves in detail, which can lead to better data quality.

Findings

Category 1: Background information

Broadly speaking, the questions asked in this category intended to explore when and how the interest about English language was born in the students, what were their experiences learning English before higher education and how they thought they were before learning English. In other words, the purpose of this section was delving into the students' past to understand the decisions they made for their future and how they first acquired an interest in the English language.

Most of the interviewees learned English independently and in their childhood between 6-12 years old. Krashen, (1982) states that children who learn a second language from an early age have a significant advantage over those who start learning it in adolescence or adulthood.

I started autonomously when I was 10 years old – Iris (My translation)

The early learning of EFL is a feature that all the interviewees shared and it seems to be the cornerstone in the construction of their professional identity. It is important to acknowledge that this interest was born in them, they encouraged themselves to learn as a hobby or almost as part of a game.

Most of them learned through audiovisual aids like videogames, series, music, movies, etc. Harmer (2015), argues that audiovisual media such as the mentioned above are valuable tools for improving students' listening comprehension, pronunciation, and speaking skills. In addition, it points out that these resources can increase the motivation and interest of students in learning English, since the topics and contents are more attractive and relevant to them (Harmer, 2015).

Well, I started learning English since elementary school, since I played video games on my PlayStation and that is how I learned words, phrases– Gilberto (My translation)

Others may have learned through private lessons at schools or language centers but an interesting observation is that almost none of them mentioned that they have learned English through public schools in

Mexico, at least non in a satisfactory manner. Their comments about “ineffective teachers” involved primary, secondary and also high school teachers. A common answer was that sometimes they were not prepared as English teachers or they would not care at all about them learning.

In basic education I think I had several ineffective teachers, because obviously they did not specialize in English or they did not take courses, they knew maybe because they liked it but they did not know the correct pronunciation itself– Roberto (My translation)

The quality of the EFL teaching in public schools in Mexico, leaves much to be desired. Or at least it did in the formative years of the participants, which often claimed that the professors often used them almost as a tool to help their fellow classmates since they were the ones that had an advantage in English language. Among other characteristics of these ineffective teachers, they talked about anything else but English or they were just not good at teaching, or they did not convey any knowledge.

Going forward on the interview it was relevant for the investigation to ask why they decided to study the B.A. in English language or what their initial motivation was. Most of the interviewees claimed that they had an “ease” for languages. Moreover, they stated that the reason why they chose to study English language was because they already knew the language and they thought it would be something that would not “challenge them”. In other words, they thought it was going to be easy for them. Later on, they retracted and they realized that the fact that understanding the language it would not be enough.

I was very motivated by... as I told you at the beginning, my taste for languages, because I really like languages, so English was like something I already had... I liked it and apart from that, I had knowledge– Gilberto (My translation)

Another important topic that was raised on this stage of the interview was their opinion about how they saw themselves before learning English. In concrete they were asked if they noticed a change on themselves compared to when they didn't know English and how they were before learning English. A question that for some of them was somewhat hard to explain because they were proficient or partially proficient in English for most of their lives.

I started learning it at a younger age, so the perception I have of myself has always been me and English, we never come separated, so we always come together throughout life, so I couldn't tell you if it changed me radically or not because... Well, I have always known it, since I have been aware of myself I have always known English or I have always had a little English. –German (My translation)

Among other perceptions, students claimed that before knowing English they perceived themselves as “shy” “naïve” “less educated” “withdrawn” or “closer-minded”. Not that these were words that define their whole identity but that is how they felt in relation to not knowing English. *I would say that a serious person, a little more... not so closed, but I did not know several things, as I was saying, right? Culture, how some people are, opinions and other things– Carla (My translation)*

In summary, this category revealed several significant findings that could facilitate the comprehension of the phenomenon from the beginning. Firstly, all participants in the study had started learning English from childhood and had done so from their own personal conviction. This suggests a strong intrinsic motivation and a genuine interest in acquiring proficiency in the English language. Moreover, the participants expressed discontent with the Mexican educational system in relation to the way in which English is taught. They highlighted shortcomings and limitations in the English language instruction they received in their earlier academic years. This discontent reflects a desire for a more effective and comprehensive English language education that meets their expectations and needs.

Besides, the participants shared a common reason for choosing to study English: the easiness they experienced in learning the language. They found that they had a natural aptitude or affinity for English, which encouraged them to pursue it further. This sense of comfort with the language likely played a role in their motivation to continue their English language studies.

In addition, the participants strongly believed that their English language proficiency had a transformative effect on their personal growth and education. They felt that prior to learning English, they were somehow less educated and less open-minded. Mastering English opened doors to new knowledge, experiences, and perspectives, allowing them to broaden their horizons.

These findings shed light on the participants' intrinsic motivation, their dissatisfaction with the existing English language education system for basic education, and the perceived impact of English proficiency on their personal and intellectual development on their early years. It emphasizes the participants' recognition of English as a valuable tool for personal growth and a means of expanding their educational and cultural horizons.

Furthermore, the aforementioned insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the participants' first experiences and attitudes towards English language learning, highlighting the importance of effective English language education and the significant role it plays in shaping individuals' educational careers and personal development.

Category 2: Students' perceptions of the English language

This category included questions about the ideas that they had about English, what they thought about it and about the people that speak the language. Perceptions of the English language can vary greatly depending on a variety of factors, including an individual's background, education, exposure to the language, and personal experiences (Crystal, 2003).

In the first question, which was about the idea that they had about English, the interviewees made different observations that seem to be more different from each other. Like having an initial disinterest or thinking it was a language that was easy to learn. Every student had a different opinion.

The points of view that they did share was that English allows people to open their mind up to new perspectives and different advantages it carries. Through the years, several authors have laid emphasis on the importance of English because of the benefits it brings.

My idea has always been that English gives you a new perspective – Gilberto (My translation)

According to Crystal (2003), learning English has several perks in terms of access to information, international connections, job opportunities, personal development and entertainment. Students seem to acknowledge these benefits and each one of them embraces them and exploit the potential it gives in their own personal way.

That thing about English opening doors is true... We are no longer enclosed to only Hispanic culture. Bearing in mind that English is now the lingua franca, which is spoken all over the world, general knowledge is in English so is not only about job opportunities, but just the fact of general culture, it opens up your knowledge a lot – German (My translation)

Bryam (2020) has argued that knowledge of English as a foreign language is essential in today's world and can provide advantages in the fields of education, business, science and technology. Students share the idea that knowing another language may give some sort of advantage over the people that does not.

I feel that it gives people who speak it an advantage over people who don't, because perhaps there are more job opportunities, you have more... to meet new people, to get to know new cultures, new... it broadens your outlook more – Gilberto (My translation)

As an example of these advantages and a thing that is considered as a popular opinion is that the knowledge of English leads to better opportunities in the labor field. Interviewees also stated that English has allowed them to meet new people and new cultures. In addition, it has allowed them to enjoy content that is in English such as movies, songs, tv shows and not only entertainment but the access to information for academic purposes.

For many people around the world, English is considered a highly valuable and important language due to its widespread use in business, academia, and international relations. It is often seen as a language of opportunity and a key to social and economic mobility (Crystal, 2003).

The initial idea that the participants had about English may have changed over time, but it is not such a marked change. Before learning English in some cases there was an indifference towards it, but it was not a negative thought, there were not stereotypes around it or an idea of English language being somehow antagonist or imposing over their native culture. For them it was something that was almost always admired and seen as something good.

In general, English perceptions from students were mainly positive. The idea that positive perceptions about speaking English can impact students' general outlook on learning the language is widely addressed in the fields of language acquisition and educational psychology. Dörnyei, (2005) suggests that students' optimistic attitudes towards the language and their recognition of its importance and worth have a substantial impact on their motivation to learn and their overall achievement in learning (Dörnyei, 2005). In this case, students had favorable opinions about English and this may have led to a positive effect on their learning processes.

Category 3: Professional Identity

This category encompasses the participants' experiences and feelings as students and professionals, emphasizing the formation they had in University and the obstacles they overcame. Moreover, it is important to highlight the perception they have about themselves after this formation process, if they think that learning English changed them.

University is an essential step in the professional training process and can be a defining moment in the lives of students. Marina (2010), points out that university education is essential for the personal and professional development of individuals, since it allows them to acquire specialized knowledge and skills that are necessary in today's world of work. Therefore, the participants in this study were asked how their experience in the Language Department was.

Overall, the participants stated that it was a positive and enriching experience. A process of constant construction and also deconstruction where they learned and understand different topics that would be useful for exercising a career based in English language. Along with the help of the professors of the B.A., who supported them and accompanied them during their path in contrast with the former basic education professors.

In general, it has been good, I mean... I am very pleased, it has been good for me in the sense that I have also had

teachers who have supported me in the process, who have cleared up my doubts, who have been able to have patience to teach me some subject or topic that has been difficult for me— Iris (My translation)

One of the objectives in this study was to identify students' perceptions of their own changes, therefore it was relevant to ask them to reflect on whether speaking English has changed them or not and in which area have they experimented this change the most.

I feel that it has changed me in all areas, both personally, professionally and emotionally, for the same reason that I am more in contact with people, information, obviously content, I feel that I am obviously more aware of everything, of my person, of society, of the problems; I feel that I am a person who has grown... My moral compass improved— Roberto (My translation)

Furthermore, it was of interest to the investigation to expose the emotions students experiment during the specific moment in which they speak, it is to say using it at work, communicating with people or just for the sake of it. A relevant aspect of this matter is that most of the participants affirm that they feel "happy", "confident" or "free" when they are talking English.

There is some sort of change in me, like... I'm a little more... or a lot more extroverted when I'm speaking English than when I'm not— German (My translation)

The phenomenon where individuals may feel more extroverted when speaking English rather than their native language is not new, several authors have explored this phenomenon and provided insights into why this might occur. Pavlenko (2006), explores the concept of "bilingual selves" emphasizing that bilingual individuals do not have a single, unchanging self, but rather adapt their self-conceptions based on the language and context they are in. This author also highlights that each language carries its own cultural and social connotations, which can shape one's self-perception, values, and beliefs. Consequently, bilinguals may encounter a sense of fragmentation or flexibility in their self-identity as they navigate between different language-based identities (Pavlenko, 2006). In essence, there are studies that demonstrated that bilingual individuals have intricate and dynamic self-identities influenced by their bilingualism and the languages they use.

It was also important to know their feelings towards their working context, so they were asked to talk about how they felt in their professional context. In this case, all of the interviewees have experience on what is like to teach English, since they are currently working as teachers or were going through professional practices in schools. In spite of the struggles they could find through this career path they all claimed that giving English classes is an activity they enjoy and the classroom is an environment in which they feel comfortable.

I feel comfortable, I like to teach. I didn't know that I was going to like teaching, but teaching the children the language and letting them learn and showing it to you if it's comforting, I feel very comfortable teaching the language. — Gilberto (My translation)

They agreed that the formation they received in the University was indeed helpful. The participants' prior knowledge of English, combined with the knowledge and experiences gained during their university years, contributed to their preparation to take on the role of a teacher even if their initial career aspirations or expectations were different.

I already knew English when I entered the university, but not a million years ago at that time I would have imagined myself as a teacher, so all the experience, all the knowledge that I acquired during these years in the university, of course, prepared me, to a certain extent— German (My translation)

The influence of English language in the case of the five participants has proven to be very beneficial, or at least this is the perception they have. Firstly, the participants expressed that their English language skills have already opened employment opportunities for them. They realized that being proficient in English has enabled them to have access to a wider range of job prospects within their local communities and it makes them consider going to a foreign country in the future. They feel like they are more desirable candidates for various positions not only in the education field. This access to employment has contributed to their sense of professional fulfillment and career growth.

Moreover, the participants highlighted that their proficiency in English has boosted their self-confidence. They described feeling more extroverted when participating in English-related activities. English fluency has provided them with a sense of accomplishment and as a result, they feel more comfortable expressing themselves, engaging in social interactions, and sharing their ideas in English-speaking contexts.

Additionally, the participants acknowledged the role of the education they received at the university in order to prepare them for their professional journey. The respondents also emphasized the support and mentorship they received from their professors. The professors' expertise, dedication, and commitment to their students' success could be also important in shaping the students' identities. The participants recognize the importance of their time in the university because it played a key role in their professional success.

In other words, the findings in this category underscore the significance of English language proficiency in improving individuals' lives and self-perceptions and emphasize the value of language learning as a means of

personal and professional growth within the Mexican context.

Category 4: The impact of a foreign culture on students' identities

Finally, this category comprehended the most relevant cultural aspects discussed in the interviews. These elements may reveal interesting perspectives of the participants towards the culture of the English-speaking world.

It was important to know if the participants have ever been to a foreign country where English is the main language. The majority of the participants have never been to a foreign country but they assure they would like to do it someday if they have the opportunity. To put it differently, there is always this interest in students of going abroad and be able to immerse completely into the culture of the different English-speaking countries.

Roberto was the exception, he did go to a foreign country, and in fact he lived there, so it was necessary to ask further questions about his experience there to add a different and interesting point of view to the research which expand the findings. Exploring the case of a migrant child that came back to his native country could shed light on the subjective experience of language and identity for individuals like Roberto.

Roberto says that he immigrated illegally with his family to the United States when he was a child and then got deported after eight years living there. Broadly speaking, he describes his experience as not negative nor positive but without doubt it impacted on his identity construction process in a different manner. In terms of his professional identity, he feels even more comfortable with English language as a consequence of his formative years in the US. He also stated that when he talks in English he feels more like "himself".

I have always felt a little more open and a little more "me" in English, so to speak, I couldn't tell you why but I feel that I feel a little more "me" – Roberto (My translation)

There are theoretical perspectives that can provide support and enhance the understanding of Roberto's experience, for example the bilingual identity theory. According to Liebkind (1995), individuals who speak two languages fluently but only view one of the languages as a practical tool without it impacting their sense of self have a monolingual identity. In contrast, individuals with a bilingual identity perceive both languages as essential components of who they are. They view language as a means of expressing their identity, culture, and personal experiences. They have a deeper connection to both languages and understand that each language contributes to shaping their overall sense of self (Liebkind, 1995).

Pavlenko (2006) points out that in societies where speaking only one language is the norm, bilingual individuals are sometimes perceived as having two conflicting personalities (Pavlenko, 2006). Roberto's sense of self and comfort in English may be indicative of his bilingual identity, where he navigates between different language-based selves and cultural contexts.

Additionally, he highlighted that the education was different there, he got the opportunity to go to an art school as an extracurricular activity, and this helped him grow as a person and to acknowledge his abilities. Also, he became aware of racial differences and learnt to be respectful and understanding towards it.

Another interesting fact was that he was the only person that code-mixed during the interview. Harmer (2015), defines code-mixing as the act of integrating words or phrases from the learners' mother tongue into their spoken or written English. In Roberto's case and in the interview the words integrated on the Spanish speech were in English. Code-mixing can facilitate understanding and communication, enabling individuals to express their ideas with greater effectiveness. It serves as a connection between the learners' native language and English, assisting them in articulating intricate concepts and emotions (Harmer, 2015). This can also be related directly with Roberto's bilingual identity, in which he would feel more comfortable by saying certain words or ideas in English rather than in Spanish.

Roberto's personal journey provides a unique perspective on the impact of language learning and cultural immersion in a foreign country. His experience as an undocumented immigrant and subsequent deportation adds a layer of complexity to his language acquisition process and its effects on his professional identity.

On the other hand, the participants were asked if they thought that speaking English have allowed them to see things from a different point of view and whether they had a bigger understanding of other cultures. The answer was unanimous. Students believe that the fact of being proficient in English has helped them to see things from another point of view, which they would not have if they would not speak it.

In general, we as bilinguals have... we no longer think in the same way as someone who only speaks one language, we can or perceive things differently – German (My translation)

In the case of English proficiency, students who become proficient in English are exposed to different cultural perspectives and ways of expressing ideas. Through language, they engage with diverse texts, media, and interactions that broaden their exposure to alternative viewpoints. This exposure could have contributed to a shift in their perspective, allowing them to see things from different angles and consider alternative interpretations.

Pavlenko (1995) discusses how sociocultural theory offers valuable insights into understanding the complex processes of language learning and acquisition. Ratner (as cited in Lantof Thorn and Phoener, 2015), claims that sociocultural theory is based on the idea that human cognitive processes are fundamentally shaped and influenced by cultural artifacts, activities, and concepts (Lantof Thorn & Phoener, 2015). In other words, it suggests that our mental functioning is mediated and organized by the cultural elements that surround us. Based on this theory, Pavlenko (1995) explores the idea of language playing a crucial role in shaping our thinking and perception of the world. Language not only reflects our thoughts but also regulates and shapes our cognitive processes (Pavlenko 1995).

In this category, two main findings emerged. First, Roberto's sense of comfort and authenticity in using English underscore the profound role that language played in shaping his self-perception and how he navigated various social and cultural contexts. Speaking English enables him to express himself more freely and comfortably, allowing him to fully embody his identity. This finding enlightens the potential transformative power of language in influencing one's self-concept and the way they engage with the world.

Secondly, the participants' acquisition of English has opened their minds to new perspectives and cultures, fostering a reflective stance towards different cultural practices and linguistic nuances. Their ability to compare and contrast these diverse cultures has expanded their knowledge base, enriching them as individuals. This finding emphasizes the broader intellectual and cultural benefits that come with language acquisition, extending beyond mere communication skills.

Taken together, these findings highlight the impact of English language proficiency on individuals' self-perception, cultural awareness, and personal growth. Moreover, language acquisition broadens individuals' horizons, allowing them to appreciate and engage with diverse cultural contexts, ultimately leading to personal enrichment.

Conclusion

Nowadays, English proficiency is considered an essential skill for success in a wide range of fields and industries. However, the decision of learning English can have a significant influence on professional development. Speaking and understanding a new language can lead to changes in the way students see themselves and their role in society, as well as in the way they are perceived by others. As they gain English skills, they are also building and shaping their professional identity.

It is important to pay attention to the way EFL is taught in public basic education in Mexico because most of the

experiences of students were described as being deficient. There were several inefficient English teachers who did not accomplish their purpose. It is important to pay attention on how this problem could be solved. It could be necessary to have well prepared teachers in basic public schools, teachers that show commitment and look for motivating students to learn English. Additionally, it would be helpful to implement English class since kinder garden in all schools in Mexico, not only private schools, since learning from a young age has proven to be positive in the sense that children may learn better due the plasticity they own, the subjects in the study are an example of this. On the other hand, the task does not only fall into English teachers, young learners need to be motivated and interested on a new language. Parents also could help promote English learning by talking with their children about all the benefits that it has and all the opportunities they could get.

By recognizing some students' strong intrinsic motivation for learning English, teachers could design strategies that foster and maintain enthusiasm throughout their language learning journey. Incorporating meaningful and relevant content, promoting autonomy and choice, and providing opportunities for self-expression and personal interests can help cultivate intrinsic motivation. Acknowledging that some students may have a natural affinity or ease in learning English, teachers can tailor approaches to promote these strengths. For example, providing differentiated instruction, offering challenging tasks, and encouraging independent learning opportunities that could help students to improve their existing abilities and further develop their English language skills.

The participants acknowledge the benefits English brings into people's lives and their own lives. Among these benefits, the most important could be having access to information and content that is not on their native language, the doors that it opens to know people from all over the world and better job opportunities. For various reasons they see themselves as they were better than before knowing English. One of the main reasons is that they have a wider range of cultural knowledge. It also allows them to reflect and compare their own culture to English speaking countries culture. Moreover, the impact in the professional identity of the subjects of this study can be also seen on the confidence it gives them. They claim to feel more extroverted and less shy when they speak. This could be seen as a great advantage and it can allow them to have a better development in their careers and also give a better impression to other people. Educators could incorporate global perspectives and intercultural competence into the basic education curriculum. Exposing students to diverse cultures, encouraging cross-cultural communication, and engaging in meaningful intercultural exchanges could help in forming a broader

understanding of the world and promote cultural sensitivity.

Although identity is seen as something that is always changing, this investigation allowed to form a picture of the identity construction process phenomenon and the current identity of a group of EFL students in a specific time and context. The significance of this research within the Mexican context could be notable due to the scarcity of studies in this area. Despite the restricted sample size in the study, the research findings establish valuable foundations for future investigations in the field and provide meaningful implications for both educational authorities and the specific Mexican educational system. These findings could give a deeper comprehension of the perceptions held by Mexican EFL students regarding the factors influencing their identities and attitudes towards their profession.

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