Examining Relationship between Learners' Motivation and Social Identity: A Study of Pakistani ESL Learners

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Abstract

The paper deals with an understanding of the relationship between Second Language learner identity and moitivation to learn English. The research employs Mixed Method research design. The tools used in this study are survey questionnaire and interviews. The sample of the study is N=249 undergraduate students from different public and private sector universities of Pakistan and N=20 ESL instructors. The data analysis involved various statistical tests in order to examine the correlation of socio-cultural factors, pedagogy, religious influence, and parental influence with learner social identity and motivation to learn English. The quantitative data was analysed through SPSS for validity and reliability testing, correlation analysis, and hypothesis testing. The quantitative results showed statistically significant correlation between different variables such as socio-cultural factors, pedagogy, religious influence, and parental influence and interplay of these variables with learner social identity and motivation to learn English. The qualitative interviews with ESL experts, futher strengthened the results by providing valuable insights on the subject of inquiry based on their experience and expertise in English Language teaching in universities of Pakistan.

Keywords: social identity, English language, motivation, pedagogy, religion, parental influence, socio-cultural factors

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Second language learning is a complex process which has been subject of inquiry in research for many decades. Recent developments in linguistic research present motivation as an important component of this process. Motivation as defined by Dornyei (2009) is learners' effort and willingness of second language acquisition. According to (Cook & Artino, 2016) motivation refers to internal processes that initiate, sustain, and regulate goal-oriente behaviours. Though language learning depends on learner's level of motivation to learn the language, learners' motivation is influenced by learner social identity (Norton, 1995). Social identity is individual's self perception shaped by his/her association with a group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

In second language learning process, social identity influences L2 learners' desire to assemble in target and native culture. According to Norton (1995) social identity is fluid; it is shaped by L2 learners' experience of diverse social contexts. Thus, learners' willingness to put efforts in L2 learning is influenced by learners' identity. It is important to examine the interplay of ESL learner social identity and motivation to learn English because L2 learners' target language performance and motivation in ESL classroom is influenced by their socio-cultural factors and other factors that build learners self perception (Ajmal et al., 2020, Wadho et al., 2016). In multicultural contexts like Pakistan, ESL learners often lack language proficiency or even face challenges in acquiring English despite being part of curriculum from primary to higher education (Pathan et.al., 2024, Hassan et al., 2024). This is due to the interplay of learner social identity and motivation in ESL classrooms. There are considerable research studies available on effective teaching and learning strategies but these strategies are unproductive unless thorough investigation of the dynamic interplay of learner social identity and motivation are carried out. This investigation is crucial in order promote effective ESL teaching and learning.

This study extends L2 motivation theories by Gardner (1985) and Dornyei (2005) and empirical studies conducted on language motivation and social identity (Ajmal et al., 2000; Al Mubarookh & Prasetya, 2000; Choi et al., 2024; Wadho et al., 2016). Existing research on ESL motivation and social identity have explored individual variable shaping learners' social identiy. This study aims to

extend the research by examining the influence of different variables such as parental influence, religion, socio-cultural aspects and pedagogy in shaping learner social identity and the influence of social identity on motivation to learn English. Theories of L2 motivation and social identity and research on L2 motivation frame following hypotheses.

H1 There is significant relationship between different variable (parental influence, religion, socio-cultural aspects and pedagogy) that shape social identity.

H2 There is significant relationship between social identity and motivation to learn English.

The study is carefully designed to test given hypotheses and to thoroughly analyze the relationship between social identity and motivation. The survey questionnaire captures learners' beliefs and attitudes toward ESL learning influenced by various constructs. This allows the researchers to run correlational analysis of different variable which shape learner social identity. Interviews conducted from ESL instructors further enhance this understanding. The research design triangulates the data to assess hypothesis aligning with collected data and exiting theories.

This paper adds to the exisiting research on L2 motivation and social identity. Theoretically, the study tests the correlation between different variables of social identity which interfere with learners' moviation in ESL context. By doing so the researchers offer a comprehensive framework to understand ESL learners' behviours and attitudes and motivation level in L2 learning. This wholesome approach is applicable in other multilingual settings for further generalization. Moreover, the research contributes to the existing empirical evidence of the Investment Theory by Norton (2006) to demonstrate how the process of identity negotiation of learners, which is influenced by cultural, social, and institutional pressures, has a crucial influence on motivation and readiness to invest in English language learning. Practically, this study has implications for language educators as it informs the influence of different variables of social identity in shaping ESL learner motivation. Also, the study highlights the need to establish positive, culturally sensitive classroom environments by dealing with the psychological and social issues that learners have to deal with negotiating conflicting identities. These measures can help to alleviate the language learning anxiety and to increase motivation of students and eventually improve educational outcomes in ESL (Abbasi et al., 2025).

1.2 Justification of the Study

Existing studies in L2 motivation mainly emphasize on the role of motivation in second language learning. However, the involvement of learner social identity is less explored area. A few studies have examined the role of social identity in learner motivation and others have examined a particular aspect of learner social idenity in relation to ESL motivation. In multicultural context such as Pakistan, where ESL learners often face challenges due to interaction of different social identities, it is essential examine the complex interplay of parental influence, religion, socio-cultural aspects and pedagogy in social identity and ESL motivation.

1.3 Literature Review

Research on L2 motivation is supported by frameworks of Gardner (2001) and Dornyei (2005). The most influential model of LLM was Socio-educational modal developed by Gardner (1985), Gardner's motivation theory was considered to be the most influential theory. Gardner believes that a learning a second language is both an educational concern and a reflection of the culture of its speakers. Thus, teaching a language might be considered imposing another culture on the students' lives. As a result, it is believed that language learners' objectives can be divided into two categories: integrative motivation and instrumental motivation. Integrative learners often have an intense fascination with the language and a desire to interact with native English speakers. Whereas learners driven by instrumental motivation focus on the real-world benefits or ambitions that learning English may provide, such as opportunities for professional or academic progress (Kiruthiga & Christopher, 2024).

Dörnyei (2005) futhur extended L2 motivation research and presented L2 motivational self system. There are three key components of L2 Motivation Self System model: the ideal L2 Self, the Ought-to-Self, and L2 Learning experience. Dörnyei claims that learner may develop an ideal exploring the Development of Second Language Motivation 431 L2 self or an ought-to-self at the beginning of the L2 learning process. However, the maintenance of the L2 motivation requires the appropriate L2 Learning experience (Lu, 2023). These theories have guided different national and international empirical studies which provide a nuanced approach to understand the relationship between learner social identity and L2 motivtion.

Zahid and Ghani (2018) investigated that relationship between learners' social identity, culture, tradition and values and foreign language have focused the main and core issues of identity which are stuck in the minds of the language learners when they learn English language. It has been observed that social identity is a cause of anxiety in second language learners. The results show that social status is directly proprtiotional to ESL learners' anxiety. Learners from higher status are more confident and motivated due to exposure and acceptance of English language and culture by their social group whereas lower social status learners are more reluctant to acquire and use English language due to the cultural Gap between both native and target social group.

Ajmal et al. (2020) investigated the influence of English language learning on the Cultural Identity of Pakistani secondary school student. 60 students of secondary level from private schools were selected for the data collection. A questionnaire consisting of close-ended questions was delivered to the participants to be filled in; the study had applied a quantitative method for data analysis. The result indicates that learning the English language has both positive and negative effects on student's Cultural Identity (CI). Learning the English Language is important, being the language of technology and lingua franca. But language never comes alone; it comes with its culture.

The school students are getting affected by Western culture.

Al Mubarokah and Prasetya (2020) observed an Indonesian ESL learners' identity reconstruction as she went through various learning experiences since childhood to university level in two different countries. In-depth interview was conducted to collect the participant's account on her experiences, followed by several online correspondences within two months after the interview was conducted. The results of this study indicated that parental support and school policy and environment played an important role in reshaping the participant's identity. Her identity construction was then explained using Gee's (2000) four perspectives of identity. This study extended the research on learner identity particularly in Indonesian context or any other contexts with nearly similar characteristics.

Farid (2021) adopted a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design to investigate the relationship between religious influence and language learning in three Indonesian pesantren. The findings suggest that learners from the most conservative context had the lowest motivation to learn English in all motivational dimensions, though their motivation to learn Arabic was the highest. The qualitative data revealed that the cohort of students, especially from the most conservative context related their English learning motivation to their spiritual vision, i.e. using English mainly as a means of da'wah (Islamic propagation) and for communicating with other Muslims worldwide. However, this da'wah motive did not appear to generate much learning effort, and was possibly a way of overcoming the dissonance they feel in being forced to study the language of 'non-believers'.

Choi et al. (2024) identified the English learning motivational profiles of elementary-school-aged children based on self-determination theory and to verify if parental involvement can predict a child's English learning motivational profile classification.The results indicate that when parents respect children's learning style, offer learning information, and provide emotional support, children are more likely to have better quality or higher quantity motivational profiles. Conversely, parental pressure was related to worse quality or lower quantity motivational profiles. The implications of the study are discussed in terms of South Korean parent-child relationships and the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context.

2. Method

The study employs mixed methods because of its feasibility in a comprehensive investigation of social identity and its influence on learner motivation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The data collection instruments in this study are questionnaire based on Tajfel's Social Identity Theory (1979) and Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System (2005) and semi structured interviews. The questionnaire provides an understanding of ESL learners' beliefs, attitudes and motivation patterns under the influence of various social identity constructs. Futher insights into the complex interplay of different varaibles such as parental involvement, socio-cultural factors, religious influence, and pedagogy in relation to social identity and motivation were provided by ESL experts who participated in interviews. Thus integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches is a suitable approach to address the issue (Dörnyei, 2005).

2.2 Participant (Subject) Characteristics

Participants of study are both male and female undergraduate English language learners (N=249) enrolled in public, private and engineering universities and English language teachers teaching there (N=15). The diversity of participants captures the true influence of learner social identiy in their motivation to learn English. This distribution ensures generalizibilty of the results to varied populations; also, this proves statistically significant interplay of various variable regardless of the contextual variations.

2.3 Sampling Procedures

In order to choose survey participants random sampling was employed to ensure are diverse and representative pool of partipants. For selecting interview participants, purposive sampling technique was used. Based on existing literature the researcher set the criteria for selecting interview participants. First, participants must be teaching English courses at any public, private or engineering university. Second, they must have 3 to 4 years of teaching. Third, they must have enough knowledge about teaching and research motivation.

3. Results

This study follows convergent research design so both qualitative and quantitative data was collected and analyzed simultaneously. SPSS was used to run different statistical tests on quantitative data to get reliable results while thematic analysis Braun and Clarke (2006) framework was used for qualitative part. The study polled 249 undergraduates from Pakistani public and private universities.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Participants

Type of University		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Public	117	47.0	47.0	67.1
	Engineering	82	32.9	32.9	100.0
	Private	50	20.1	20.1	20.1
	Total	249	100.0	100.0	

Table 1 shows the distribution of sample. It shows 117 participants were from public universities, 82 were from Engineering universities, and 50 from private sector general universities.

3.1 Statistics and Data Analysis

The study employed a Pearson correlation analysis to investigate the connections between motivation to learn English and various facets

of social identity including parental influence religious beliefs cultural affiliation and pedagogical environment.

Table 2. Correlation Analysis of Different Variables

Correlations						
	PEDG	REL	MOT	Par_Fa	Soc_cul	LER
PEDG	1	.389**	.339**	.275**	.214**	.312**
REL	.389**	1	.410**	.481**	.386**	.454**
MOT	.339**	.410**	1	.589**	.380**	.518**
Par_Fa	.275**	.481**	.589**	1	.410**	.496**
Soc_cul	.214**	.386**	.380**	.410**	1	.349**
LER	.312**	.454**	.518**	.496**	.349**	1
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).						

A direct relationship is indicated by a correlation coefficient (r) with a value of -1, and an inverse relationship is indicated by a value of +1. The strength of the relationship is indicated by the magnitude of (r), with commonly understood scale as follows: Weak: (0.0 - 0.3), Moderate: (0.3 - 0.6), and Strong: (0.6 - 1.0). To test the reliability of data Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each construct.

Table 3. Social Identity Factors

Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.887	3

All values exceed the 0.7 threshold recommended by Nunnally (1978) indicating strong internal consistency. The validity of the constructs was validated by factor analysis (KMO = 0. 82 Bartlett's Test p 0. 001) which showed that the items successfully measured the factors they were supposed to. Further, in order to evaluate the influence of social identity factors on learners' motivation a multiple regression analysis was performed. With a statistically significant model ($F_{(4,244)} = 21.67$ p < 0. 001) and an adjusted $R^2 = 0. 47$ social identity factors account for 47% of the variation in motivation.

The survey findings shed important light on the variables affecting students desire to learn English. By emphasizing the influence of social identity factors on learners' motivation the findings validate the hypotheses. The greatest predictor of motivation was found to be parental influence (β = 0. 32 p < 0. 001) suggesting that students who have parents who actively encourage them to learn English are more likely to be motivated. This result supports H1 by reaffirming the notion that learners' motivation is increased by a strong social identity as English users. Additionally, Cultural Identity was found to have a significant positive effect (β = 0. 29 p < 0. 001) indicating that students are more motivated to learn English if they associate it with prestige social mobility and career advancement. This result shows that a strong identification with English as a social asset increases motivation which further supports H1.

Religious Influence (β = -0. 14 p = 0. 013) demonstrated a negative correlation with motivation suggesting that students who believe that English threatens their cultural or religious values are less motivated. This finding supports H2 which holds that motivation is adversely affected by a conflicted identity such as feeling cut off from English speakers. Moreover students motivation was found to be positively impacted by Pedagogical Influence (β = 0. 24 p < 0. 001) suggesting that good teaching methods are essential for promoting English language acquisition. Positive self-identification with English which is promoted by interesting and encouraging instruction boosts integrative motivation which is why this finding supports H3.

The overall results of the survey support the idea that a variety of social and cultural factors influence people's motivation to learn English. Positive self-identification with English is greatly influenced by parental and educational factors and cultural identity boosts motivation when English is seen as a useful skill. However identity conflicts brought on by religious concerns can impede motivation. These findings demonstrate the intricate relationship between identity cultural perceptions and pedagogical practices in influencing language learning motivation and offer empirical support for the study's hypotheses.

3.2 Qualitative Analysis

After survey analysis the interview transcripts were coded and analyzed using thematic analysis. Following are the main themes of the qualitative data.

a) Social Mobility and Parental Expectations

Experts stressed that students' motivation is significantly influenced by their parents' expectations. As one of the experts pointed out, speaking English well is frequently associated with better job prospects in Pakistan. Rich parents make significant investments in their children's English education which boosts their motivation. The quantitative conclusion that parental influence is the most important predictor of motivation n is consistent with this theme.

b) Religion as a Motivational Force as Well a Barrier

Participants of the study believe that different religions had different opinions about English. While some students saw English as a threat to their culture others saw it as a source of global knowledge. An ESL educator who was interviewed mentioned that some students resist learning English because they believe it weakens their religious identity while others view it as essential for gaining access to global knowledge. This theme corroborates the quantitative analysis finding that religious identity and motivation are negatively correlated.

c) Conflicts of Social Identity and Prestige

A number of experts emphasized the identity conflict that students especially those from rural areas face. One of the participants said that students frequently struggle between the pressure from society to adopt English for social mobility and their desire to preserve their cultural identity. In accordance with Tajfel's Social Identity Theory (1979) learners may encounter in group-out group dynamics that impact their motivation.

d) The Role of Pedagogy in Identity Formation

According to experts, motivation is fostered by student-centered teaching methods. A professor made the following observation. Students feel more motivated to engage with English when their cultural identities are acknowledged in the classroom. This is consistent with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory which contends that when teachers foster a collaborative learning environment, students become more motivated.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study emphasizes how learners' identities and motivation to learn English are shaped by the intricate interactions of institutional individual and sociocultural factors. The results both support and contradict previous research by confirming that identity has a positive and negative impact on English language use. Parental and socioeconomic background both are important factors in line with Norton's (1995) theory of language learning investment. In contrast to discouraging parents who frequently do so out of cultural or religious concerns supportive parents promote motivation by highlighting the importance of English in upward mobility (Farid, 2021). The findings of the study align with Al Mubarookh & Prasetya (2020) that unsupportive surroundings and a lack of resources impede motivation and identity transformation.

The study shows that cultural and religious identity conflicts also influence students' motivation to learn English in context of Pakistan. While urban students occasionally oppose English out of concerns about cultural decline rural students typically embrace it as a component of who they are. The findings are supported by Farid's (2021) investigation into religious identity in Indonesian Islamic schools which demonstrated the strong influence of sociocultural context on motivation. The social and cultural contexts of learners also influence whether they view English as a threat or an advantage (Lamb, 2012).

Collaborative learning and institutional support have an additional effect on motivation. Ushioda (2009) asserted that motivation is socially mediated and peer interactions and group activities support learners' identities as English speakers. Institutional policies however frequently ignore sociocultural diversity which lowers motivation for particular groups. Wadho et al. (2016) emphasize the necessity of customized interventions and demonstrate how culturally aware methods greatly increase participation.

The study suggests that culturally appropriate resources and instructional techniques are also very important. Norton (1995) argues for identity-reflective learning materials which are strengthened when regional and religious contexts are incorporated into English instruction. Similarly, according to Peng and Patterson (2021) inclusive teaching strategies increase students' motivation and flexibility. It was evident from the interview data that the gap between present identities and the Ideal L2 Self can be closed with the aid of inclusive education. According to Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System learners who view English as essential to their goals are more driven. In contrast people who believe that English contradicts their identity find it difficult to maintain their motivation which is consistent with research by Farid (2021). Though the study provides a complete framework for understanding the relationship between learner social identityshaped by different variables and motivation to learn English in ESL contexts, this study has contextual limitations. The study doesn't offer cross cultural investigation which may lead to different results. Future researcher could extend this study by examing ESL motivation and social identity in crosscultural groups.

Author' contributions

All authors contributed to the study and design. ALI(First draft-writing, re-writing, and data analysis); HBP (conceptualization, data collection, supervisor); AFS (literature review, super- vision-Chief, funding acquisition); OKS (editing, sources, proof-reading).

Competing interests

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

Informed consent

Obtained.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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