

Social Identity: A Composite Concept in Social Sciences Research

Asieh Amini*

*Ferdowsi University of Mashhad

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 Feb 2020

Received in revised form 30 May 2020

Accepted 11 Aug 2020

Keywords:

ABSTRACT

Social identity is amongst concepts which have attracted considerable attention from sociologists and numerous studies have been conducted for recognition its nature and aspects. Although identity construction and its process is an individually-based concept, its construction is affected by society and social factors and reforms in relation to society throughout one's life. Nowadays, raising relevant issues to social identity has been turned to be one of the most significant subjects in the realm of social sciences research. It is considered as one of the most complex concepts in humanities field. Sociology and psychology are the two disciplines have centralized it in research. Multidimensionality of social identity is one of the tenets of social identity theory. Under the research umbrella of applied linguistics, results of research regarding social identity in psychology and sociology have gone toward making them applicable for educational settings. Considering the importance of learning and pertinent factors, the current review study intends to put flesh on this multifaceted issue from a different perspective. In the end, suggestions are provided for future researchers to pay more attention to the role of social identity in academic settings.

1. Introduction

In the same way with every kind of methodology, promotion in learners' performance is of a great concern for language practioners. There are various factors in improving learners' performance such as gender, age, learning experiences, cognitive and learning styles, interests and incentives, and personality type that reveal significant relationships with educational success. One of the most important characteristics of learners is identity (Sahin, 2008).

Learning a new language is an abstruse experience which encompasses the whole person with its different aspects (cognitive, emotional, and physical). During learning a new language, (re)construction a new identity from one hand and maintaining the original identity from another hand creates disturbances and oscillations. In such situation, learners find themselves in an undulative condition of being L1 speaker or their identities as L2 or EFL speakers. Accordingly, it has been demonstrated that (re)construction of a new identity through learning a new language has been a dynamic and constant issue (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2007). Regarding the importance of language, Warschauer (2007) explicated that a language plays an integral role in expressing and (re)construction of identity. In the postmodern era, by fading some features of identity like race this function of language has become consequential. Moreover, it has been asserted language and identity are two inseparable parts which enact effective roles in formation of human societies in personal and social relationships (e.g., Edwards, 2009; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Norton, 1995, 2009; Warschauer, 2007). In line with corroborating the inseparability between language and identity, it has been presumed that language is considered to be essential for humans' cognition, identity (re)construction, and self-development (Edwards, 2009). The meaning of the integrity between language and identity is that a language shapes identity and also it is shaped by identity (Norton, 1997).

Recent trends in educational policy of EFL countries have focused on facing challenges of globalization, internationalization, and individuals' needs for learning another language. Since English is considered as an international language, governments of countries like Iran in which English is not the means of communication have been strongly developing learning of English as a vital hard core (Liao, 2007). Therefore, EFL learners are influenced by the new language besides their original identities; it affects their new identities as well. A social viewpoint on EFL learning illuminates the fact that learners are not attached to a static state, rather their identities are to social factors which affect sense of self (Arnold, 1999).

Interactivity among culture, identity, and language is the basis of evolution and a complement for many learning variables, and most of the learners' complex characteristics are considered multidimensional (Owen, 2011). From this respect, this multidimensionality of identity permits researchers to designate learners' revealed thoughts as a reflection of a constant interaction with others and environment (Mackey, 1999). Furthermore, recognizing

* Corresponding author: Asieh.Amini@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24200/jsshr.vol8iss03pp26-32>

learners as "social beings" assist researchers to conclude that learning process is affected by various factors that come into play in different dimensions. Conceptualization of identity initiates with a transaction between self and society (Stryker, 1980). Identity affects society via individuals' actions by creating institutions, organizations, groups, and mutually society influences the self by its shared language and meanings that enables an individual to take the role of others, and engage in social interactions (Stets & Burke, 2003). Although there is a problem and that is considering learners as a one-dimensional entity. One-dimensionality of learners is a reflection of the fact that only language stimulations cause learners to use language without taking into account other social and cultural factors and interactions (Mackey, 1999)

2. Review of the Relate Literature

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Theory of social identity is one of the well-developed theories in the realm of psychology and sociology propounded by Tajfel and Turner in the 1970s and 1980s. Identity is defined as the amount of individual's self-concept which is a result of interaction in a relevant social group (Turner & Penny, 1986). Put it in another frame, it seeks to elucidate intergroup behaviors (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, 1989). This theory was developed by reliance on three pillars, namely, difference, social group, self, inter/intra-group communication, and inter-group behaviors. More to say, it went on to elaborate first, inter-group behaviors in which differences lie at the heart of a self, and second to clarify how society, members, and interactions affect one's identity and how these may lead to identity change or reconstruction. In this line, any changes in identity are derived from emotional attachment to a group, or moving from one culture to another (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1999). An integral assumption in social identity theory is that individuals are motivated to gain and maintain a positive identity. The exact essence of this attempt for positive identity has been remained elusive (Long, Spears, 1997; Rubin, Badea, & Jetten, 2014; Turner, 1999)

Identity is defined as a way for thinking personhood. It is a term which has its originality in west and especially effective for global capitalism (Norton, 1997). In other words, it is simultaneously a social position and an affect which has its reliance on interest for coherence and completeness. Self, personality, individual, character, and rationality are terms lie at its heart. Identity is highlighted by recognition of: "I am" that is a reciprocal association and a bidirectional way in which an individual's recognition is manifested in how one identifies him/herself, thus identity can be manifested through being in touch with others (Skeggs, 1994). Based on this definition, Radhakrishnan (1996) demonstrated there are at least two motivations for identity namely, being-for-the-self and identity-for-the-other.

This term has gained remarkable attention from educational researchers, sociologists, and cultural theorists. They have been figuring out the influential factors in new identity formation especially in academic settings (e.g., Carolina, 2011; Owen, 2011; Ricento, 2005; Starfield, 2002; Talmy, 2008; Toohey, 2000; Toohey & Norton, 2010). Language learners' identity is part of learning process which not only relates to roles and learners' voices as members of classroom community, but also, as active participants in perception of a language that is different from their own. From this respect, relationship between identity and language is a golden aspect in understanding the constant procedure of identity formation in EFL learners (Carolina, 2011)

Regarding the positive contribution of identity in EFL learning, Gass (1998) stated that the theory of social identity has been fully developed; though, theoretical pertinence of identity levels to EFL learning required to be established. Multitude research about language and identity showed that novel theories in identity in (EFL learning) educational

settings suggested insightful implications about the process of language learning (e.g., Ibrahim, 1999; Curtis & Romney, 2006; Dagenais, 1999; Kendrick & Jones, 2008; McKinney, 2007; Silberstein, 2003)

All of events happen in a classroom, ways or types of communicating others, ways learners see other learners and teachers, culture, religion are all kinds of experiences and relations which constructed through chains of interactions with others and the environment the new language is being learned. Although creation of such plausible setting varies from one context to other contexts and learners' needs to other learners' needs, among the most significant of all is a condition which the interactions re-accommodate with learning milieu and learners themselves in order to fulfill learning objectives (Cruwys et al., 2016)

A growing body of evidence from various disciplines has asserted that language learning and identity (re)construction are closely related. This issue has attracted considerable attention by many researchers (e.g., Barnawi, 2009; Huang, 2011; Joseph, 2009; Lazzaro-Salazar, 2013; Nabavi, 2010; Norton & McKinney, 2011; Roth, 2010; Tamimi Sa'd, 2017). In a Study, Barnawi (2009) examined the identity negotiation and shaping of two EFL students at American universities in Saudi Arabian. The results revealed that they had difficulty in socializing in the TL community. Following a metaphorical approach, Huang (2011) conducted a study to examine identity construction in English Taiwanese students. The results of interview showed that the majority of students used positive metaphors in describing their L2 self- development through learning English. Similarly, in examining identity construction in Indonesian multilingual EFL learners, Zacharias (2012) found that among different identity levels learners had evaluated their national identity negatively. The researcher argued this negative perspective was gained from learners' recognition of themselves as non-native speakers (NNS). In several case studies, Morita (2004) conducted a study aimed at examining Canadian L2 learners' identity negotiation. Based on observations, the researcher found that learning English enacted an effective role in their identity constructions.

Taking a poststructuralist view of identity, Li and Simpson (2013) investigated migrant learners' attitudes of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) toward identity construction. The researcher asseverated that broadening perception about how identity is constructed would help practitioners to gain illuminative insights into needs analysis. Adopting a quantitative approach in collecting data, Lefkowitz and Hedgcock (2006) employed a questionnaire to show how identity in Spanish learners of English was being (re)constructed via a standard set of rules for pronunciation due to social pressures. In line with these studies, Ritzau (2015) set out a study which conspicuously examined Danish learners at the initial levels of learning English, negotiated selves and identities in their target language .

2.2. Models in Social Identity Construction

Considering the importance of identity and its construction, researchers in various fields of social sciences have attempted to perceive the multidimensionality of social identity through proposing different models. In the following section, four models as instances are provided.

2.3. Ecological Systems Model of Social Identity (ESM)

The basic model of identity formation has been developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979). Bronfenbrenner considered four main layers (Micro, Meso, Exo, and Macro systems) (Figure 1). At the heart of micro system individual is located. In this inner circle, family, school, and neighborhood have contribution in developing the primary body of individual's identity. In exo system, work settings, social services, and family friends bring identity to a more advanced level of construction. Finally, in macro system social, cultural, and historical elements influence identity formation. As layers become more extensive construction goes toward abstractness; that is, invisible factors. The necessity of micro system should not be waived, since as Bronfenbrenner (1979) demonstrated the first seeds of one's identity are planted by the small environment (s)he involves in. This small environment with its complements has a contributory role in growing blossoms of identity to the ripened (advanced) level.

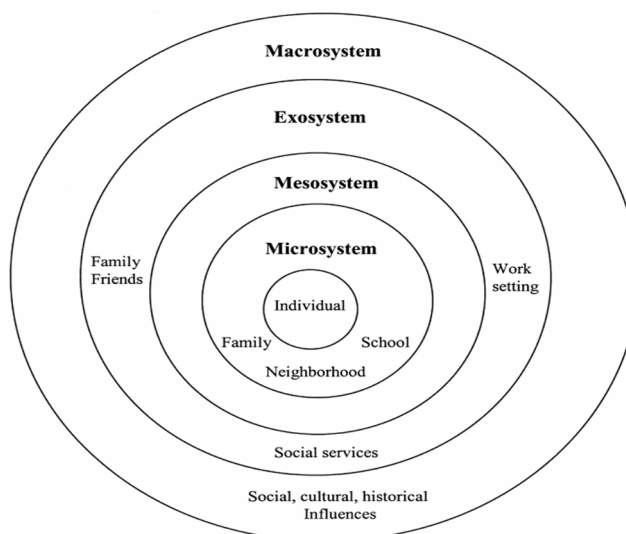


Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model

2.4. Diversity Wheel Model of Social Identity (DWM)

The second model has been extracted from the field of Psychology and counseling (Figure 2). This model elaborates how parent- teenager relationships could be nurtured through conversation about identity, and teenagers' social identities are influenced by many social factors (Loden & Rosener, 1991). In this model no factor surpasses others, rather the researcher believed in each stage of teenagers' lives some special factors contribute to identity construction. Some factors like (race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, religion, and national origin) are fixed, and thus, their selection is out of one's control/will. Some other like (education, ability, working experience) can be gained through being in interaction with others in a group or generally society. To the extent teenagers become nearer to adulthood, the circles of effective favors become wider.



Figure 2. Diversity Wheel Model of Social Identity

2.5. Social Spiral Model of Social Identity (SSM)

In the field of Business Marketing, Birkigt and Stadler (1986) proposed a model named Social Spiral Model of Social Identity. This model examines identity formation from two levels of “External VS. Internal” and “Social” (Figure 3). The micro level of identity includes one’s image (which is external body of identity), and one’s identity (which is the full picture of blank image). The individual’s image includes personality which is affected internally (behavior) and externally (communication and symbols). Advent to a broader identity image, social spiral is the level in which besides symbols, communication, and behavior, encompasses other minor factors. This model has its focus on the role communication and behavior more than other social factors even symbols.

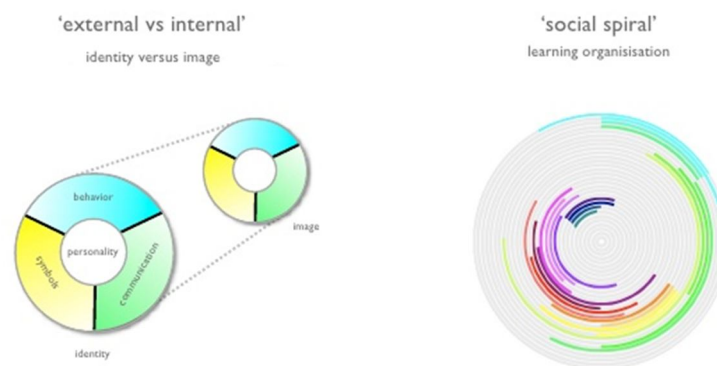


Figure 3. Social Spiral Model of Social Identity

2.6. North central University Diversity Wheel Model of Social Identity (NCU)

This model is an advanced model of Diversity Wheel, mentioned earlier in this section. It was proposed by Loden (1996), and particularly for educational settings (North central university) (Figure 4). NCU welcomes diversity of thought, cultural groups in a community. Educational inquiry would be promoted if it enjoys diversity in nature and there is room for respecting to different experiences, social and cultural groups (Loden, 1996). This diversity includes all dimensions of an individuals’ identity internal (marital status, language, community, race, ability, gender, education, and religion), life experiences (personal and historical experiences), institutional dimension (student, staff, faculty, administrator), school and organizational departments. All these dimensions together lead to one’s diverse identity and enhance pedagogical quality in university (Loden, 1996).

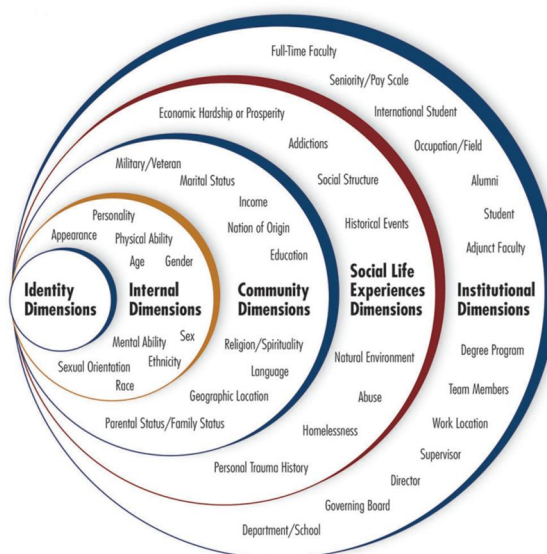


Figure 4. North central University Diversity Wheel Model

3. Discussion

Researchers have demonstrated that in nearly all ESL and EFL settings, language practitioners and researchers do not directly deal with learners' or their affective and cognitive characteristics, but also consider relational aspects of learning (Jackson, 2008; Parkinson & Crouch, 2011). From this respect, Arnold (1999) asserted that ESL and EFL learning is an act of reaching beyond self to others. The way individuals could answer who they are is significantly shaped by their social identities (Tajfeld, 1978).

Since the advent of academic research in 1950s, foreign language education research has centralized "individuals' factors" which affect target language learning (e.g., personality and cognitive styles) with pedagogical implications (e.g., Gui, 1986; Shi, 2000; Wen, 2001; Wen & Wang, 1996; Zhou, 1996; Zhu, 2006). It has been demonstrated that miscommunication in cross-cultural interactions might be the result of cultural differences, and in the same way affects target culture and language learning as two interwoven parts. Although psychological, social, and cultural alterations in contrast to individuals' classical contributing factors which directly influence learning, has been gaining more attention and many educational researchers have been tending to examine how these factors: 1) affect learning, and, 2) lead learners to gain complete understanding about who they are as EFL learners (Qu, 2005; Tamimi Sa'd, 2017). Furthermore, studies examined perception of identity (re)construction through target language learning, would reveal insightful results and implications which elucidate probable ways for learners to learn a target language (Tamimi Sa'd, 2017).

Identity is formed through communicating others, extending from past and continuing to present and future (Wenger, 1998). More to say, identity is a dynamic process of searching the self dealing with a community of practice. The importance of a language is to the extent that its learning is nearly equal to learning a culture, and learning a culture leads to a new identity (re)construction and affects one's original identity. This significance in examining learners' identities, whose English is a foreign language seems timely, since EFL learners have to maintain their original identities and language besides their new identities which are formed through learning a language. Considering all models in different fields of study it can be concluded that in all of them, interactivity among all factors implies the multidimensionality of social identity. Future studies are suggested to be conducted in order to make up gaps and uncertainty in how learners' social identities are constructed, and to what extent it can predict learners' success in learning. Moreover, further research help researchers in all fields of social sciences to gain better understanding regarding finding new dimensions in identity construction.

REFERENCES

- Barnawi, O. Z. (2009). The construction of identity in L2 academic classroom community: A small scale study of two Saudi MA in TESOL students at North American university. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies (JLLS)*, 5(2), 62-84.
- Birkigt, K., & Stadler, M.M., (1986). Corporate identity: Corporate identity. Foundation, functions, case descriptions. Landsberg am Lech: Verlag Moderne Industrie.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge, MA :Harvard University Press.
- Cameron, D. (2006). *Theoretical debates in feminist linguistics: Questions of sex and gender*. In Wodak, R. (Ed.) Gender and discourse (pp. 21-36). London: Sage.
- Castells, M. (2004). *The information age: The power of identity*. London, UK: Blackwell Publishing.
- Curtis, A., & Romney, M. (2006). *Color, race, and English language teaching: Shades of meaning*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

- Dagenais, D., Moore, D., Lamarre, S., Sabatier, C., & Armand, F. (2008). *Linguistic landscape and language awareness*. In E. Shohamy & D. Gorter (Eds.), *Linguistic landscape: Expanding the scenery*. New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 253-269.
- Gao, Y. (2004). Legitimacy of foreign language learning and identity research: Structuralist and constructivist perspectives. *Intercultural Communication Studies*, 16(1), 100-106.
- Gass, S. (1998). Apples and oranges: Or why apples are not oranges and don't need to be. A response to Firth and Wagner. *The Modern Language Journal*, 82(4), 83–90.
- Gui, S.C. (1986). An analysis of the social psychology of English majors in China. *Modern Foreign Languages*, 4(1), 1-67.
- Higgins, E.T. (1987). Self-discrepancy: A theory relating self and affect. *Psychological Review*, 94(4), 319-40.
- Huang, W. (2011). The EFL learner identity development: A perspective of metaphor. *International Journal of Innovative Interdisciplinary Research*, 1(5), 1-13.
- Ibrahim, A. E. K. M. (1999). Becoming Black: Rap and hip-hop, race, gender, identity, and the politics of ESL learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33(3), 349–369.
- Johnson, K., & Johnson, H. (Eds.). (1999). *Encyclopedic dictionary of applied linguistics*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.
- Joseph, J. E. (2009). *Identity and language*. In J. L. Mey (Ed.), *Concise encyclopedia of pragmatics* (pp.345-351). Oxford, UK: Elsevier Ltd.
- Kendrick, M., & S. Jones (2008). Girls' visual representations of literacy in a rural Ugandan community. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 31(3), 372-404.
- Larsen-Freeman, D., & Cameron, L. (2007). Complex systems and applied linguistics. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 17(2), 226-239.
- Lazzaro-Salazar, M. V. (2013). Diving into the depths of identity construction and motivation of a foreign language learner. *Argentinian Journal of Applied Linguistics (AJAL)*, 1(1), 6–23.
- Lefkowitz, N., & Hedgcock, J. (2006). Sound effects: Social pressure and identity negotiation in the Spanish language classroom. *Applied Language Learning*, 16(1), 17-42.
- Loden, M. (1996). *Implementing Diversity*, Burr Ridge, IL: Mc-Graw Hill Publishin Loden, M. and J.B. Rosener (1991). *Workforce America: Managing employee diversity as a vital resource* homewood, IL: Business One Irwin.
- Long, K., & Spears, R. (1997). *The self-esteem hypothesis revisited: Differentiation and the disaffected*. The social psychology of stereotyping and group life. Oxford: Blackwell:
- Mackey, A. (1999). Input, interaction, and second language development: An empirical study of question formation in ESL. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 21(4), 557-587.
- McKinney, C. (2007). If I speak English does it make me less black anyway?. Race' and English inSouth African desegregated schools. *English Academy Review*, 24(2), 6-24.
- Nabavi, M. (2010). Constructing the 'citizen' in citizenship education. *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education*, 3(1), 1-10.
- Norton, B. (1995). Social identity, investment, and language learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29(1), 9-31.
- Norton, B. (1997). Language, identity, and the ownership of English. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(3), 409-429.
- Norton, B., & McKinney, C. (2011). *An identity approach to second language acquisition*. In D. Atkinson (Ed.), *Alternative approaches to second language acquisition* (pp. 73–94). London, UK: Routledge.
- Norton, B., & Pavlenko, A. (2004). Addressing gender in the ESL/EFL classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 38(3), 504-514.
- Owen, C. (2011). *Language and culture identity: Perception of the role of language in the construction of Aboriginal identities* (Unpublished master's thesis). Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario
- Parkinson, J., & Crouch, A. (2011). Education, language, and identity amongst students at a South African university. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 10(2), 83-98.
- Radhakrishnan, R. (1996). *Diasporic mediations: Between home and location*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Reynolds, K. J.; Turner, J. C.; Haslam, S. A.; Ryan, M. K. (2000). When are we better than them and they worse than us? A closer look at social discrimination in positive and negative domains. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78(1), 64–80.
- Ricento, T. (2005). Considerations of identity in L2 learning. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research on second language teaching and learning* (pp. 895-911). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Ritzau, U. (2015). Self-positioning through beginners' foreign language. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 25(1), 105-126.
- Roth, W. (2010). *Language, learning, context*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Rubin, M.; Badea, C.; Jetten, J. (2014). Low status groups show in-group favoritism to compensate for their low status and to compete for higher status. *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, 17(5): 563–576.
- Sahin, S. (2008). The Relationship Between Student Characteristics, Including Learning Styles and their Perceptions and Satisfaction in Web-Based Courses in Higher Education. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 9(1). 12-24.
- Shi, Y. Z. (2000). A survey of university students' English learning motivation. *Foreign Language Teaching Abroad*, 2(4), 8-11.
- Silberstein, S. (2003). Imagined communities and national fantasies in the O. J. Simpson case. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* 2(4), 319-330.
- Skeggs, B. (1994c). *Refusing to be civilized: "race", sexuality and power*. In H. A. Maynard (Ed.) *The dynamics of race and gender* (pp. 116-130), London: Taylor and Francis.
- Starfield, S. (2002). 'I'm a second-language English speaker': Negotiating writer identity and authority in Sociology One. *Journal of Language, Identity and Education*, 1(2), 121-140
- Stets, J. E., & Burke, P. J. (2000). Identity theory and social identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 9(11), 224-237.

- Stryker, S. (1980). *Symbolic interactionism: A social structural version*. Benjamin-Cummings: Publishing Company.
- Sunderland, J. (2004). Issues of language and gender in second and foreign language education. *Language Teaching*, 33(4), 203-223.
- Tajfel, H. (1978). *Human groups and social categories*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). *The social identity theory of intergroup behaviour*. In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin. Psychology of intergroup relations (pp. 7–24). Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall.
- Talmy, S. (2008). The cultural productions of the ESL student at Trade winds High: Contingency, multidirectionality, and identity in L2 socialization. *Applied Linguistics*, 29(4), 619-644.
- Tamimi-Sa'd, S. H. (2017). Foreign language learning and identity reconstruction: Learners' understanding of the intersections of the self, the other and power. *CEPS Journal: Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal*, 7(4), 13-36.
- Toohey, K. & B. Norton (2010). *Language learner identities and socio-cultural worlds*. In R. B. Kaplan (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of applied linguistics* (pp.178-188). New York: Oxford Press.
- Toohey, K. (2000). *Learning English at school: Identity, social relations and classroom practice*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Turner, J. C., & Oaks, P. J. (1986). The significance of the social identity concept for social psychology with reference to individualism, interactionism and social influence. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 25(3), 237-252.
- Warschauer, M. (2007). *Language, identity, and the internet*. In B. Kolko, L. Nakamura, & G. Rodman (Eds.), *Race in Cyberspace*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Wen, Q.F. (2001). English learning motivation, beliefs, and strategies: Patterns and characteristics of change. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 2(2), 105-115.
- Wen, Q.F., & Wang, H.X. (1996). Xuexizhe yinsu yu daxue yingyu siji kaoshi chengji deguanxi (Relations between learner factors and College English Test Band scores). *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 1(4), 33-39.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. New York, NY: Cambridge university press.
- Zacharias, N. T. (2012). *EFL students' understanding of their multilingual English identities*. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 9(2), 233-244.
- Zhu, Z.Y. (2006). A study of learning strategies employed by non-English majors in normal colleges. *Foreign Languages in China*, 26(4), 12-15.

How to Cite this Article:

Asieh Amini, Social Identity: A Composite Concept in Social Sciences Research, *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research* 8(3) (2020) 26–32.