

“WHO AM I?”: SOCIAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN RURAL EFL LEARNING

“¿QUIÉN SOY YO?”: CONSTRUCCIÓN DE IDENTIDAD SOCIAL EN EL APRENDIZAJE DE INGLÉS EN CONTEXTOS RURALES

Original Research Article




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Abstract

This study explores what tenth graders' narratives reveal about the role their social identity construction plays in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) within a rural Colombian school context. Grounded in a twelve-week qualitative narrative inquiry, the research involved five students from a public institution in San Miguel de Sema, Boyacá. Data were collected through six workshops on social identity and three phenomenological interviews per participant. The analysis combined Riessman's performative narrative approach and the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) proposed by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, allowing for an in-depth understanding of learners' lived experiences and identity construction in relation to EFL learning. The findings reveal how relational contexts, personal experiences, and perceptions of English influence students' social identity development, motivation, and engagement. The study offers insights into the importance of identity-sensitive pedagogies, particularly in underserved rural educational settings.

Keywords: Social identity; identity construction; narrative inquiry; English learning; EFL learners; rural education; qualitative research; Colombia.

Resumen

Este estudio explora lo que revelan las narrativas de estudiantes de grado décimo sobre el papel que desempeña la construcción de su identidad social en el aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) en el contexto de una escuela rural colombiana. La investigación se llevó a cabo con cinco estudiantes de una institución educativa pública en San Miguel de Sema, Boyacá, y se basó en una indagación narrativa cualitativa de doce semanas. Los datos se recopilieron mediante seis talleres enfocados en la identidad social y tres entrevistas fenomenológicas por participante. El análisis combinó el enfoque narrativo performativo de Riessman y el Análisis Fenomenológico Interpretativo (IPA) propuesto por Smith, Flowers y Larkin, lo cual permitió una comprensión profunda de las experiencias vividas y de la construcción de identidad en relación con el aprendizaje del inglés. Los hallazgos evidencian cómo los contextos relacionales, las experiencias personales y las percepciones sobre el idioma influyen en el desarrollo de la identidad social, la motivación y el compromiso de los estudiantes. El estudio ofrece perspectivas valiosas sobre la importancia de pedagogías sensibles a la identidad, especialmente en entornos rurales con recursos limitados.

Palabras clave: Identidad social; construcción de identidad; indagación narrativa; aprendizaje de inglés; estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera; educación rural; investigación cualitativa; Colombia.

Introduction

In today’s globalized world, learning a foreign language is not only a linguistic challenge but also a social one, as it entails negotiating new identities and ways of being (Gómez). English, in particular, has transcended its communicative role to become a symbol of access, opportunity, and self-construction (Gómez). Thus, learning English involves both internal processes and external social influences that shape learners’ identities in diverse and evolving ways.

Identity is constructed through interaction with cultural symbols and social contexts, where individuals make sense of their experiences and position themselves within communities (Penuel and Wertsch). In language learning, social identity becomes especially relevant, as learners often reconstruct who they are based on how they engage with the language and the world around them.

This study explores how tenth-grade students in a rural Colombian school construct their social identity through English learning. Grounded in narrative inquiry, the research draws on students’ lived experiences, expressed through written and oral narratives collected over twelve weeks. As Clandinin and Connelly argue, narratives are powerful tools for understanding how individuals give meaning to their experiences. Narratives are not merely stories—they are social and reflective acts that reveal how learners position themselves in relation to language, community, and self (Czarniawska; Trahar).

By documenting students’ voices, this study aims to unveil the role that social identity plays in English learning, particularly in rural educational contexts often overlooked by mainstream research. The findings offer insight into students’ perceptions, the factors influencing their identity construction, and how narrative spaces in the classroom can promote reflection and transformation. Ultimately, this article advocates for identity-aware pedagogies that center students’ voices and lived realities as a foundation for meaningful language learning.

Theoretical Framework

This section deals with the following concepts: identity, social identity, narratives, language and identity, communicative language teaching, task-based approach, and rural school.

Identity

Identity is understood as how individuals perceive their relationship with the world, how this relationship evolves over time and space, and the future possibilities they envision (Norton 2013; Park 2015). It encompasses social, cultural, and political dimensions, shaped through the interpretation of societal symbols and internalized through mental processes (Penuel and Wertsch). Identity is linked to learning and personal development within communities (Wenger) and serves as a means of relating to the world based on personal and social recognition (Van Lier; Tajfel). Far from being static, identity is fluid and changes over time, influenced by social interactions (Lamb; Horowitz).

Individuals possess multiple, dynamic identities that vary according to context and relationships (Gee; Norton 2000; Gómez). Identity is shaped not only by individual traits but also by historical, cultural, and socioeconomic factors (Norton and Toohey; West; Norton 1997). Bourdieu adds that cultural, symbolic, and economic capital significantly influence identity formation. Furthermore, identity construction involves the negotiation of meaning within social communities and is continually shaped by individual knowledge and broader social dynamics (Benson; Wenger; Gómez).

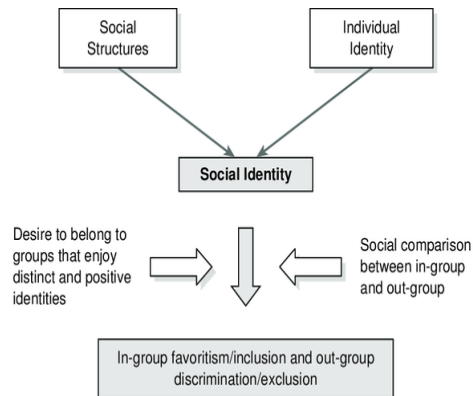
Social Identity

Social identity refers to how individuals define themselves based on group memberships, which can include aspects such as race, ethnicity, language, religion, and culture (Tajfel and Turner; Deaux; Peñaloza). It involves both internal elements, such as self-concept and self-esteem (Gentry and Campbell), and external social categorizations shaped by intergroup interactions (Snow and Anderson; Norton 2010). According to Hogg and Tindale, social identity facilitates the transformation of individual actions into collective group efforts by influencing shared values and behaviors. Tajfel’s theory further explains that individuals gain a sense of belonging and identity through group affiliations like family, gender, and social class, and that people tend to categorize others into in-groups and out-groups, often exaggerating group differences and similarities. These cognitive processes form the basis of stereotyping and shape how individuals perceive themselves and others in the social world.

Social Identity Stages:

According to Tajfel and Turner, social identity theory consists of three key processes: categorization, social identification, and social comparison. First, categorization involves organizing people into social groups (e.g., student, teacher, Colombian), which helps individuals understand their social environment and define group norms. Second, social identification refers to adopting the identity of the group one belongs to, influencing behavior and emotional attachment to the group. Finally, social comparison occurs when individuals evaluate their group in relation to others, often favoring their own group to maintain self-esteem. This process underlies the development of group-based biases and can lead to intergroup competition and prejudice.

Fig. 1. Social Identity Theory Basic Principles



(Source: Mor Barak, 2008)

Identity involves how individuals and groups define themselves in relation to others through systems of similarity and difference. Hall emphasizes that identity includes both socially assigned roles and self-constructed images,

and tensions between the two often require negotiation. In the context of language learning, identity plays a critical role: learners position themselves through language use, reflecting social relationships and personal stance. As Bakhtin suggests, language and meaning are socially constructed, and learners shape their identities by interacting with others and appropriating language. Beyond acquiring linguistic skills, language learners seek symbolic capital such as intellectual prestige and social recognition, which contributes to building identity and accessing broader social and material resources. Norton (1997) highlights that a learner’s right to speak and investment in language learning is deeply tied to social and historical contexts.

Narratives

Narratives are representations of lived experiences shared through oral or written discourse, carrying intentional meanings and contributing to identity construction (Salamanca; Pavlenko). They allow individuals to express emotions, perspectives, and interpretations of life events. Narrative inquiry, as a qualitative research method, offers a framework to explore how people make sense of their experiences and construct meaning (Webster and Mertova; Bolívar; Bruner). Narratives are both individual and social processes, enabling reflection on the past and projection into the future (Moen; Canagarajah). There are two main types: fictional and personal narratives, with the latter used in research to reveal identity construction through personal memories, feelings, and reflections (Pavlenko). Narrative inquiry emphasizes interpretation over

objectivity, focusing on how people select and structure life events to make sense of their identities within social and cultural contexts (Bell; Trahar; Jonassen).

Language and Identity

Language plays a fundamental role in identity construction, serving not only as a communication system but also as a medium through which individuals express their thoughts, beliefs, and sense of self (Ochs; Ávila and Villamil). Language enables people to define who they are and who they might become (Belsey), acting as an “identity kit” that signals group membership and adapts based on social context (Gómez). According to Weedon, language is both the site of social organization and personal subjectivity. It facilitates identity formation by allowing individuals to adopt different roles depending on context (Gee and Crawford). Moreover, language is not neutral; it is a social practice through which identities are negotiated and experiences are structured (Norton 2000). As such, language mediates the individual’s relationship with society, institutions, and peer communities, playing a central role in both social identity and personal development (Norton 1995; Ávila and Villamil).

Communicative Language Teaching

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), as outlined by Richards, emphasizes the development of communicative competence as the primary goal of language instruction. It involves principles that address language teaching objectives, learning processes, classroom activities, and the roles of

teachers and learners. According to Lightbown and Spada, CLT prioritizes not just linguistic structures but also the functional and contextual use of language. Thamarana adds that CLT caters to individual learner needs by linking language use to real-world contexts, thus enhancing engagement and skill acquisition. Richards identifies key components of communicative competence, including functional language use, context-appropriate variation, comprehension and production of diverse text types, and strategic communication despite linguistic limitations.

Characteristics of Communicative Language Teaching

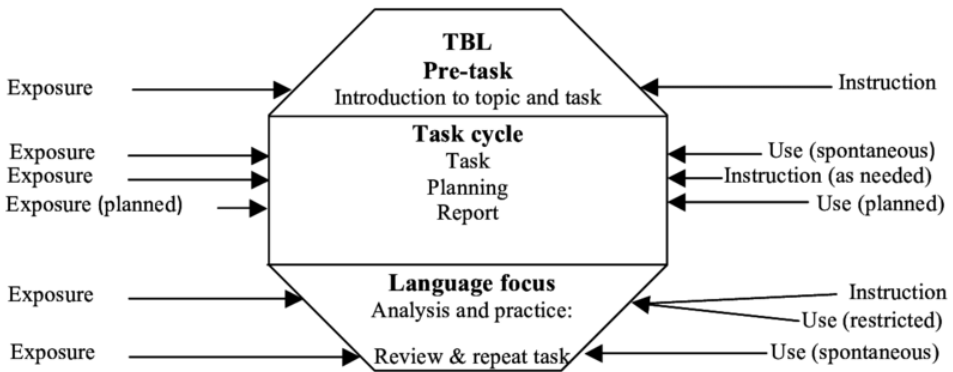
Larsen-Freeman, Celce-Murcia, and Johnson identify key characteristics of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), highlighting its focus on language use and function over formal structure. CLT emphasizes authentic, meaningful communication, promotes the development of all four language skills, prioritizes fluency over accuracy, and integrates grammar instruction in contextually relevant ways. According to Richards, CLT also offers several advantages: it enhances learner motivation and confidence by encouraging independent language use, supports real-life communication needs, and positions the teacher as a facilitator, allowing learners to take a more active role in the learning process.

Task-Based Learning

According to Celik, task-based learning (TBL) offers learners opportunities to develop language proficiency through meaningful use of

the target language, guided by the teacher. In TBL, learners engage in real-life communicative situations to complete tasks, which, as defined by Willis and Willis, involve using the target language to achieve a specific outcome. The aim is to foster authentic communication and purposeful language use. In this narrative study, tasks were designed to help students explore and express their identities through interaction with peers. TBL is structured in three stages: the pre-task, the task cycle, and the language focus (Willis and Willis).

Fig. 2. A Typical TBL Lesson Based on Willis's Framework



(Source: Thanh and Nguyen, 2012)

In task-based learning (TBL), instruction is organized into three stages: the pre-task, where the teacher introduces the topic and key vocabulary; the task cycle, where learners perform the task using the target language; and the language focus stage, where language use is reviewed to support correction and learning (Celik).

In order for tasks to be effective, they must incorporate specific features. Ellis outlines that tasks are work plans emphasizing meaning, simulating real-world language use, engaging cognitive processes, involving any of the four skills, and aiming for a clear communicative outcome. Similarly, Skehan highlights that tasks prioritize meaning, encourage original learner expression, relate to real-life activities, carry significance in completion, and are assessed based on outcomes. Overall, TBL emphasizes meaningful communication, positioning students as language users engaged in problem-solving and negotiation of meaning rather than focusing solely on language accuracy.

Rural School

Rural schools are shaped by the specific characteristics of their local contexts, making them difficult to define due to the diversity of rural realities (Moreno Carrillo; Ábos, Torres, and Fuquet). Factors such as proximity to urban centers, teacher working conditions, sociocultural backgrounds, infrastructure, and communication access must be considered. Despite historical challenges, rural schools have often served as spaces for innovation and effective educational practices (Bustos Jiménez; Bonilla and Cruz-Arcila). In Colombia, a significant disparity exists between rural and urban education. Therefore, rural education should reflect its unique context and cultural connections. Teachers must recognize students as individuals with distinct needs and backgrounds, rather than treating them as a homogeneous group (Ramos Holguín, Aguirre Morales, and Hernández).

Challenges in English Language Education in Rural Schools

Ramos Holguín and Aguirre Morales identify several key challenges to English language education in rural schools. These include geographical isolation, which limits academic interaction; the need for teachers to adapt to multiple roles beyond their training; and cultural factors that demand English instruction be relevant to local contexts. Additionally, family perceptions often deprioritize English learning in favor of economic survival, leading to low student motivation, especially when English is not seen as useful for future employment. Poor infrastructure and a lack of educational resources further hinder learning, while ongoing violence in some rural areas poses a serious threat to consistent and effective teaching.

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, narrative approach grounded in a constructivist paradigm to explore the construction of social identity in EFL learning. Drawing on Creswell and Richards, the research is situated, participant-oriented, holistic, and inductive, focused on understanding the lived experiences, thoughts, and feelings of tenth-grade students at a public school in Boyacá without altering their environment. The research emphasizes dialogue, contextual understanding, and personal narratives as sources of knowledge, aiming to uncover the multiple realities that shape students' English learning experiences.

Methodology

This study employs a narrative inquiry approach to explore the role of social identity construction in English as a Foreign Language learning. Narrative research, as defined by Ary et al., focuses on the co-construction of meaning through participants’ life stories, granting equal voice to both the researcher and participants. This approach enables an in-depth understanding of how learners organize, interpret, and represent their experiences and identities within specific social contexts (Barkhuizen, Benson, and Chik; Webster and Mertova).

Data were collected through phenomenological interviews and written workshops with five tenth-grade students from a rural school in Boyacá, each of whom selected a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality.

The research process was structured in three chronological stages: **“Understanding my learning process”**, which examined past experiences and their impact on language learning; **“My meaningful learning”**, which focused on present identity and EFL engagement; and **“Discovering my social identity”**, where students reflected on how their language learning shaped their self-perception.

The narratives were analyzed using Riessman’s performative analysis and the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) proposed by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin. These methods facilitated the identification of key themes and the sequential structure of participants’ stories, which included elements

such as protagonists, conflicts, and settings, aligning with narrative inquiry principles (Creswell; Ary et al.). Ultimately, the study highlights the interplay between identity, language learning, and rural context, offering insights into how students make sense of their educational and social realities through storytelling.

Data Collection Instruments

Students’ Artifacts

The first data collection instrument consisted of student artifacts gathered through six workshops centered on the concept of social identity. These workshops aimed to raise students’ awareness of their social identity as EFL learners and as individuals with unique traits and personalities. Through activities such as drawings, self-portraits, puzzles, and reflective questions, students explored the guiding questions “Who am I?” and “What is my social identity?” These workshops not only facilitated self-reflection and identity construction but also helped establish rapport between the researcher and participants, serving as a foundation for the subsequent phenomenological interviews.

Phenomenological Interviews

In this narrative study, data were collected through phenomenological interviews derived from students’ narratives. As Gill et al. explain, interviews are particularly effective for gaining in-depth understanding of participants’ experiences, beliefs, and motivations. Specifically, phenomenological interviews

aim to explore the meaning of lived experiences from the participants’ perspectives (Ary et al.), emphasizing the subjective interpretation of those experiences.

The study involved three phenomenological interviews conducted over three phases—beginning, middle, and end—during the seventh, ninth, and tenth weeks of the research. These interviews sought to elicit detailed personal accounts related to the construction of social identity in EFL learning. The data collection was followed by an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which helped to clarify students’ narratives and address emerging questions.

To ensure credibility, a double-checking process was conducted during the twelfth week, in which participants reviewed their narratives in Spanish and responded to follow-up questions. This process validated the data and reinforced participant-centered analysis.

Context and Participants

This narrative study was conducted at Institución Educativa Hato Viejo, a rural public school located in San Miguel de Sema, Boyacá, Colombia. The school operates under Colombia’s formal education model, offering preschool, primary, and secondary education, and serves approximately 116 students with a teaching staff of eight. Rooted in a constructivist and academic pedagogical approach, the institution emphasizes values, dialogue, and holistic student development.

The English program at the school follows the national Basic Standards of Foreign Language Competence (MEN), with students receiving three hours of English instruction weekly. However, limited technological resources and a focus on grammar and reading comprehension contribute to generally low English proficiency among students.

The student population primarily comes from peasant families engaged in agriculture and livestock, with many students walking long distances to attend school. Socioeconomic factors play a central role in their educational experience and identity development.

The study focused on five tenth-grade students (three females and two males), aged fifteen to seventeen, who voluntarily participated in the research. They selected the pseudonyms **Golfo**, **Sarística**, **Salome**, **Nashely**, and **Ángelus** to protect their identities.

Data collection was grounded in the students’ lived experiences and conducted through social identity workshops and phenomenological interviews, forming the foundation for a deeper exploration of identity construction in the context of EFL learning. Thus, the following chart outlines the research question, objective, methodology, participants, sample, context, and data collection instruments.

Table 1. Summary of the Research Design

Research Question	Objective	Approach	Partici- pants	Context	Instru- ments
What do tenth graders’ narratives reveal about the role their social identity construction plays in English learning as a foreign language?	To document what narratives reveal about the role their social identity construction plays in English learning as a foreign language in tenth graders at a public institution in San Miguel de Sema, Boyacá.	Qualitative Research Constructivist Paradigm Narrative Study	Five tenth-graders from a public school	Colombian students from a rural public school in Boyacá	Students’ artifacts Phenomenological Interviews

Source: Author

Data Analysis

This chapter outlines the data analysis process used to explore tenth-grade students’ narratives regarding the role of social identity in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. The primary research question guiding this analysis was: What do tenth graders’ narratives reveal about the role their social identity construction plays in English learning as a foreign language? A related sub-question investigated the factors influencing this identity construction.

The study involved five tenth-grade students from a public school in San Miguel de Sema, Boyacá, over a twelve-week period. The narrative inquiry was organized into three stages:

1. **“Once Upon a Time”**: This initial phase involved rapport-building through six workshops on social identity, allowing the researcher to gain familiarity with participants and contextualize their experiences.
2. **“Whispers of My Heart”**: The core of the study, consisting of three phenomenological interviews per participant, focused on uncovering their personal experiences and reflections on identity and EFL learning.
3. **“Shadows of My Journey”**: The final phase involved Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to interpret and validate participants’ narratives. A double-checking process was conducted in which participants reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of their shared experiences.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using performative narrative analysis (Riessman), which examines not only the content of narratives but also how they are delivered, considering voice, body language, and interaction dynamics between interviewer and participant. This approach recognizes narratives as performances that reflect participants’ sense-making processes and lived experiences.

Additionally, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), as outlined by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, was employed to deepen understanding of participants’ experiences. IPA focuses on how individuals make sense of their personal and social worlds and emphasizes the co-construction of meaning between participant and researcher. A final reflective session with all participants ensured that the narratives authentically represented their experiences.

Together, these methods provided a comprehensive and ethically grounded framework for interpreting how social identity shapes students’ engagement with EFL learning.

The phenomenological interviews were conducted over twelve weeks, scheduled according to the availability of school staff and the academic calendar, as the researcher was an external visitor. Interviews took place within the school setting, providing students with a familiar and comfortable environment that encouraged open and honest participation. Each student was interviewed individually, in Spanish, to ensure clear communication and emotional ease, given their ongoing English language learning. No time limits were imposed, allowing participants to express themselves at their own pace. During the final stage, “Shadows of My Journey,” students reviewed and reflected on their narratives in Spanish, fostering deeper understanding and participant validation.

Findings

This section presents the key findings of the narrative research study exploring the role that social identity construction plays in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning among tenth-grade students at a rural public school in Boyacá, Colombia.

Each participant’s story is shared as an individual “book,” structured around three narrative stages: “Once Upon a Time” (rapport-building via six social identity workshops), “Whispers of My Heart” (three phenomenological interview moments: the beginning, the middle, and the end), and “Shadows of My Journey” (final reflection and validation through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis).

Through phenomenological interviews and thematic analysis based on Riessman’s performative approach, the voices of five students revealed how personal, social, and academic experiences shape their identities as EFL learners. The findings are structured around three core themes that emerged from the cross-case analysis: Relationship with the Language, Relational Contexts, and Experiences.

In this sense, these themes are outlined in the following table, showing their connection to the study’s central research question.

Table 2. Themes Emerged from Each Moment

Research Question	Moment	Theme
What do tenth graders’ narratives reveal about the role their social identity construction plays in English learning as a foreign language?	1st Moment: “ <i>The beginning</i> ”	<i>Understanding My Learning Process</i>
	2nd Moment: “ <i>The middle</i> ”	<i>My Meaningful Learning</i>
	3rd Moment: “ <i>The end</i> ”	<i>Discovering My Social Identity</i>

Source: Adapted from Vásquez-Guarnizo (2019)

As part of the performative analysis (Riessman), the study also addressed the sub-question: What factors influence tenth graders’ social identity construction in EFL learning? This was achieved by identifying the key factors shaping their social identity development within the context of English language learning.

Table 3. Factors Influencing Social Identity Construction in EFL Learning

Sub-Question	Participants	Body	Factors
What factors influence tenth graders' social identity construction in EFL learning?	Golfo	1st Moment: “The Beginning”	Relationship with Language
		2nd Moment: “The Middle”	Relationship with Language
		3rd Moment: “The End”	Relationship with Language
	Sarística	1st Moment: “The Beginning”	Relational Contexts
		2nd Moment: “The Middle”	Relationship with Language
		3rd Moment: “The End”	Relational Contexts
	Salome	1st Moment: “The Beginning”	Relational Contexts
		2nd Moment: “The Middle”	Relationship with Language
		3rd Moment: “The End”	Relationship with Language
	Nashely	1st Moment: “The Beginning”	Experiences
		2nd Moment: “The Middle”	Relationship with Language
		3rd Moment: “The End”	Experiences
	Ángelus	1st Moment: “The Beginning”	Relational Contexts
		2nd Moment: “The Middle”	Relationship with Language
		3rd Moment: “The End”	Relationship with Language

Source: Adapted from Vásquez-Guarnizo (2019)

Through Riessman’s performative analysis of the participants’ narratives, three key factors influencing social identity construction in EFL learning were

identified: **relationship with language, relational contexts, and personal experiences**. These factors emerged in all three stages of the interview and were critical to understanding the role of social identity in language learning.

A **cross-case analysis** was also conducted to identify broader patterns across participants. Two major themes emerged:

1. **Recognition of English’s Importance:** All participants acknowledged English as valuable for future economic, personal, and social opportunities, including travel and cultural exchange.
2. **Low Language Interaction:** Despite recognizing its value, students reported minimal engagement with English in their daily lives due to rural contexts, family responsibilities, limited school exposure, and a lack of meaningful or motivating learning experiences.

Finally, the narratives were structured in three stages **“Once Upon a Time,” “Whispers of My Heart,”** and **“Shadows of My Journey”** and each participant’s story was presented individually to highlight their unique perspectives on social identity and learning English as a foreign language.

1. Golfo: Distant Engagement with English

Golfo expressed a consistently negative perception of English learning. He viewed it as difficult and external to his life goals, which are more technical (automotive system and robotics). His engagement with English was passive; he often relied on classmates to complete assignments and did not see the language as relevant to his future. Despite this, small moments of classroom

collaboration (e.g., learning verbs with peers) provided a social context that modestly enhanced his classroom interactions. His case illustrates a peripheral integration into the English learner identity group, where motivation was largely instrumental and minimal.

2. Sarística: Positive Identity Transformation

Sarística showed a dynamic and evolving relationship with English learning. Initially, she experienced challenges but later developed a strong identification with English due to interactive and identity-focused classroom methodologies. She began to perceive herself as a capable learner and saw English as a key to future mobility and professional success. English learning positively impacted her self-concept and leadership role among peers, showing that meaningful, context-aware pedagogies can foster both academic improvement and social identity formation.

Salome: Ambivalent and Resistant Identity

Salome maintained an ambivalent attitude toward English, driven by disinterest and low self-efficacy. Although she acknowledged minor academic benefits and occasional collaborative learning moments with peers, she expressed little intrinsic motivation. Her resistance to English reflected a strong attachment to her native language and social group, with limited identification as an English user. Her identity construction was marked by a passive resistance to change and minimal engagement in language-mediated social dynamics.

4. Nashely: Motivated and Aspiring Language Learner

Nashely demonstrated the most positive orientation toward English learning. While she initially felt disconnected, a shift occurred as she began to associate English with future academic and personal aspirations. Her motivation was both integrative and instrumental, driven by a desire to travel, engage with different cultures, and pursue English-related careers. She described classroom participation with enthusiasm and viewed language learning as empowering, indicating a developing social identity aligned with a global, multilingual community.

5. Ángelus: Reflective and Gradually Engaged Learner

Ángelus showed progressive improvement and growing confidence in his English learning journey. Initially guided by vocabulary-matching activities in primary school, he later found value in expressing preferences and participating in dynamic classroom tasks. Although he experienced discomfort with pronunciation and speaking publicly, he recognized that English opened up academic and professional opportunities, especially abroad. He appreciated the new, more engaging methods introduced in class, which facilitated his social integration and helped him associate English with everyday life. Ángelus stated that learning English allowed him to discover personal qualities and abilities he had not previously recognized, thus contributing to his evolving social identity as a competent language learner.

Conclusions

This narrative research aimed to explore what tenth graders’ narratives reveal about the role of social identity construction in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) at a rural public school in San Miguel de Sema, Boyacá. Five students (three females and two males) voluntarily participated after a six-week intervention based on social identity workshops.

Thematic analysis of students’ narratives across three key moments “Understanding My Learning Process,” “My Meaningful Learning,” and “Discovering My Social Identity” highlighted how students’ evolving self-perceptions and contextual experiences shaped their engagement with English learning.

In the first moment, students recalled their early English learning experiences, often centered around visuals and basic vocabulary in primary school. Most participants acknowledged gradual improvement in their language development over time.

In the second moment, participants discussed current perceptions of English. Most described it as a difficult, external, and low-priority subject, often citing limited classroom interaction and motivation. A notable exception was Nashely, who expressed genuine interest and enthusiasm for English, positioning herself as an aspirational language learner.

In the third moment, all students recognized a recent improvement in their learning, attributing it to more engaging and interactive classroom

practices. They identified English as a tool for accessing future educational, social, and professional opportunities, particularly in international contexts.

The findings aligned with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner), revealing the three core processes:

- **Categorization:** Students identified themselves as English learners, especially through self-portrait activities during the workshops.
- **Social identification:** They internalized their role as students, associating English learning with emotional, cognitive, and social development.
- **Social comparison:** Participants recognized English as a valuable skill that distinguishes them socially, offering more opportunities than other common activities.

In addressing the sub-question *What factors influence social identity construction in EFL learning?* three key influences emerged:

1. **Relationship with Language:** Many students lacked intrinsic motivation, viewing English as irrelevant to their personal lives. Only Nashely demonstrated strong internal interest and engagement.
2. **Relational Contexts:** Students’ rural socioeconomic background, focused on farming and household work, often deprioritized English. Limited instructional time and lack of exposure further weakened their connection to the language.

- 3. Experiences:** Students had few significant or emotionally resonant experiences with English, leading to weak affective bonds with the language and limited identity development.

Finally, the study demonstrates that social identity construction plays a nuanced yet critical role in shaping how rural students engage with English learning. While structural and contextual barriers limit motivation, thoughtfully designed pedagogical interventions such as those used in this research can positively influence learners’ identities, perceptions, and engagement with a foreign language.

Ethical Implications

This narrative study adhered to established ethical guidelines to ensure the protection of participants’ privacy and data. Prior to conducting the research, informed consent was obtained from the principal of *Institución Educativa Hato Viejo*. Subsequently, parental consent was secured through a signed form, which was read and explained to both students and their guardians.

Participants were assured that their identities and shared narratives would remain confidential and used solely for academic purposes. They were also given the option to choose pseudonyms and informed of their right to voluntarily withdraw from the study at any stage.

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