UNPACKING IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND NEGOTIATION OF A STUDENT STUDYING ABROAD: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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Abstract
This study aims to explore how an Indonesian male doctoral student forms and negotiates his identities while studying in the United States. Using a phenomenological approach, this study explores the participant's experiences in detail through a semi-structured interview. The results show that the process of identity construction was dynamic and influenced by linguistic, academic, social, and technological challenges. The participant experienced barriers to understanding informal English, intensive academic pressure, and the demands of writing at native-speaker standards. However, he showed resilience by strengthening his identities through time management strategies, independent learning using digital technologies, and identity reinforcement through everyday activities, especially cooking. These activities not only served as practical skills but also as a medium to maintain emotional stability and cultural connection. Furthermore, the participant actively negotiated his identities by navigating cultural expectations from both Indonesian and American contexts, adjusting language use, social behavior, and academic positioning accordingly. This research confirms the importance of continued investment in cultural skills and language learning as part of the cultural adaptation process. The results recommend that higher educational institutions provide contextualized support and be more sensitive to international students' needs as they construct and negotiate academic and social identities in a global environment.
Keywords: *ELF, Identity, Learner Agency, Negotiation, Study Abroad*

Introduction

In an age of strengthening globalization, individuals are increasingly obligated to address a variety of cultural contexts, develop intercultural communication skills,

Fitria et al. (2025). Unpacking Identity
Construction and Negotiation of a Student
Studying Abroad: A Phenomenological Study

Inspiring: English Education Journal
Vol. 8 No. 2 (September 2025) pp. 222-236
ISSN 2721-2130

and promote a broad global perspective. Global ability is understood as the ability to understand global issues, understand cultural differences, communicate effectively across cultures, and act responsibly towards the basic educational goals of the world (Zhou et al., 2025). The global strategy for capacity development proposed in existing research emphasizes intercultural international communication. Foreign language proficiency is the basis for the development of global competence. Therefore, strengthening foreign language formation has contributed to improving global competence (Meng et al., 2018). The cultivation of intercultural attitudes, such as empathy and openness, and practical skills like flexibility in communication, as highlighted by both Romero and Bobkina (2024) and Hicham et al. (2025), can profoundly influence this identity development process, enabling students to navigate diverse social and cultural landscapes with greater resilience.

Furthermore, increased exposure to foreigners can help improve students' global capabilities and expand perspectives (Meng et al., 2021). The development of globalization has facilitated the spread and use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) for intercultural communication. Given the critical role of English in that context, universities around the world have been effectively implementing various courses in English as the medium of instruction (Boonsuk & Fang, 2023; Sung, 2020). Matsumoto (2018) argued that ELF is not only used for communication but also, in an increasingly globalized and multilingual world, it is integrally involved in identity construction. In going beyond the traditional EFL framework, ELF communities could provide new opportunities for language learners to reconstruct their identities as competent language users when exposed to a new context and environment, for example in their experiences of study abroad (Cai et al., 2022; Fang & Baker, 2018).

While a previous study has explored how international students construct and negotiate their identities while studying abroad (Cai et al., 2022), most of these works focus on Chinese undergraduate students and emphasize either academic or social challenges in isolation. For instance, Cai et al. (2022) unpack how Chinese students navigate identity tension in academic discourse and informal peer interactions, yet pay

Fitria et al. (2025). Unpacking Identity Construction and Negotiation of a Student Studying Abroad: A Phenomenological Study

Inspiring: English Education Journal
Vol. 8 No. 2 (September 2025) pp. 222-236
ISSN 2721-2130

limited attention to how students reorganize their identity through lived, intercultural conflicts in informal, non-academic settings.

Therefore, this study addresses the gap by examining how an Indonesian doctoral student constructs and negotiates his identity not only in formal academic settings but also through personal intercultural experiences, such as culinary adaptation, social misunderstandings, and institutional pressures. This study also investigates how personal agency and institutional contexts intertwine during this identity negotiation process.

Method

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach Creswell & Poth (2017) to explore how An Indonesian student constructs and negotiates his identity. This approach was chosen to emphasize understanding individuals' subjective lived experiences, which is crucial for analyzing identity formation in a cross-cultural context.

The research focused on one Indonesian university student who had been enrolled in a Second Language Studies program in the United States for approximately two years. The intentional selection of a single participant allowed for an in-depth exploration of the student's individual experience, aligning with the phenomenological aim of understanding lived experience through deep, idiographic analysis (Smith et al., 2021). The participant was a male aged 38 years, whose first language was Bahasa Indonesia, and was a postgraduate student. The participant's diverse experiences were expected to yield rich data.

The data collection conducted a semi-structured interview via Zoom, which lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The interview was carried out in Indonesian and English to help the participant express his thoughts and experiences more freely and in detail. The questions explored a range of topics, such as the participant's personal journey studying abroad, how he navigated language and identity challenges, his perspectives on English accents, and the cultural tensions he encountered. The interview questions were informed by previous studies on identity negotiation, intercultural communication, and second language learning in study abroad contexts

(F. G. Fang, 2017; Yu & Wright, 2024). The interview was audio-recorded with the participant's permission, and the researcher also took field notes to capture relevant observations during the session. After the interview, the recording was transcribed verbatim. To ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of the data, the transcript was shared with the participant for confirmation, a process known as member checking. This allowed the participant to verify the content and correct any possible misunderstandings, helping the researcher maintain credibility in the data collection process.

The recorded interview was analyzed using Braun & Clarke (2021) six-phase thematic analysis framework. The process began with familiarization, which involved repeated listening to the audio recording and intensive reading of the transcript. Next, initial codes were generated by labeling meaningful segments of the data. These codes were then organized into potential themes based on conceptual similarities and recurring patterns. In the fourth phase, themes were reviewed to ensure both internal coherence and external distinctiveness. Fifth, each theme was defined and named to reflect its analytical focus. Lastly, the themes were reported using selected verbatim quotes and linked to the research questions and relevant literature.

Figure 1. *Six-phase thematic analysis framework*

This analysis integrated both deductive and inductive approaches: deductive coding was informed by concepts such as agency and identity negotiation, while inductive analysis allowed unique insights to emerge from the participant's lived experience.

To ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of the data, the interview transcript was shared with the participant for confirmation through a process known as member checking. This allowed the participant to review, clarify, or correct any information, helping the researcher confirm the credibility of the interpretation and minimize potential misrepresentation.

Results

This section presents the main findings from the semi-structured interview with one Indonesian male doctoral student studying in the United States. Through thematic analysis, six themes emerged that reflect the participant's lived experiences in navigating linguistic, academic, technological, cultural, and personal challenges while constructing and negotiating his identity abroad. Each theme is illustrated with selected verbatim quotes from the interview.

1. Being lost in communication

The participant found informal English significantly more challenging than academic English. This difficulty stemmed from the fast pace of speech and non-standard pronunciation encountered in casual settings, similar to the linguistic variations experienced in local markets in Indonesia.

Excerpt 01:

"…If in the campus it could be easier because they are well-known and educated person… but if you talk in the market of Jakarta, for example, or in the local market like in Cirebon, so local people speak faster and the way they pronounce the word is not standard, not like in TOEFL and IELTS…"

Despite initial difficulties, the participant demonstrated communicative resilience, gradually adapting to the nuances of informal American English.

Excerpt 02:

"In the first semester I felt that it's difficult for me to get it and to make it make sense... but as long as I try to understand, I can get it eventually."

2. Complicated time management

Fitria et al. (2025). Unpacking Identity
Construction and Negotiation of a Student
Studying Abroad: A Phenomenological Study

Inspiring: English Education Journal
Vol. 8 No. 2 (September 2025) pp. 222-236
ISSN 2721-2130

The participant experienced significant challenges with time management due to a heavier academic workload in the U.S. compared to Indonesia, even with only three courses. The volume of assignments and continuous tasks led to increased stress and a lack of rest.

Excerpt 03:

"If we are in Indonesia, we just submit it and the assignment is not too much, but here I was taking three courses, but one course, there are more than 20 assignments…"

The demanding academic schedule impacted the participant's well-being, leading to reduced sleep and limited leisure time.

Excerpt 04:

"…So you need to manage your time, less sleeping… even in the holiday, you don't have time to take rest…"

The participant acknowledged the importance of self-care amidst academic pressures.

Excerpt 05:

"You need to maintain your time management, well-being, your health, your mind, your soul."

3. Alienation from Education Technology

The participant reported that educational technology, particularly tools for academic writing, exacerbated feelings of language alienation. There was a perceived pressure to adhere to native speaker writing standards, leading to discomfort with using assistive technologies like Google Translate or AI.

Excerpt 06:

"So, it's better for you to start from now, learning how to write in English without any tools, without any AI tools, without any Google Translate."

The participant also noted a conflict between their natural writing style, influenced by Indonesian language patterns, and the professors' expectation for a native English sound.

Excerpt 07:

"Sometimes my writing is like Indonesian style, but the professor here wants our writing to sound like a native speaker's."

4. Auto-chef: Domestic Agency and Everyday Adaptation

An unexpected finding was the participant's development of independence and resilience through learning to cook. Despite no prior cooking experience in Indonesia, the participant was motivated to learn after moving to the U.S.

Excerpt 08:

"When I'm in the US, I cannot cook, so I can learn from YouTube. And eventually I can cook by myself."

Cooking became a means to establish routine and maintain balance in daily life.

Excerpt 09:

"There are many menus for dishes, something like for breakfast, for having dinner."

This new skill also boosted the participant's self-confidence.

Excerpt 10:

"I can cook by myself now. I'm a good chef now."

5. Keep learning journey

The participant viewed English mastery as crucial for accessing knowledge and understanding global developments, particularly in combating misinformation. The participant emphasized the necessity of persistence and long-term commitment in learning English.

Excerpt 11:

"To become a good English learner you need to persistent and you need to keep up your learning journey. Because it takes more time. Maybe it could be more than 20 years. But you don't give up. You don't stop your learning"

6. Bearing cultural shock

The participant experienced cultural differences related to social practices, specifically the "potluck" tradition in the United States. A lack of awareness about this custom led to an uncomfortable experience during a party.

Fitria et al. (2025). Unpacking Identity
Construction and Negotiation of a Student
Studying Abroad: A Phenomenological Study

Inspiring: English Education Journal
Vol. 8 No. 2 (September 2025) pp. 222-236
ISSN 2721-2130

Excerpt 12:

> "So, if it's a party, bring your own food".

Excerpt 13:

> "So, at that time, I thought, fine, because there will be food, I don't need to bring food. When I found out, I brought my own food. So, people eat their own food. I didn't bring food I was hungry again. So, for two hours I held back my hunger".

The participant also noted that while some invitations clearly state whether food is provided or if guests should bring something, the expectation to bring food is common.

Excerpt 14:

> "But that's a separate type of party. There is also this party that clearly describes that we provide a dessert menu, we provide a heavy menu, there is a dish. So, if he invites, it's clear. So, you have to bring food or it's already provided. So, he's clear at the beginning. There are also those where we don't have to bring anything. We eat already provided. But mostly, if we are invited to eat here, we have to bring something. If not, we don't eat".

Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings of this study by connecting them with existing literature. The themes that emerged from the participant's experience are interpreted through the lens of identity construction and negotiation in cross-cultural academic contexts. The analysis highlights how language use, academic culture, technological expectations, personal routines, and intercultural experiences contribute to identity reconstruction during study abroad.

1. Language Struggles and Communicative Resilience

The participant's difficulties in understanding informal English in everyday contexts reflect what Vasquez Diaz & Iqbal (2024) describe as the experience of "being lost in communication." This situation is common among international students who may be well-prepared for academic English but find themselves struggling with fast-paced, idiomatic, and non-standard English used by native speakers in casual

Fitria et al. (2025). Unpacking Identity Construction and Negotiation of a Student Studying Abroad: A Phenomenological Study

Inspiring: English Education Journal Vol. 8 No. 2 (September 2025) pp. 222-236 ISSN 2721-2130

conversations. Park et al. (2017) noted that such informal environments often deviate from the standardized English taught in TOEFL or IELTS preparation.

However, instead of viewing this as a purely negative experience, the participant's effort to adjust his listening strategies aligns with the concept of communicative resilience (Aladegbaiye et al., 2022), where learners actively find ways to decode meaning, cope with linguistic gaps, and persist in unfamiliar communicative contexts. This suggests that identity construction through language is not only about mastery but also about strategic adaptation and perseverance.

2. Academic Culture Shock and the Need for Adaptation

The participant's struggles with the heavier workload, tight deadlines, and fast-paced learning in the U.S. academic environment point to a form of academic culture shock (Can et al., 2021). International students often face a disjuncture between their previous academic practices and those of the host institution. This mismatch can lead to stress, burnout, and emotional exhaustion.

Despite these challenges, the participant's effort to manage his time and maintain emotional well-being illustrates what Terzi et al. (2024) assert: that time management is a crucial coping strategy for students in demanding educational systems. Identity negotiation here involves a shift from passive adaptation to proactive self-regulation, suggesting a redefinition of the self as both a learner and a survivor.

3. Alienation by Technology and Native-Speakerism

While technology is often positioned as an empowering tool for academic work, the participant expressed discomfort with the expectation to produce native-like English and avoid AI-based tools like Google Translate. This experience reflects the ideology of native-speakerism, which privileges native norms and marginalizes non-native voices (Dey et al., 2023).

Instead of supporting his linguistic development, digital tools became a reminder of standardized expectations that did not accommodate his cultural identity. This echoes the findings of Agarwal et al. (2025) and Lee (2024), who argue that such technologies often reproduce normative standards and fail to validate the diverse linguistic resources of multilingual students. Thus, the negotiation of identity here

Fitria et al. (2025). Unpacking Identity
Construction and Negotiation of a Student
Studying Abroad: A Phenomenological Study

Inspiring: English Education Journal
Vol. 8 No. 2 (September 2025) pp. 222-236
ISSN 2721-2130

includes resistance against dominant ideologies and the search for a more inclusive academic space.

4. Growth through Everyday Routines

The participant's growth through simple domestic tasks like cooking underscores the importance of everyday practices in identity reconstruction. These routines, while mundane, provided a sense of control and competence in an otherwise unfamiliar environment. Kaesberg et al. (2023) highlighted that digital platforms like YouTube can facilitate skill-building and autonomy, especially for international students living alone.

This supports the argument by Surgenor et al. (2021) that everyday life activities are deeply tied to mental resilience and emotional stability, helping students maintain a coherent sense of self outside of academic identity. In this sense, identity is not only constructed in institutional spaces but also in the kitchen, the supermarket, and other personal domains.

5. Language as a Lifelong Journey

The participant's perception of English as a continuous journey highlights the intersection of language, identity, and global participation. His awareness that English is a tool for engaging with the world aligns with the concept of global literacy. In the digital age, the ability to critically assess information and engage across cultures is increasingly important (Knuutila et al., 2022; Roozenbeek et al., 2022).

Rather than viewing English merely as an academic requirement, the participant saw it as a key to personal empowerment and global navigation. This reinforces the idea that language learning is an identity project, one that continues beyond the classroom and becomes embedded in how individuals relate to the world.

6. Learning through Cultural Misunderstandings

The participant's experiences of cultural misinterpretation, such as confusion about potluck traditions, illustrate how intercultural competence develops through informal and unstructured experiences. While classroom-based instruction can raise intercultural awareness (Mahaputri et al., 2021), this study shows that real growth often happens through trial-and-error in social settings. This aligns with Yang et al.

Fitria et al. (2025). Unpacking Identity
Construction and Negotiation of a Student
Studying Abroad: A Phenomenological Study

Inspiring: English Education Journal
Vol. 8 No. 2 (September 2025) pp. 222-236
ISSN 2721-2130

(2018), who emphasize empathy and flexibility as core components of intercultural communicative competence. The participant's identity shifted through small but meaningful interactions that required emotional risk, openness, and reflexivity.

The participant's experiences show that identity construction and negotiation in a study-abroad context are multifaceted, dynamic, and deeply personal. Language struggles, academic adaptation, emotional coping, and cultural learning are not separate domains but interconnected processes that shape how international students see themselves and their place in a globalized world. The findings of this study reinforce the importance of considering students' personal voices in discussions about international education, identity, and resilience.

Conclusion

This study explored how an Indonesian graduate student negotiated his identity while studying in the United States. The findings highlight that identity is dynamic, shaped by language use, academic challenges, and social interactions. The participant experienced pressure to conform to native-speaker norms, which affected his confidence, while also adapting to new cultural practices and demonstrating resilience in the process.

The study has several limitations. It focused on one participant in a specific context, which limits generalizability. Future research should involve more participants from diverse backgrounds, disciplines, and host countries to provide broader insights into identity negotiation among international students. Attention to factors such as gender, institutional support, and family dynamics would also enrich understanding of how identities are shaped during study abroad.

The findings carry important implications for English language education. Educators are encouraged to value students' cultural and linguistic identities, move beyond native-speaker norms, and support confidence in diverse English varieties. Reflective activities and culturally responsive teaching can foster intercultural dialogue, empathy, and adaptability. Ultimately, teachers play a key role in helping learners develop both linguistic competence and a strong sense of identity as legitimate English users in global contexts.

Fitria et al. (2025). Unpacking Identity
Construction and Negotiation of a Student
Studying Abroad: A Phenomenological Study

Inspiring: English Education Journal
Vol. 8 No. 2 (September 2025) pp. 222-236
ISSN 2721-2130

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Fitria et al. (2025). Unpacking Identity
Construction and Negotiation of a Student
Studying Abroad: A Phenomenological Study

Inspiring: English Education Journal
Vol. 8 No. 2 (September 2025) pp. 222-236
ISSN 2721-2130

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Fitria et al. (2025). Unpacking Identity
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Vol. 8 No. 2 (September 2025) pp. 222-236
ISSN 2721-2130

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