

Research Article

Identity Construction among English Learners in Online Communities

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the dynamic processes of identity construction among English language learners (ELLs) within online communities, including digital platforms such as online gaming environments and social forums. Drawing on sociocultural theories of identity, the research examines how ELLs negotiate their linguistic and cultural identities through interactions in these virtual spaces. By analyzing qualitative data from participant observations, interviews, and discourse analysis, the study reveals how these digital environments foster opportunities for authentic language practice, cultural exchange, and identity exploration. The findings highlight the role of online communities as informal yet powerful contexts for language acquisition, where learners navigate linguistic challenges, build confidence, and construct multifaceted identities. Furthermore, the study discusses the potential of leveraging these digital spaces as innovative tools for language teaching, offering insights for educators to design culturally responsive and engaging pedagogical approaches that harness the affordances of online platforms to support ELLs' linguistic and identity development.

Introduction

The advent of the digital age has revolutionized the landscape of language learning, positioning online communities as pivotal arenas for English language learners (ELLs) to engage in authentic communication, cultural exchange, and identity exploration

(Fayard & DeSanctis, 2010; Indriani et al., 2024). These virtual environments—encompassing social media platforms, online gaming worlds, fanfiction sites, and discussion forums—extend beyond the confines of traditional classroom settings, offering ELLs unique opportunities to practice language



skills, interact with diverse interlocutors, and negotiate their linguistic and cultural identities (Black, 2005; Putrawan & Riadi, 2020). As digital technologies evolve from Web 1.0 to Web 3.0, the affordances of user-generated content, immersive digital worlds, and adaptive feedback systems amplify learners' autonomy and collaborative potential, fostering informal digital learning environments that support both language acquisition and identity development (Indriani et al., 2024; López & Urbar-Serrano, 2024). Despite their growing prevalence, however, there remains a critical gap in understanding how ELLs dynamically construct and negotiate their identities across these heterogeneous online spaces, particularly with respect to the interplay of linguistic, sociocultural, and affective dimensions (Wijaya et al., 2021; Albaqami, 2022).

Online communities provide ELLs with distinctive affordances that facilitate identity construction. In Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), learners engage in role-play, collaborative quests, and interactive storytelling, navigating linguistic challenges while experimenting with social positions and personas (Peake & Reynolds, 2020; Peterson, 2012). Similarly, fandom-based platforms and social networking sites enable learners to curate digital identities through writing, reviewing, and multimodal composition, fostering lexical and syntactic growth alongside community-based identity negotiation (Black, 2005; López & Urbar-Serrano, 2024). The asynchronous nature of many digital interactions further enhances this process, allowing learners to craft deliberate responses and revisit past exchanges, supporting reflective identity work (Marden & Herrington, 2022; Thorne et al., 2009). These spaces also encourage translanguaging and

code-switching, where ELLs leverage their multilingual repertoires to assert agency, challenge monolingual norms, and express hybrid identities (Mona, 2024; Chan, 2015).

This study is grounded in sociocultural theories of identity, which conceptualize identity as a fluid, relational construct emergent through participation in communities of practice (Fauziah & Novita, 2023; Thorne & Black, 2007). Drawing on Vygotskian principles, identity construction is seen as a dialogic and transformative process mediated by social interactions, cultural artifacts, and discourse (Norton & Toohy, 2011; Jou, 2012). Poststructuralist perspectives further emphasize identity's multiplicity and context-dependency, positioning learners as active agents who negotiate selfhood through digital engagement (Lytra, 2021). Norton's notion of imagined identities complements this framework, highlighting how ELLs project future roles—such as proficient communicator or cultural ambassador—that shape their language use and community participation (Early & Norton, 2012). These theories provide a robust lens for examining how online communities serve as sites for identity experimentation and development.

Empirical research underscores the potential of online communities for language learning and identity formation. Studies on digital game-based learning demonstrate that gaming environments enhance vocabulary acquisition, pragmatic competence, and authentic language use through collaborative and multimodal interactions (Aulia et al., 2024; Ng & Raghbir, 2021). Fanfiction and social media platforms similarly support linguistic development by engaging learners in peer collaboration, affective stances, and cultural storytelling (Li, 2015; López & Urbar-

Serrano, 2024). Moreover, the affective dimensions of these spaces—such as reduced anxiety and increased motivation—play a critical role in shaping learners' confidence and identity as English users (Albaqami, 2022; Syifa et al., 2024). Yet, challenges such as digital literacy disparities and foreign language anxiety persist, necessitating a nuanced understanding of these dynamics (Han & Kesevan, 2024; Zheng, 2024).

Despite the transformative potential of online communities, there is a limited comprehensive understanding of how ELLs construct and negotiate their identities within these digital spaces. Existing research highlights specific contexts—such as gaming or fandom—but lacks an integrated analysis of the linguistic, sociocultural, and affective processes across diverse platforms. This gap hinders the ability of educators to fully harness these environments for language pedagogy and identity support.

This study aims to:

1. Explore how ELLs leverage online communities to navigate linguistic challenges and engage in cultural exchanges.
2. Analyze the processes through which learners perform and negotiate their identities in digital interactions.
3. Identify pedagogical implications for integrating online platforms into language education to foster culturally responsive and engaging learning experiences.

By examining identity construction in online communities, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the symbiotic relationship between digital engagement, language learning, and personal development. The findings offer practical insights for educators, suggesting ways to design learner-centered pedagogies that integrate the

authenticity and interactivity of digital platforms, ultimately supporting ELLs' linguistic proficiency and multifaceted identity growth in the 21st century.

Review of Literature

The literature on identity construction among ELLs in online communities converges on sociocultural theories, emphasizing the dynamic interplay of language, culture, and digital affordances in shaping learners' identities. Online platforms—spanning social media, gaming environments, discussion forums, and multimodal spaces—provide unique arenas for ELLs to negotiate linguistic and cultural identities through authentic practice, peer interaction, and reflective engagement. This review synthesizes key themes, including sociocultural frameworks, digital affordances, multimodal and narrative practices, identity investment, digital literacy, and challenges, drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives to elucidate how online communities foster identity construction and language acquisition.

Sociocultural theories frame identity as a socially constructed, dynamic process negotiated through participation in communities of practice (Jou, 2012; Chenchen, 2024; Gebhard, 2005). Wenger's concept of legitimate peripheral participation illustrates how ELLs transition from peripheral to central roles in online communities, accruing linguistic competence and social capital (Spears et al., 2012; Wiltse, 2011). These digital spaces enable learners to craft multifaceted identities by adopting platform-specific linguistic registers and cultural norms, reflecting both personal aspirations and communal expectations (Leonard et al., 2010; Floriasti, 2023). The "third space" framework further highlights

how online environments serve as liminal arenas where ELLs reconcile native and target language identities, fostering hybrid, plurilingual selves (Li, 2018; Makoe, 2014; Han & Reinhardt, 2022). This negotiation is inherently dialogic, as learners engage with diverse cultural narratives, positioning themselves as intercultural agents (Freiermuth & Huang, 2021; Abdusyukur, 2022).

Digital platforms offer affordances—such as anonymity, multimodality, and asynchrony—that shape identity work. Anonymity in computer-mediated communication (CMC) fosters fearless experimentation with linguistic and cultural identities while introducing pressures for normative conformity (Leonard et al., 2010; Shaw, 2008; Barr, 2010). Asynchronous forums, like those studied by Floriasti (2023) and Whitworth (2009), enable reflective identity construction through archived threads, allowing learners to revisit and refine self-presentations. Synchronous interactions, such as Zoom-based telecollaboration, enhance immediacy and paralinguistic cues, strengthening relational ties and spontaneous identity performances (Freiermuth & Huang, 2021). Social media platforms, including microblogging and content-sharing networks, facilitate authentic language use and intercultural dialogue, explaining significant variance in self-regulated learning behaviors (Zhu, 2025; Fauziah & Novita, 2023). Gaming environments, particularly MMORPGs, provide immersive contexts for identity bricolage, where avatar customization and collaborative quests serve as semiotic tools for signaling linguistic competence and group affiliations (Martins, 2023; Liu et al., 2024; Alghamdi, 2023).

Multimodal communication—integrating text, images, videos, and emojis—enriches identity expression in digital spaces. Digital

storytelling, as explored by Kendrick et al. (2022), Pandhiani (2022), and Grigsby et al. (2015), empowers ELLs to articulate cultural narratives, fostering authenticity and agency. These narratives, shared in forums or social media, serve as conduits for negotiating complex identity dynamics, blending personal histories with global perspectives (Shen et al., 2023; Pastor, 2018). Multimodal artifacts, such as avatars, memes, and digital portfolios, enable learners to project hybrid identities that transcend traditional linguistic boundaries (Alghamdi, 2023; Han & Reinhardt, 2022). The aesthetic dimension of digital communication, including visual symbols and design elements, carries symbolic capital, enhancing identity narratives through non-verbal cues (Han & Reinhardt, 2022; Alghamdi, 2023). These practices underscore the role of digital literacy in enabling learners to navigate and produce multifaceted identity texts (Blattner, 2012; Pham, 2023).

Identity construction in online communities is closely tied to learners' investment in language learning, reflecting their accumulation of linguistic and cultural capital (Gu, 2008; Pan et al., 2021). The concept of the ideal L2 self highlights how ELLs construct aspirational digital personas embodying fluency and cultural adeptness, driving motivation and identity transformation (Liu et al., 2024; Fauziah & Novita, 2023). Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE) practices, such as engaging with social media, forums, and games, foster autonomy and self-regulation, enabling learners to strategically select communities and content aligned with identity goals (Fauziah & Novita, 2023; Elshahawy, 2020). Strategic identity signaling—through lexical choices, discourse genres, and profile curation—allows learners to project expertise and solidarity, navigating community

norms and personal aspirations (Leonard et al., 2010; Zhu, 2025). Humor and creative language use further mitigate linguistic insecurities, reinforcing resilience and community belonging (Dávila, 2019; Goharimehr, 2018).

Digital literacy, encompassing technical, socio-pragmatic, and critical competencies, is pivotal in mediating identity construction. Proficiency in navigating platforms, curating content, and interpreting algorithmic feedback empowers ELLs to craft coherent digital identities (Blattner, 2012; Meurant, 2009; Hasibuan & Irzawati, 2020). Learners' ability to engage with multimodal resources—hyperlinks, multimedia, and platform-specific affordances—enhances socio-pragmatic awareness and cultural competence (Alghamdi, 2023; Kang & Kim, 2023). However, digital literacy also involves critically navigating power dynamics, such as algorithmic biases and hegemonic language norms, which may marginalize non-standard varieties or compel conformity (Shaw, 2008; Spears et al., 2012). Culturally responsive pedagogies that integrate digital literacy training support learners in asserting authentic identities while bridging linguistic gaps (Blattner, 2012; Wang & Yuan, 2024).

Despite their potential, online communities present challenges for identity construction. The fluidity of digital identities can lead to fragmentation or dissonance, as learners navigate multiple roles across platforms (Ye, 2024; Isiki, 2013). Tensions between global English norms and local cultural identities require strategic negotiation, with learners balancing native-like proficiency against cultural authenticity (Pan et al., 2021; Goharimehr, 2018). Algorithmic structures, such as content-ranking systems and AI-driven feedback, may reinforce standardized norms,

constraining creative identity expression (Liu et al., 2024; Shaw, 2008). Issues of equity, including unequal access to digital infrastructure and varying levels of digital literacy, exacerbate the digital divide, limiting inclusive identity work (Al-Salmi & Smith, 2015; Indriani et al., 2024). Privacy concerns and platform governance further complicate identity performances, prompting learners to adopt protective strategies like pseudonyms or selective disclosure (Liu et al., 2024; Meurant, 2009).

The synthesis of sociocultural, CMC, multimodal, and IDLE scholarship reveals online communities as transformative spaces for ELL identity construction and language learning (Zhu, 2025; Spears et al., 2012; Martins, 2023; Fauziah & Novita, 2023; Li, 2018). These platforms facilitate authentic practice, cultural exchange, and reflective identity work through diverse affordances. By integrating digital literacy, culturally responsive pedagogies, and reflective practices, educators can harness these spaces to empower ELLs in crafting resilient, hybrid identities. Continued interdisciplinary research is needed to explore evolving digital landscapes and their implications for equitable, identity-driven language education.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the dynamic processes of identity construction among ELLs within online communities, such as online gaming communities and social forums. The qualitative approach was selected for its ability to capture the complex, context-dependent nature of identity negotiation in virtual spaces, providing rich insights into learners' experiences, interactions, and self-

perceptions. The research is grounded in sociocultural theories of identity, viewing identity as a fluid, socially constructed phenomenon that emerges through participation in digital communities of practice. This theoretical framework guided the investigation into how ELLs negotiate their linguistic and cultural identities through online interactions.

Research Context and Participants:

- **Context:** The study focused on two distinct types of online communities:
 1. *Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs):* Chosen for their immersive, collaborative, and linguistically demanding nature (*Fortnite, Call of Duty Multiplayer, and GTA Online*).
 2. *General Social Discussion Forums:* Platforms focused on shared interests (Reddit, Quora, and Discord), chosen for their asynchronous communication and diverse user bases.
- **Participants:** Participants for this study were recruited using a purposive sampling method (Patton, 2015) through postings within relevant online communities, language learning networks, and social media groups targeting ELLs. The recruitment materials clearly articulated the study's focus on exploring identity and language learning in online spaces. Eligible participants were required to self-identify as non-native English speakers, be actively engaged in at least one of the two specified online community types for non-academic purposes with a minimum commitment of 5 hours per week, represent diverse linguistic backgrounds with self-reported English proficiency levels ranging from beginner to advanced, and be 18 years of age or older.

The study targeted a sample size of 20 participants to achieve data saturation, ensuring sufficient depth of analysis across varied online contexts, with efforts made to recruit individuals from each of the three community types to encompass a broad range of experiences and perspectives.

Data Collection

Data were collected through multiple qualitative methods to capture the complexity of identity construction processes:

- **Participant Observations:** The researcher conducted immersive observations within selected online communities, including MMORPGs, social media groups, and discussion forums, to record authentic interactions and language use in situations. This approach enabled the identification of linguistic practices, role-play, and identity performances in real-time digital engagements.
- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** In-depth interviews were conducted with selected participants to gain insights into their subjective experiences, motivations, and perceptions regarding their identity construction and language learning within online environments. The interviews allowed participants to reflect on their linguistic challenges, cultural exchanges, and identity negotiations.
- **Discourse Analysis:** Samples of textual and multimodal communication from participants' online interactions were collected for detailed discourse analysis. This included chat logs, forum posts, and social media contributions. The analysis focused on linguistic features, code-switching, translanguaging practices, and identity markers embedded in digital communication.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was an iterative process, beginning concurrently with data collection and guided by the sociocultural theoretical framework.

- *Thematic Analysis (Interviews & Observation Notes)*: Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, the interview transcripts and field notes were systematically analyzed through a six-step process. Initially, familiarization with the data was achieved through repeated reading and listening. This was followed by generating initial codes that captured key concepts relevant to the research questions, such as "*linguistic strategy: paraphrasing*," "*identity performance: gamer role*," "*cultural sharing: explaining tradition*," "*affect: anxiety reduction*," and "*agency: code-switching*." These codes were then organized into potential themes and sub-themes, including "*Navigating Linguistic Challenges*," "*Performing and Experimenting with Identity*," "*Building Confidence through Community*," and "*Negotiating Cultural Positionings*." The themes were subsequently reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflected both the coded data and the entire dataset. Each theme was clearly defined and named, culminating in the production of a report that integrated compelling data extracts into a cohesive thematic narrative.
- *Critical Discourse Analysis (Online Discourse)*: Collected digital texts were subjected to Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2003; Gee, 2011), focusing on how language was used to construct identities, relationships, and knowledge within the specific social context of each online community. Analysis examined linguistic choices, interactional structures,

and how power relations or community norms might influence identity negotiation and expression. This analysis directly informed and enriched the thematic analysis.

- *Integration and Interpretation*: Findings from the three data sources (observations, interviews, discourse) were constantly compared and integrated. Patterns and contradictions across datasets were examined to build a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the identity construction processes. The theoretical lens (sociocultural/poststructuralist identity) provided the interpretative framework for understanding *how* and *why* these processes occurred as they did.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical standards for research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. Online observations were conducted in publicly accessible spaces or with permission from community moderators, respecting participants' privacy and digital rights.

Results

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, observation notes, and discourse analysis of online interactions identified four primary themes that illustrate how ELLs construct their identities and navigate linguistic challenges in online communities, specifically MMORPGs and social discussion forums: (1) Navigating Linguistic Challenges, (2) Performing and Experimenting with Identity, (3) Building Confidence through Community, and (4) Negotiating Cultural Positionings. These themes emerged consistently across the

20 participants and both types of online platforms, reflecting their significance in the context of language acquisition and identity development. Each theme is elaborated below with supporting evidence from the data.

Theme 1: Navigating Linguistic Challenges

ELLs employed diverse strategies to address linguistic barriers and participate effectively in online communities. Common strategies included code-switching, seeking peer assistance, and utilizing digital tools (e.g., online dictionaries or translators). These approaches enabled learners to maintain communication flow while simultaneously reinforcing their linguistic and cultural identities.

For example, a participant from an MMORPG stated:

[Player K]: *"If I don't know a word, I ask my team or use Google Translate fast. They don't mind, and I learn new words this way."*

Discourse analysis of chat logs revealed frequent code-switching, as seen in this gaming exchange:

[Player D]: *"We need to flank, yalla! Go right now!"*

Observations noted that the real-time nature of MMORPGs often prompted simplified English usage, yet provided immediate opportunities for practice and feedback, enhancing linguistic adaptability.

Theme 2: Performing and Experimenting with Identity

Online platforms, especially MMORPGs, allowed ELLs to explore and perform varied identities, often adopting personas distinct from their offline selves. This process was described as empowering, enabling learners to practice English confidently in a playful, low-pressure environment.

An interviewee explained:

[Player F]: *"In Call of Duty, I'm a leader, not just a shy student. I can give orders in English, and it feels good."*

Discourse analysis highlighted the use of role-specific language to enact these identities, such as:

[Player E]: *"Follow me, fighters! We'll conquer the enemy base!"*

Some learners adopt gamer avatars or forum personas to try out different facets of self:

"I'm 'ShadowNinja' in-game—no one knows my real name, so I say whatever I want in English."

This theme reveals how digital spaces facilitate identity experimentation, supporting both language development and self-expression.

Theme 3: Building Confidence through Community

The supportive atmosphere of online communities significantly bolstered ELLs' confidence in using English. Participants frequently cited positive reinforcement and collaborative interactions as motivators for increased participation. These communities often fostered norms of encouragement, particularly for language learners.

Participants shared:

[Player C]: *"My first post on Reddit was full of mistakes, but people corrected me nicely. Now I write more without fear."*

[Player H]: *"My squad always corrects my English kindly. I feel braver to speak up now."*

[Player A]: *"My first English guide for COD Easter eggs got 2k upvotes. I'd never spoken English aloud before that. Now I host voice walkthroughs."*

Observations confirmed that supportive exchanges, such as praise or constructive feedback, were common, enhancing learners' willingness to engage linguistically.

Theme 4: Negotiating Cultural Positionings

Online communities provided spaces for ELLs to share cultural identities and engage in cross-cultural dialogue, though this sometimes involved addressing stereotypes or misunderstandings. Participants actively negotiated their cultural positions by sharing cultural insights or correcting misconceptions. One participant noted:

[Player L]: "On Discord, I told my group about Norouz. Some thought it's just Iranian New Year, so I explained it's more than that."

Discourse analysis captured such negotiations, as in:

[Player F]: "No, not all Iranians speak Persian—my family speaks Kurdish."

[Player C]: "When I mentioned in the game group chat that I am from Iran, a few teammates thought Iranians are all Arab, and I told them that this isn't correct."

This theme underscores the dual role of online spaces as arenas for cultural exchange and identity assertion.

The following table summarizes the identified themes and subthemes, providing illustrative quotes and an indication of their prevalence across the dataset. While the study is qualitative, frequency counts are included to reflect the prominence of each subtheme among the 20 participants.

Table 1.
Summary of the Identified Themes and Subthemes

| Theme | Subtheme | Illustrative Quote | Participants Mentioning (n=20) |
|--|------------------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| Navigating Linguistic Challenges | Code-switching | "I say <i>eyval</i> when I'm happy, then switch to English." | 16 |
| | Seeking peer assistance | "My guild helps me with hard words during raids." | 18 |
| Performing and Experimenting with Identity | Adopting personas | "As a GTA boss, I talk tough in English—it's fun!" | 14 |
| | Expressing cultural identity | "I posted about Eid on Quora to share my story." | 12 |
| Building Confidence through Community | Positive reinforcement | "Upvotes on my post made me want to write more." | 17 |
| | Collaborative interactions | "We solve language problems together in chat." | 15 |
| Negotiating Cultural Positionings | Sharing cultural insights | "I taught my team about Chaharshanbe Souri." | 13 |
| | Correcting misconceptions | "I said, 'No, Iranians are not all Arabs!' in a thread." | 10 |

Integrated Findings

The results collectively demonstrate that online communities serve as rich contexts for ELLs to engage in authentic language practice,

experiment with multifaceted identities, and participate in cultural exchanges. These platforms enable learners to overcome linguistic hurdles through adaptive strategies, build confidence via community support, and

negotiate their cultural identities in dynamic ways. The consistency of these themes across MMORPGs and social forums highlights the broad applicability of these findings to various digital environments, offering a nuanced understanding of identity construction processes among ELLs.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the dynamic interplay of linguistic, cultural, and affective dimensions in the identity construction of English language learners (ELLs) within online communities, specifically MMORPGs and social discussion forums. These results align with and extend sociocultural theories of identity, which posit identity as a fluid, relational construct shaped through social interactions and cultural practices (Norton & Toohey, 2011; Fauziah & Novita, 2023). The four emergent themes—Navigating Linguistic Challenges, Performing and Experimenting with Identity, Building Confidence through Community, and Negotiating Cultural Positionings—offer a comprehensive understanding of how digital platforms serve as transformative spaces for language acquisition and identity development. Below, these themes are discussed in relation to the existing literature, their implications for language pedagogy, and the broader theoretical and practical contributions of the study.

Navigating Linguistic Challenges

The first theme highlights how ELLs employ adaptive strategies such as code-switching, peer assistance, and digital tools to overcome linguistic barriers in online communities. This finding resonates with prior research emphasizing the role of digital affordances in facilitating authentic language

practice (Freiermuth & Huang, 2021; Zhu, 2025). Code-switching, as observed in participants' use of native language expressions alongside English (e.g., "yalla" in gaming chats), reflects translanguaging practices that allow learners to leverage their multilingual repertoires to maintain communication flow and assert agency (Mona, 2024; Chan, 2015). The use of real-time tools like Google Translate and peer support further underscores the collaborative nature of online spaces, aligning with Vygotskian principles of mediated learning through social interaction (Norton & Toohey, 2011). These strategies not only facilitate linguistic adaptability but also reinforce learners' identities as competent communicators, challenging monolingual norms and fostering plurilingual selves (Li, 2018). However, the reliance on simplified English in fast-paced MMORPGs suggests a need for pedagogical interventions that scaffold more complex language use in such contexts, balancing immediacy with linguistic depth.

Performing and Experimenting with Identity

The second theme reveals how online communities, particularly MMORPGs, enable ELLs to experiment with diverse identities through role-play and persona adoption. Participants' ability to enact personas like "ShadowNinja" or "GTA boss" supports the notion of digital spaces as "third spaces" where learners explore hybrid identities free from real-world constraints (Han & Reinhardt, 2022; Li, 2018). This aligns with Norton's concept of imagined identities, where learners project aspirational selves—such as confident leaders or proficient speakers—that drive linguistic and motivational growth (Early & Norton, 2012). The playful, low-stakes nature of these environments

reduces foreign language anxiety, corroborating findings by Albaqami (2022) and Syifa et al. (2024). Moreover, the use of platform-specific linguistic registers (e.g., authoritative commands in gaming) highlights how identity performance is mediated by community norms and discourse practices, as suggested by Fauziah and Novita (2023). These findings suggest that educators can harness role-playing affordances in digital platforms to foster identity exploration, encouraging learners to experiment with linguistic and social roles in structured yet authentic contexts.

Building Confidence through Community

The third theme underscores the role of supportive community interactions in enhancing ELLs' linguistic confidence. Positive reinforcement, such as upvotes or constructive feedback, aligns with research on the affective benefits of online communities, which reduce anxiety and boost motivation (Albaqami, 2022; Han & Kesevan, 2024). The collaborative ethos observed in both MMORPGs and forums reflects Wenger's concept of legitimate peripheral participation, where learners progress from peripheral to central roles through community support (Spears et al., 2012). For instance, participants like Player C, who gained confidence through Reddit interactions, illustrate how digital communities foster a sense of belonging that emboldens linguistic risk-taking. This finding extends prior work on Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE), which highlights how community-driven feedback enhances self-regulated learning (Fauziah & Novita, 2023; Elshahawy, 2020). Pedagogically, these insights advocate for the integration of community-based learning environments into language curricula, where peer support and

collaborative tasks can mirror the motivational dynamics of online spaces.

Negotiating Cultural Positionings

The fourth theme illustrates how online communities serve as arenas for cultural exchange and identity assertion, as participants shared cultural insights and corrected misconceptions (e.g., clarifying that "not all Iranians speak Persian"). This process aligns with poststructuralist views of identity as context-dependent and negotiated through dialogue (Lytra, 2021). The act of explaining cultural traditions, such as Norouz or Chaharshanbe Souri, reflects learners' roles as intercultural agents, as noted by Freiermuth and Huang (2021). However, the need to address stereotypes suggests ongoing tensions between global English norms and local cultural identities, corroborating Pan et al. (2021) and Goharimehr (2018). These negotiations highlight the importance of digital literacy in navigating cultural dynamics, as learners must critically engage with community norms and power structures (Blattner, 2012). For educators, this underscores the need for culturally responsive pedagogies that encourage students to articulate and negotiate their cultural identities in digital spaces, fostering intercultural competence alongside linguistic proficiency.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings offer actionable insights for language educators seeking to integrate online communities into pedagogical practice. First, the linguistic strategies observed (e.g., code-switching, peer assistance) suggest that curricula should incorporate tasks that encourage translanguaging and collaborative problem-solving, leveraging digital tools to mirror real-world practices. Second, the

identity experimentation facilitated by MMORPGs and forums highlights the potential of role-playing and persona-based activities in classroom settings, where students can explore imagined identities through gamified or forum-like tasks. Third, the confidence-building role of community support calls for the design of collaborative online projects that replicate the encouraging dynamics of digital platforms, such as peer review systems or group discussions. Finally, the cultural negotiations observed necessitate culturally responsive teaching approaches that integrate digital storytelling and intercultural dialogue, enabling students to assert their identities while engaging with diverse perspectives. These strategies align with prior calls for identity-sensitive pedagogies that harness digital affordances (Han & Reinhardt, 2022; Wang & Yuan, 2024).

Theoretical Contributions

This study advances sociocultural and poststructuralist theories of identity by demonstrating how online communities serve as dynamic contexts for identity construction among ELLs. The integration of Vygotskian principles with Norton's imagined identities framework provides a robust lens for understanding how digital interactions mediate linguistic and cultural growth. The findings also extend the concept of the "third space" by illustrating how MMORPGs and forums function as liminal arenas for hybrid identity formation, bridging native and target language selves (Li, 2018). Furthermore, the study contributes to the literature on Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE) by highlighting the interplay of linguistic, affective, and cultural dimensions in identity work, offering a nuanced model for analyzing digital language learning environments.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations. The sample size of 20 participants, while sufficient for qualitative depth, limits generalizability across diverse online platforms and learner populations. The focus on MMORPGs and social forums may not fully capture the identity dynamics in other digital spaces, such as social media or AI-mediated platforms. Additionally, the study's reliance on self-reported proficiency levels and purposive sampling may introduce selection bias. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to explore cyclical identity transformations and include a broader range of platforms, such as AI-driven learning environments (Liu et al., 2024). Investigating the impact of digital literacy disparities and platform governance on identity construction could further address equity concerns, ensuring inclusive access to digital learning opportunities (Al-Salmi & Smith, 2015).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that online communities—specifically MMORPGs and social discussion forums—constitute dynamic, multifaceted sites for English language learners to negotiate and construct their linguistic and cultural identities. Through adaptive strategies such as code-switching, peer scaffolding, and digital tool use, learners effectively navigate real-time communicative challenges. Simultaneously, role-play and persona adoption enable identity experimentation in low-stakes environments, fostering confidence and reducing language anxiety. Supportive peer feedback and collaborative interactions further reinforce learners' self-efficacy, while cultural exchanges allow them to assert and refine their intercultural positions. These processes collectively underscore the

affordances of digital spaces as informal yet powerful contexts for language acquisition and identity development.

Pedagogically, our findings advocate for the deliberate integration of game-based and forum-style activities into formal language curricula, the promotion of translanguaging and peer-based scaffolding practices, and the incorporation of culturally responsive digital projects that encourage intercultural dialogue. Future research should extend this inquiry through longitudinal designs, broader platform comparisons—including AI-mediated environments—and explicit attention to equity in digital access and literacy. By harnessing the authenticity, interactivity, and community ethos of online platforms, educators can create learner-centered pedagogies that not only advance linguistic proficiency but also empower ELLs to craft resilient, hybrid identities in an increasingly digital world.

Authors' Contributions

Each author made an equivalent contribution to both the research activities and the preparation of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, the language model ChatGPT was utilized.

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