

Identity Negotiation of International Students When Studying in A Non-Speaking English Country

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ABSTRACT

Today, with the trend of internationalization, a growing number of universities and institutions worldwide are encouraging their students to take part in abroad programs or vocational training schemes in a foreign country. It is easy to find out that not only are English-speaking countries ideal destinations for education overseas, but many other countries where English is not the first language also attract millions of students worldwide. Studying in these countries, students will have to use English for academic purposes and at the same time learn the local languages to adapt to the host environment. Firsthand exposure to the native speech community coupled with formal classroom learning is said to create the optimal environment for learning an additional language and culture, thus, at the same time, would inevitably cause some effects on students' identities. Based on the interviews with a focus group of international students studying at a university in Haiphong, the types of negotiated identities, the ways they alternate their behaviors, emotions, and cognitions to adapt to the new environment will be revealed. With these findings, some implications for curriculum and pedagogy which optimize opportunities for international students to develop their knowledge, openness, and adaptability are also suggested.

Keywords: Identity, Identity negotiation, International students

1 Introduction

Today, with the trend of internationalization, a growing number of universities and institutions worldwide are encouraging their students to take part in study and residence abroad programs or vocational training schemes in a foreign country. According to the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development), in 2015, there were more than five million students enrolled in higher education outside their home country and this number is estimated to increase enormously in the coming years. The time for a sojourn can vary from three or four years to short – term sojourns, ranging from a week to three or four months. Studying abroad today is also more available with a wider range of program options with a variety of goals. Some students can take part in programs that are designed to enhance their foreign language and cultural learning while others enroll in exchange programs led by faculties from their home institutions. Some groups travel on their own and take courses with local students in the host institution.

With such a variety of opportunities for studying abroad, it is easy to find out that not only English-speaking countries are ideal destinations for education overseas, however, many other countries where English is not the first language also attract millions of students worldwide. In such countries, students have to use English for their academic purposes but at the same time need to know the host language in order to get more closely adapted to the local life. Students who come from a different culture can bring different mindsets, expectations and identities. Firsthand exposure to the native speech community coupled with formal classroom learning are said to create the optimal environment for learning an additional language and culture, thus, at the same time, would inevitably cause some effects on students' identities. How students adapt themselves to the host country's academic and living environment while still attempting to retain and negotiate their own identities is a complex phenomenon which attracts many scholars worldwide.



With the trend of globalization, every year, Vietnam Maritime University (VMU) attracts from eight to ten international students, mainly from African countries such as Nigeria, Mozambique, South Africa and some Asia countries like Myanmar, Laos, Korea etc. These students live in dormitories and study with local students. Having chances to meet and teach some of them, it is easy to find that different cultures and languages have created extraordinary difficulties for them not only in their daily lives but also in their studies. However, until now, there have not been any research about these issues. For these reasons, the writer would like to carry out a study under the title “Identity negotiation of international students while studying in a non-speaking English country” with an aim to closely examine the process of how individual international students experience the study abroad context. It is hoped that some suggestions for a better adaptation when studying in a multilingual and multicultural new environment will be offered through the findings of this study.

2 Literature review

2.1 Types of identity

The subject “I” potentially embeds multiple identities which are constructed at the interstices of multiple axes such as age, gender, ethnicity, class, social status etc., whereby each aspect of identity redefines and modifies all others. As a consequence, there are different ways to classify identity. However, in this study, the writer focuses on the negotiation of identities taking place in multilingual contexts, hence, limits itself to certain identities which are imposed or devalued or misunderstood. The framework adapted in the study is proposed by two post-structuralists Pavlenko and Blackage (2004). In their study, they differentiated three types of identities including imposed identities, assumed identities, and negotiable identities which are further discussed below.

As mentioned in their study, imposed identities are not negotiable at a particular time and place. In other words, individuals cannot resist or contest their identities at a particular point in time. For example, if we are caught by the police because of exceeding the speed limit, we are imposed the identity of lawbreaker. This identity is non-negotiable because there is law enforcement on the people who break the rules. We are seen and treated as law breakers during our interactions with the police. Therefore, for this kind of identity, individuals do not shape for themselves but are imposed by the outsiders who use it to define individuals’ membership in particular social groups. This definition is further explained as “certain identities may not be negotiable because people may be positioned in powerful ways which they are unable to resist” (Pavlenko & Blackage, 2004:250).

These “powerful ways” could be an authority, society, policy, legal discourses, political speeches, mass media outlets and popular images. For instance, undocumented immigrants are labelled as “illegal immigrants”, no matter how they feel, they are powerless to contest deportation when being imposed by authority.

In contrast, assumed identities are accepted and not negotiated. These identities are considered as kinds of stereotypes which people feel comfortable with and do not necessarily find offensive. These identities are legitimized by dominant discourses (Pavlenko & Blackage, 2004). For example, in Western tradition, men used to be a breadwinner while women were housewives. They might feel comfortable and content with their roles, however, this does not mean that all men and women agree with the ideas. Assumed identities are used to support and clarify our perceived roles in society but also use discourse to debate against elements that we perceive to not fit with our value systems.

Finally, negotiable identities “refer to all identity options that can be and are contested and resisted by particular individuals and groups” (Pavlenko & Blackage, 2004: 31). These identities are negotiated at various levels, including the family, workplace, educational contexts as schools and universities, peer group

interactions, class and social status etc. As mentioned earlier, identities were considered fixed, stable and nonnegotiable 100 years ago, however, in contemporary critical theory, it is considered negotiable (Pavlenko, 2003). For example, in today's society, the trend of immigration is expanding rapidly and the immigrants are expected to assimilate into the culture and values of the host country. However, immigrants are also thought to have a great choice whether to sustain the dominant culture of the host country or to maintain their self-identification of their home country. Numerous immigrants choose to be selective in what facets of the host country are appropriate into their identities. In this way, their identities can be flexible between two countries.

2.2 Identity negotiation

Along with identity, identity negotiation in a multilingual environment has been extensively studied in recent years. The word "negotiation" is defined in Oxford dictionary as a "formal discussion between people who are trying to reach an agreement" and identity negotiation is the process whereby relationship partners reach agreements regarding "who is who" (Swann, 2009). However, in socio-cultural research, identity negotiation is not only the agreement between two partners but also within oneself. It emphasizes the linkage between cultural values and self-conception. Identity negotiation perspectives explain how one's self-conception influences one's cognitions, emotions and interactions profoundly and why people draw intergroup boundaries. It illustrates the different needs and wants of individuals in desiring to be included in their relationships and also shapes the factors that contribute to identity shock – as when individuals move from a familiar cultural milieu to an unfamiliar one (Ting – Toomey, 1999). According to Swann, identity negotiation process is the satisfaction between *desired* identity and *actual* identity. In order to achieve this balance, one generally has to conform to various principles of identity negotiation that not only facilitate smooth interpersonal interactions but promote intrapersonal harmony as well.

Many sociocultural scholars also propose the identity negotiation process of individuals when moving into an unfamiliar cultural environment. When entering the new context, individuals may feel like a "fish out of water" which may result in culture shock or "a loss for words" in their new surroundings (Bocher, Furnham, and Ward, 2001). These views are in line with Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986), Ting – Toomey (1999, 2005), and contemporary sociocultural theorists. The identity negotiation theory (INT) by Ting – Toomey (1999) emphasizes that human beings in all cultures desire positive identity affirmation in a variety of communication situations. However, when individuals view their present social identity as less than satisfactory, they may attempt to change their groups' membership in order to view themselves more positively. Negotiation in this perspective is defined as "a transactional interaction process whereby individuals in an intercultural situation attempt to assert, define, modify, challenge and/or support their own and other's desired self-images" (Ting Toomey, 2005: 217). This negotiation takes place through both verbal and non-verbal communication.

Therefore, in order to maintain positive desired identities, it is essential to enhance intercultural understanding, respect and mutual support through mindful communication. To be mindful communicators, in turn, individuals need to be empathetic, respectful listeners and pay attention to pragmatic rules across cultures (LoCastro, 2003; Spencer-Oatey, 2000). "Sensitive language usage", as explained by Ting – Toomey, is a crucial vehicle in reflecting our mindful attitudes in communicating with dissimilar others. In other words, individuals must be sensitive to the cultural beliefs, values and backgrounds of partners to have suitable language choices. Successful communication across cultural boundaries is achieved through a joint function of both communicators attending to their "mutual identity needs, expectations, attunements and cravings" (Ting - Toomey, 2005:229). When entering new contexts, a new group or a new environment, individuals easily get the feelings of insecurity and vulnerability as they

are at a loss to figure out how to be in the unfamiliar context. If the host is welcoming and supportive to the newcomers, they are more likely to develop more positive attitudes towards the host culture and language, hence, make more effort to become a part of its members. By contrast, if they find the host environment too daunting and unwilling, they may reject or reduce the opportunities for personal and linguistic expansion.

In short, in this global village, in order to achieve the three identity negotiation outcomes (i.e. the feeling of being understood, the feeling of being respected and the feeling of being affirmatively valued), newcomers need to learn to swing between the various dialectical-thematic poles adaptively and creatively, while on the other hand, members of the host culture should be gracious, respectful and mindful to the newcomers.

2.3 Recent research evidence and trends

Research on identity in general and identity negotiation in particular has long been a contested issue which has attracted various researchers around the world. In the early days, scholars of different approaches, namely behaviorist approaches, personality approaches, interactionist approaches, sociocultural approaches, post-structure approaches etc. proposed different frameworks on identity and identity negotiation. Based on these theories and views, modern researchers adapted into participants of particular contexts. For example, in 2010, Xiaoning Chen studied the identity construction and negotiation within and across school communities. In her study, the theoretical framework was built on constructs of identity, community of practice, power relations and investment to explore one English-as-a-new-language student's identities within and across three different school communities. Another research titled "Identity in flux: negotiating identity while studying abroad" was carried out by Young, Natrajan-Tyagi and Platt in 2015 to examine how individuals experience themselves and others when abroad by using the qualitative method of phenomenological interviews.

Further developing the identity negotiation theory, in 2011, Frenk designed an interdisciplinary and theoretical study on the topic of identity and the development of collective consciousness to investigate the ways in which people feel about and operate with their identities today. Besides, there are some other studies on the discourse negotiation of international student identities (Haugh, 2008) and negotiating identity at home and abroad (Jewett, 2000).

It can be seen that the topic of identity and identity negotiation of international students are popular with researchers worldwide today, however, this field remains under researched in Vietnam when the main concerns are still on teacher identity and discourse identity. To the best of the writer's knowledge, no existing empirical research on identity negotiation of international students except for the study of Lien Pham and David Saltmarsh (2013) exploring how international students construct their identities drawing on their social networks by in-depth interviews with Vietnamese tertiary students studying in Australia. Besides, studying in Vietnam, an "outer circle" (Kachru, 1985) country, will surely offer unique experiences for international students, an issue that has not been fully investigated in previous studies.

As a result, this gap has inspired the writer to further investigate this issue, in order to be able to suggest pedagogical implications for the host institution to create a better environment for foreign students and help them adapt to the new environment.

3 Materials and methodology

3.1 Research questions

The study is carried out in order to find out the answers to the following questions:

1. What identities do foreign students construct in a multilingual context?
2. How do students negotiate their identities in a culturally and linguistically unfamiliar context when studying abroad?

3.2 Research settings

Vietnam Maritime University (VMU) is specialized in marine sectors such as navigation, marine engineering, maritime business and shipbuilding technology. One of the greatest strengths of VMU is international cooperation and it is currently working cooperatively with more than 100 institutes, universities and organizations worldwide. Every year, VMU has exchange programs with other marine universities in the world which attract about 8 to 10 foreign students who are mainly from African countries, particularly those from Angola, South Africa, Morocco, Mozambique, Nigeria and Asian countries such as Myanmar, Laos, and Korea. These students mainly study at International School of Education (ISE) and School of Excellent Education (SEE) while some others study in other full-time training programs. The length of a formal training program normally ranges from 3.5 to 4 years. During their sojourn, the foreign students are arranged to live in dormitories and study with local Vietnamese students. English is used as the main language to study the academic subjects while they can learn some basic Vietnamese to communicate with the local people in social contexts.

3.3 The participants

The participants, aged from 22 to 29, are five foreign undergraduate students (4 males, 1 female) who have spent at least 2 years and expect to spend at least two years or more in Vietnam. All participants are presented pseudonymously in this study. None of them have previously lived or spent time in any other country than Vietnam. Prior to their arrival in Vietnam, they knew almost nothing or had no experience about living in Vietnam, as this applies to students from Asian countries. All of these students are doing English - medium courses where English is used as the main language to communicate with lecturers and classmates.

Although they have spent at least two years in Vietnam, their Vietnamese language proficiency is quite low due to lack of opportunities for communication. Two of them have finished Vietnam language course 2, meanwhile the other three interviewees are doing Vietnamese language course 1. In general, their Vietnamese conversational fluency is quite the same, except for one student from Myanmar, who is interested in learning Vietnamese and has self-study, hence, can carry on a conversation in familiar face – to – face situations involving high frequency words and simple grammatical constructions without using body language or facial expressions. Meanwhile, the four remaining students still have difficulty in maintaining some basic daily conversations like going shopping, ordering meals or asking for directions. However, all of them are unable to use Vietnamese in learning academic subjects. In terms of accommodation, they are all required to share a dormitory room with other foreign students. The general information of the participants can be summarized in the following table:

Table 1: Background information of participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Country	Length of stay in Vietnam	Department	Vietnamese language level
Student 1 (Leo)	27	M	South Africa	4 years	ISE	Beginner
Student 2 (Karl)	29	M	Mozambique	3.5 years	ISE	Beginner
Student 3 (Si)	23	M	Myanmar	3 years	SSE	Beginner
Student 4 (Tham)	22	M	Myanmar	3 years	SSE	Beginner
Student 5 (Wutyi)	20	F	Myanmar	2 years	ISE	Beginner

3.4 Data collection procedures

Based on the themes of the research questions, the writer designed open-ended questions to solicit participants' responses and reconstruct their experiences with the topic. There are three separate interview series for each participant. The first interview establishes the context of the participants' experience by asking him/her to tell as much as possible about him or herself relating to the topic up to the present time. In this phase, open – ended questions were sent to the participants and they answered in written form.

The second interview enables participants to reconstruct the details of their experiences in their families, school, with friends and other social relationships. The participants were invited to a face-to-face interview conducted individually. In this phase, the narrative inquiry was applied to encourage interviewees to tell their own stories relating to the topic with minimal interruption. Each in-depth interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. Because the topic of this interview study is how they changed when coming to Vietnam and factors affecting their changes, the writer focused on the participants' past experience in school, families, society before attending the education program in Vietnam as well as their present lived experience. The writer did not ask for opinions but rather the details of their experience, upon which their opinions may be built. In order to situate their experience within the context of the social setting, the writer encouraged them to talk about their relationships with their teachers, friends, the administrators, the staff and the wider community. These experiences were revealed through some stories from their daily lives.

Finally, the third interview encouraged the participants to reflect on the meaning of their experience. In this interview, participants looked at how the factors in their lives affecting to bring them to their present situation and also looked at their present experiences in detail and within the context in which they occurred. The combination of exploring their past and present lives established conditions for them to reflect upon what they were doing now in their lives.

4 Results and discussion

4.1 Results

4.1.1 Types of Identity negotiated

According to two post-structuralists Pavlenko and Blankage (2004), there are three types of identities in their theory including imposed identities, assumed identities and negotiable identities. According to the researchers, these identities are interchangeable, which means there can be a shift from one identity to another in changing contexts. In this study, the participants shifted from imposed identities to assumed identities. For example, the second interviewed student, Karl, a black African student, faced serious racial discrimination not only in social life but also in academic life. Four years ago, the common disease from Africa named Ebola spreading widely coincided with his first sojourn in Haiphong, hence, people called him "*Ebola, Ebold*" when he was walking on the street which was described as "*the worst thing I felt in Vietnam*". Sometimes, he was also subjected to racial slurs or offensive comments like "*É, da đen*" or "*alien*" when going out. A restaurant even rejected him because he was a black man.

"4 years ago, there was a disease in Africa called Ebola, everyone call us Ebola, Ebola in the street, that's the worst thing I felt in Vietnam. Going outside, and someone just come to you and say something bad, they say Ebola. Even some restaurants, I know one restaurant here in Haiphong, I went there to eat lunch, they say no black."

However, such irritating and stressful experiences did not stop there. In his class, Vietnamese students didn't want to sit beside him. His classmates also called him "black".

"Academically, the students don't want to approach, they don't want to sit beside me. While I was studying strategic supply chain management, I was sitting at the second and two students came and say: "You cannot sit here because we don't want anything black to interfere our view to the teacher."

This means that when living in Vietnam, he is imposed with the identity of “black” or “alien” both socially and academically, and he was not able to negotiate such positioning at that time and in that place. Because of the society’s prejudice imposed on him, he could not resist or contest even though he felt irritated and uncomfortable. However, in a different context, after a period of time living in Vietnam, he has a different view about this. When he gets used to it, he no longer cares about these irritating slurs. If someone calls him “*da den*”, he just looks at him/her and smiles “*Hello*”. In the English center where he has a part-time job, he allows his students to call him “*da den*” if they like, if not, they can call his name. “*Even I told to my students: “You can call me “da den” in class, it’s no problem, but if you don’t want, don’t call me teacher, call me Karl.”*”

As a result, for international students coming from different parts of the world like Africa, they shifted from imposed identities to negotiable identities after a period of time of gradual adaptation and negotiation. However, for most of Asian students like those from Myanmar, are comfortable with the assumed identities of being “Vietnamese” and do not necessarily find any behaviors offensive. Because of the similar culture and appearance, most Burmese students are mistaken as Vietnamese, and talk Vietnamese to them. However, they do not find anything offensive in it “*when I come to this university, most Vietnamese think I am a Vietnamese and they always speak Vietnamese to me but I said “em khong hieu (laugh)”*”.

In conclusion, because of their different skin color, African students coming from Nigeria, Mozambique, Angola have to struggle with racial discrimination while studying in Haiphong as they are constantly imposed the identities of “black, da den, alien...”. However, after a period of sojourning here, they tried to adapt and gradually accept the identities that people imposed on them. Meanwhile, with similar appearances, culture and values to Vietnamese people, Myanmar students did not face much difficulty when studying at VMU and they are quite comfortable when being mistaken as Vietnamese people.

4.1.2 Identity Negotiation Process

4.1.2.1 Reactions to context

Being exposed to different contexts, all the interviewees shared the same feelings of being nervous, worried, scared and also a little excited because it was the first time they studied in a foreign country. After a period of time, however, they get accustomed to the new environment and enjoy their new lives in Vietnam, especially in Haiphong. Some students even reported feeling like ‘local people’. They all agreed that their experiences studying abroad brought about lasting personal and academic benefits. Nonetheless, it is unavoidable to encounter difficult emotions in some particular contexts which led to their behaviors.

Disappointment. “*I was really disappointed at that time. Oh my God*”. It was the feeling of the Wutyi, the fifth interviewed student, when she first came to Noi Bai airport. There were four Burmese students in total, two boys and two girls arriving at midnight with so much language but no one picked them up.

“*Because we have 4 people so they think we can go by ourselves so no one come to us at that time. It was really difficult at that time. You know Hanoi, no one we can speak, everything is in Vietnamese language so really, really difficult*”.

It was the first time these teenagers had travelled abroad but they faced so much difficulty that they felt “*so wrong to come to Vietnam, I shouldn’t come to Vietnam*”. There might be some misunderstanding in the agreement between the two universities which put these students in such an unexpected situation. Nonetheless, their depression with the hospitality of the host university is unavoidable.

In addition, the problem of teachers teaching in Vietnamese is quite common in classes involving international students. All the interviewees reported that they felt bored and disappointed when the teachers continuously use Vietnamese and even gave homework in Vietnamese. One of them wished “*someone would come and explain in Portuguese something I don’t understand*”. The matter is even getting worse because “*most of the teachers now, they are all Vietnamese, the teacher assistants now become teachers*”. The number of high – quality teachers are decreasing because “*they study Master and then they can teach*”. The current situation makes them

miss the old time when being taught by high-quality teachers, especially those from America, Japan and Korea.

Although frequently there are such problems in their academic lives, the students cannot report to the staff as they are afraid that their names will be revealed. *"In Vietnam, they don't hide name of the one who say it"*. They also do not dare to request the teacher directly because they don't know how the teacher would react to the information. Consequently, they just keep it to themselves as *"it is safer to keep the thing to you"*.

Annoyance. During their stay in Hai Phong, participants reported that it was unavoidable to experience certain annoying situations. For those studying in ISE, they claimed that the information was not always consistent which caused them plenty of difficulty and frustration to follow. Leo narrated his experience: *"...always break when someone tell you that "yes" you can do this but go back tomorrow other say that "no" you can't do it. So, it's very frustrating especially for me or someone who always travel"*. Sometimes, the information is changeable like weather *"They gave us the rules when we came here but all the rules are changed along the year and anyone can change the rules in the office. If they feel happy today, they can change them if they feel sad they can change them, so it's very confusing."* Such inconsistent information certainly made them annoyed as they repeatedly needed clarification from the office staff. This also caused some irritation for the staff. *"They see me as if I always get there like "ah he's coming to complain"*. The conflicting communication between students and staff made them both annoyed. Hence, they learned that *"when you complain, they can get very angry. When you complain more, they make things more difficult for you."* Although one of the interviewed students showed her sympathy *"I think ISE system needs to update because they connect with foreign lecturers so they need to update. We always need to update, too (laugh)"*, another sadly compared to his home country: *"In Vietnam, we are not allowed to question authority, so it's maybe the rule. We cannot question why the rules are changed or why that. All these are challenges. We come from place where we are allowed to question everything if we don't understand."*

Not only inconsistent information but inattentive Vietnamese students in class also caused international students some irritation. According to Myanmar students, Burmese people are conservative and preservative, hence, they are extremely obedient and respect seniors, especially their teachers. Therefore, they are irritated when other students keep chatting or playing games on their mobile phones without concentrating on the lessons. Wutyi, the female Myanmar student recalled:

"...right now most of Vietnamese students don't respect because the teacher is explaining but they don't listen. They use their phone playing games or texting. At the first time, I think why they do like this because the teacher is explaining. The teacher told not to do like this but they don't care. I think it is not good'.

However, when asked about their intention to interfere with the situation, she was reluctant and gave reasons.

"I know they are teenagers; they don't want to listen. Just ignore it. I think so." *"We are foreigners, we need to keep good relationship with custom"*. *"Sometimes I feel hesitate because their ideas and their way of thinking about life are quite different from me. This makes me hesitate to share my ideas because if I talk to them, they don't care."*

Not only Burmese students, Karl, a Mozambican also admitted that students in his country were not given as much freedom as here. While students in Vietnam are allowed to eat in class, in his country, they would be taken out immediately. Besides, he also showed his irritation to troublesome fellows keeping playing games or talking in class because this distracted him from the lesson. *"In Vietnam, students are playing games in their laptop, I'm sitting behind them, what my eyes will go? It goes to the screen; I won't pay attention to the class. So, that affects me."* He thought that teachers should be stricter to their students to make class more disciplined.

Shock. When being exposed to and interacting with an unfamiliar environment in the host country, it is unavoidable for international students to experience some kind of shock. Being considered to have the lowest socioeconomic development of the world, African students felt strange and uncomfortable with some private questions like *"Băn ăn cơm chưa/ Have you had lunch?"* because many people in their country

tried to survive and they even did not enough \$1 to eat. *“Maybe in Mozambique, there are people who survive without even \$1, they even don’t have \$1 to eat but if you ask him: ‘Have you had lunch?’, you don’t know if that person have money to eat or not so, if someone ask you here, I feel it is a strange question for me”*, Karl explained. However, over time, they gradually learnt that these questions were kinds of greetings, not because of curiosity or privacy.

Vulnerability. As mentioned earlier, the African students are seriously discriminated due to their black skin color, not only academically but also socially. They are constantly called by insulting names such as “da den”, “alien”, “black” etc. No one wanted to sit beside them or approach them. They were isolated in their own class. *“I feel excluded. They excluded me from the class itself “*. The discrimination happened not only in one single class but in most classes. *“They never came to talk to us in class. In our class, there are five foreigners, four South American and I. Everyone is in class and we always sit together. So, we just talk to ourselves, no one came to us”*. Karl, the Mozambican student thought that his Vietnamese fellows only come to him when they needed help with their studies. *“Even to sit beside you, they never sit beside only if it’s a subject that we have to read in English like English composition, speech communication more than business, things that we have to read in theory much. They always come like: ‘Hey, I don’t understand here, can you explain to me? What does this word mean?’ They only come because of benefits. When there’s no benefits they never come.”*

They also admitted that during their sojourn, they did not have many friends, there were only a few students that they could talk to. *“I only have three guys, not really friends but three guys that I usually talk to. One of them now is working at ISE office but normally all other students we never spoke, we never even say hello. So just work inside class, people sit in the chain and do whatever happening then everyone just go home. It has been hard.”* Despite the teachers’ effort to connect African students with Vietnamese students, the matter is not much better. *“All teachers always emphasize that make groups foreigners with Vietnamese but even when I am in groups with them it’s very hard for them to talk to me. So, I just say, ‘ok I give you your part and you do it and then send it to us’ but they won’t have meetings and go to school to work together so I have to do mine on my own and then send my part. So, it has been always like that.”*

The feeling of being isolated in an unfamiliar environment was not easy, especially as they lived far away from their home and their family. In the host country, they were constantly treated unfavorably both directly and indirectly which caused them to experience acculturative stresses. Inside their class, they were excluded from their class activities. *“They didn’t call me for pre-graduation photo session of my class”*. Outside their class, they were also treated unequally. *“Even in ISE, there is discrimination. They don’t show but the way they treat American students and the way they treat African student are totally different.”*

4.1.2.2 Negotiation Outcomes

Personal alteration and adaptation

Despite the initial negative feeling, after a period of time, all five interviewees developed a better understanding towards the host context which represents their deeper self-expression and adaptation to the context. This understanding has generated significant effects on their behaviors.

For ISE’s international students, after conflicting and ineffective communication with the ISE staff, they improved their interaction skills to build good relationships with the staff. They realized that it was useless to complain, therefore, they became more flexible in the way of receiving information. *“So, I am just friendly. I just ask, if they say ‘no’ I say ‘ok, let me know next time.”* *“I just get used to it and I don’t question it now just ask and then if they say yes or no, it’s ok”*. They were proactive to build relationship with the staff. *“Even now, if I don’t have class, I go to the office. Maybe I want something, maybe I just make fun and talk to them, even daft smiling and they laugh”*. Leo, a dynamic, active and adventurous person, who liked travelling and going to the bar, admitted that studying at VMU had changed his mind in many ways.

"I mean in any other place you learn how to live and how to adapt so I learn to adapt to the situation like that. I know what I should do when it's complicated, and now I know how to approach them at the office. Can't just go there and be angry and complain. Now, I have to talk in the suitable way and ask them and beg them and things can happen. Yeah. But it changed my mind in a lot of ways."

He learned that he was living in an unfamiliar environment, therefore, he had to alter and adapt to the situation. When he could not change the situation, he had to change himself. *"If you don't believe in you are doing, you have to be aggressive. Right? But in Vietnam, I know we can't do that. On top of that maybe if the manager say we are doing this but you don't think it's right, you can't say no. I have to accept it"*. In his class, he also tried to break the ice by proactively making friends with his classmates. *"In class, I always play around, I make fun and talk to other Vietnamese people"*. However, it does not usually work because Vietnamese students are still *"too shy to respond"*.

Other participants overcame their negative feelings and emotions by adopting some kind of action plan. They registered with some clubs such as karate, Kung fu or gym where they had more chances to build their social relationships. All the participants agreed that most of their Vietnamese friends were not their classmates but were outsiders. *"I try karate club so I got a lot of friends there."* *"We have karate page for our members and we always contact and communicate with each other so it's really comfortable and really happy"*.

Two African students, Leo and Karl, started learning at VMU when they were mid-twenties, Leo was twenty – four and Karl was twenty – six. Therefore, when being isolated and excluded from their class, they felt depressed at first, but gradually got used to it. They tried to console themselves that their Vietnamese classmates were just kids and they had fewer chances to see the world.

Another reason for their easy adaptation is their preparation before coming to Vietnam. Karl had been well-educated and foretold by his mother the difficulties that he might encounter *"Because of my mom, she says: "Where you are going, you have to face this and this" so I was ready from home to come here"*. Therefore, he can easily get adapt to the situation. *"I get used to it. I understand how life is here so I have to adapt myself to the situation. I can easily adapt. I can complain but I can easily adapt to it and I adapted already."* After two to four years of sojourn, all the interviewees have learned to accept and how to adapt with the new environment, as well as build in their minds an "I-don't-care" attitude: *"Just put in my mind that I don't care and life is going"*.

Negotiation outcomes

All the interviewees confirmed some solid changes in the way they view themselves after their long sojourn in Vietnam, and these changes are not only related to their personalities but also some other social traits. For SSE's Myanmar students, they admitted that the experience of studying abroad made them more mature and thoughtful. In their home country, they used to study at Myanmar Maritime University (MMU) which was a smaller but more peaceful university. There are about 2000 students in their university and it is like a big family where everyone is always in harmony regardless of religion, races and ethnic background. They commented that VMU had better teaching and learning facilities, nonetheless, VMU was more formal and had a rather cold atmosphere. In their previous university, they were like children because they can rely on their teachers for any problems and any of their single word was respected.

Therefore, the time living in Vietnam was a big challenge for them, but it also made them more mature. Tham jokingly described himself now has become *"an adult"* after *"getting out of the box"* and *"can see the world wider"* and knew that there was something that he had never known. After *"going through ups and downs of life"*, he *"started to know what is life"*. The experience of living abroad also changed his personality and his way of making decision. He used to make decisions based on his emotion but now they are based on his priority and avoid harming the relationship with others. He narrated a story about picking up four Myanmar students to illustrate that. Although he was angry with the decision of the International Relationship

Department at that time, he had to choose and finally he had to accept their decision. *“Sometimes we have to make an option. Something like that in life. That’s what I want I say and I didn’t use to that. I didn’t use to do that before I came here. This is the first time from VMU to know myself.”* Tham also thought that he was now more tolerant and mindful than before. The story of a pregnant laboratory teacher who cannot speak a single word in English during all her lesson is an example. He was angry and had an intention of reporting the video of her class to the office, however, after witnessing the teacher with her babies, he changed his mind. *“If I reported, she would be fired or her salary would be reduced or she could get some punishment but she is a normal person she is a mother and she is a pregnant woman.”*

Despite some bad experiences, African students have now become familiar with the new context and love their new life. Leo admitted that *“I am here, I miss home but when I go home, I miss Vietnam”*. After finishing his student life, another Mozambican student, Karl, has an intention to study master at VMU. Most students now have the feeling that they are living in their own country *“but right now sometimes I feel like my country”*.

4.2 Discussion

One of the key findings of this study confirms the participants’ adjustment and adaptation in their experiences of themselves, which is resulted from the language barriers, different academic systems, cultural conflicts, racial discrimination, social isolations and emotional concerns described above. While they may be among the most talented and well-resourced in their home countries, international students face the challenges of daily life in a foreign environment, usually without adequate information or preparation. This adjustment and alteration demonstrate the process of how students attempted to negotiate their identity in accordance with their interactions with the locals in both academical and social contexts.

The first finding is aligned with theories of Identity Negotiation by Ting-Toomey (1999). More specifically, in her theory, she suggested that when facing unfamiliar contexts, individuals tend to have feelings of emotional vulnerability or experience emotional discomfort. In this study, all interviewees mentioned some occasions when they were overwhelmed by embarrassment, vulnerability, disappointment, anger and shock. In addition, the theory stated that individuals are likely to “feel included when their desired group membership identities are positively endorsed and experienced differentiation when their desired group membership identities are stigmatized” (Ting – Toomey, 1999: 3).

This explains the African students’ feelings of being marginalized by the locals despite their efforts to build closer relationships. In the next phase, the insecure identity would make the individuals gradually develop “thoughtfulness” and “mindfulness”. In this study, the Myanmar student’s deeper level of cognition was revealed through his attempt to avoid any negative reactions he might receive from others, to act accordingly to the expectations he used to have and have strategies to avoid any misunderstanding in whatever situations. Consequently, this finding supports Ting – Toomey’s suggestions that the struggle between identity security and identity vulnerability in new contexts leads to new frameworks of self-identity (Ting-Toomey, 1999).

All five interviewees demonstrated either an adaptive or adjusted version of identity. An outstanding result from the interview is that after a certain period of time, all participants showed satisfactory negotiation outcomes, admitting that they felt being understood, respected and supported by the locals, whereas some individuals continued to experience misunderstandings or negative feelings like being unwelcomed or being looked down upon.

Another finding of this research can be explained within Pavlenko and Blackedge (2004)’s theory about three types of identities - namely imposed identities, assumed identities and negotiable identities. In this study, there are two distinguished participants who are imposed upon with different types of identities. The group of African students with different appearances felt irritated when being attached with “black” or “da

den” identities at first, but gradually accepted and allowed this nomination. Hence, they shifted from imposed identities (not negotiable) to negotiable identities. Meanwhile, the Asian groups were satisfied with the identities of “Vietnamese people”. They found this mistaken identity interesting and did not want to negotiate it.

5 Conclusions

From the current study, it is affirmed that the study abroad experience has the potential to reshape and reform some aspects of students’ personal perceptions about themselves. In other words, studying and living abroad create unique interactive contexts and environments wherein the negotiation of some of the sojourners’ identities can be facilitated. Furthermore, the preference of language used in a multilingual environment also affects the identity negotiation process. To be specific, language choice would lead to the absence or presence and modification or stability of a certain type of identity. This confirms the assumption that the use of a specific language can give rise to a related identity.

The findings also emphasize the importance of education in the negotiation of identity in study abroad contexts. Especially, globalization provides more chances for students to study abroad with more choices and a variety of destinations. While in the “inner circle” countries, students have troubles with languages and cultures of the host countries, studying in extended circle countries seems to cause even greater troubles with their varied multilingual and multicultural contexts. As proposed by Ting-Toomey (1999), in order to develop mindful cross culture and inter-culture communication, it is necessary to acquire a thorough understanding of the value content of one’s identities.

Hence, it is the role of education to help the learners to get hold of the notion of identity and to gradually understand how their identities would affect their life within the contextual specifics of an unfamiliar culture. It is notable from the interviews that the interviewees had drawn excessively on those interactions in the school environment, especially with their professors who had been assumed to be experienced and knowledgeable. Initially, these interactions generated negative feelings and emotions of being vulnerable and embarrassed, and it took a certain amount of time for the students to establish more favorable perceptions of themselves. Therefore, it is suggested that education environments should not only provide students with academic knowledge but also play a role in assisting students to build these positive perceptions through social and pastoral care and affordances.

6 Declarations

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