The aim of this paper is to investigate the role of the English language in Sudanese identity construction after the Naivasha agreement between the South and the North of Sudan in 2005. An attempt is also made to examine associations between students’ educational backgrounds and identity. The population of this study is the students of three private universities. The researcher has designed a structured interview for the students. The findings presented here are from a few selected subjects. The results reveal that English has played a role in Sudanese students’ identity construction. Moreover, it has been found that English emerges as a dominant language, English is viewed as a pragmatic language and a language of empowerment, and a sense of “othering” is clearly identified among the students that have a good command of English.

Keywords: Identity, English as a medium of instruction (EMI)

Key terms:

Identity: identity is the way a person perceives self, others and the world

English as medium of instruction (EMI): a shift from English being taught as a foreign language (EFL) to English being the medium of instruction for academic subjects

Author Bio: Ishraga Bashir is an associate professor at Al Neelain University, Khartoum, Sudan. She is the former President of TESOL Sudan.

Author email: ishragabashirelhassan@gmail.com
Introduction

Language shapes people’s perception about self and the world. It is the main reason of identity construction. The use of English language as a medium of instruction has many outcomes. One of these is the linguistic competence or the mastery of the language, and the most important other one is the construction of identity.

The study of the relationship between language and identity has drawn the attention of many scholars. The common result from all the study of identity is that identity is a complex issue. A person’s identity usually changes due to personal, social and linguistic factors that make identity constantly changing over time and space. English recently has been perceived as a language of power, political and economic dominance and mobility. A person who studies English language for instrumental reasons could be aiming to join the upper class, move to the developed world, etc. The instrumental potential of the language has reached its peak in the context of globalization in which English as a global lingua franca plays a catalyst role. As a result, English has greatly influenced the educational and social life of many people. It was of interest in this study to examine and provide evidence of whether English language has an effect on Sudanese learners’ identity and to address the possible relationship between foreign language learning and learners' identity.

English Language Status in Sudan

The use of English as a second language in Sudan was first introduced by British rulers in the 19th century. Throughout British rule, the English language continued to gain official, political and social status. When Sudan gained independence, English had become so deep-rooted in the political fabric of the country that it was constitutionally kept as one of the official languages. From 1958 onward, the Arabic language has become the means of instruction from the primary to the secondary level of education in the north of Sudan. In 1992 Arabic became the medium of instruction in higher education.

The place of English in educational institutions has been recently a subject of debate by politicians and educationists. However, after the Naivasha Peace Agreement in 2005 (International Crisis Group, 2006), English and Arabic were granted equal constitutional status as official working languages. The parliament passed a bill declaring Arabic and English as the official languages of Sudan for an indefinite period of time. This is the current position. English plays an important role in Sudan today. Judging from certain trends, it appears that the influence of English is on the increase rather than on the decrease.

English as a Medium of Instruction in Sudan

Globalization is the main reason that English is becoming the medium of instruction in Sudan. The need to be proficient in the use of English among non-native speakers is a global phenomenon. The number of higher education institutions which use English as the medium of instruction is increasing constantly. Today, more and more universities in Sudan are starting to design language policies, usually including Arabic and English. According to the Ministry of Higher Education, there are 28 government universities which mostly use English as a medium of instruction in (EMI) health sciences and general sciences, and there are 105 private universities which use EMI for all
their programs (Ministry of Higher Education, 2016). As for primary and secondary schools, the number of international schools has increased to 103 since 2005, as international schools gained popularity among Sudanese. English has been used at Sudanese universities, thus far, for academic and research purposes, mainly in those university centres where international research collaboration has been established. This is in addition to those departments that contribute to the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes of English Studies, Translation and Health Sciences. However, the new language policies designed after Naivasha (International Crisis Group, 2006) have significantly contributed to the increase in the use of English in other degrees. In that sense, Sudanese institutions (primary, secondary and tertiary level) have clearly promoted the implementation of EMI. According to this language policy, teachers benefit from EMI specialists and English language support.

**Literature Review**

The reviewed literature in this study focused on identity construction, the significance of EMI’s effect on learners’ identity, and the philosophic aspects of self and the other.

**Identity as a Concept**

In order to develop a considerable understanding of identity, researchers usually draw on the cognate drip lines of sociology, psychology, anthropology and sociolinguistics. Advancement in these fields has contributed to the conceptualization of identity from static mental process to a kind of dynamic process (Caldas, 2008; Park, 2007). The social constructionists have adopted and developed the idea that a person’s identity is a relational phenomenon. According to them, identity is socially and jointly constructed by social actors in action and interactions.

**Identity Construction in Foreign Language Learning**

Identity formation is more complicated in second or foreign language learning situations because learners are exposed to two diverse cultural and linguistic systems. Myers et al. (1991) conceptualize optimal identity development as a process of coming to know self as expression of spirit, and the reason for this is that language is the vehicle of expressing oneself. The formation of identity in the second and foreign language learning context is well known in the milieu of educationists generally as a concept, but research about the relationship between second and foreign language and identity is very limited. Only recently it has begun to attract researchers’ attention, perhaps as a result of the popularity of the work of Dörnyei (e.g., 2009) which explores the motivation in second language learning and self system.

This study shows there is much interest in the individual’s perspective in the foreign language learning context. Dörnyei’s (2009) study is based on two theories: the possible selves in language learning context (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and self-discrepancy (e.g., Higgins, 1987). The study has identified three types of selves: the ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience. From the psychological perspective, identity is seen as a person’s self-concept deriving from his or her awareness of membership in a particular social group (Milville, Koonce, Darlington, & Whitlock, 2000). Campbell (2000) assumed cultural identity as a social construct and that the ability to move across cultural boundaries was an advantage rather than a disadvantage.
Considering the context of the research, it can be said that individuals usually develop their identity by moving from a status of devaluation and oppression to a positive integration to the new identity.

The Sense of Others

The sense of others is one of the dimensions of identity construction. It is about how individuals see other people and what role they play in their lives. They compare themselves to other people; moreover, they distinguish themselves from others (Palfreyman, 2005). The German thinker, Hegel, presents the idea of the other “as constituent in self-consciousness” (Bristow, 2007). Lévinas (1985) assumed that the concept of other precedes self; the concept of others is not predicted and could not be formed into an object of the self. The conception of otherness later integrated to identification of identities.

Objective and Focus Questions

The objective of this study is to investigate the impact of second/foreign language learning and identity among university students. This study focuses on the following questions:

1. What is the relationship between using English language as a medium of instruction and identity construction among Sudanese learners?
2. What is the relationship between students' secondary education and their sense of identity?

Methodology

The study sample included a total of 100 students (both males and females) from three private universities: Sudan International University, Ahfad University for Women and the University of Medical Sciences and Technology. All three universities use EMI. Participants were divided into three groups based on the identity that they had adopted. The first group (IG) had received language instruction and had been exposed to a foreign language culture during a long term of study. While the second group (SSSC) was assumed to have received considerable English language instruction and accordingly had been exposed effectively to the second language and culture, the third group (GCC) (beginners or elementary learners) was assumed to have received no considerable English language instruction and accordingly had not been exposed effectively to a foreign language culture.

Data Collection

The major instrument used to collect data was a semi-structured questionnaire containing 30 items, regrouped into three domains: the first consists of questions about personal data, the second consists of questions concerning educational background and secondary school certification, and the last consists of open-ended questions about their sense of othering. The questionnaire was written in both Arabic and English. The students had the choice to respond in either language. To make a correspondence between the identity adopted and foreign language proficiency, the frequencies of the items were calculated to find the percentage for each part or type and correlation analyses were carried out to examine the relationship between English language proficiency levels and identity.
Findings

Most of the respondents think that English is a prestigious language. Generally, they see using English as being elitist. They recognize that English is important and that there are clear advantages in being fluent in English; for example, it is an international language, it is usually used at job interviews, it is useful for overseas travel, for understanding lectures, and for accessing knowledge as references are in English. For example, one of the respondents says, “... I feel I’m better than them as ... they really can’t speak that fluently so I feel that’s an advantage that I know more than them...”

Another undergraduate believes that “people appreciate your views especially the guys. They stopped looking down at you...” To her, mastering the English language means being intellectual and knowledgeable. In light of the data, we can identify three kinds of groups, each of which has an identity that differs more or less from the other groups. Each group perceives self and others differently.

The First Group (IG). Members of this group are those who have received language instruction and have been exposed to a foreign language and its culture during a long term of study. This group considers English language as a marker of social class, associating English use with social prestige and high level education. Clearly they have appropriated English language as their own, and their personal identity is quite naturally constructed by its use. They have a sense of “us” and “them” (meaning those who speak mainly local language or languages).

The Second Group (SSSC). The respondents in this group clearly indicate that while they are fully aware of the cultural value of knowing English. They do not ignore the importance of maintaining their national language, nor do they belittle the significance of learning the mother tongue of their own ethnic community. The respondents report an ease of code-switching between the languages they use in the appropriate contexts, and clearly maintain a strong sense of being Sudanese.

The Third Group (GCC). This group, however, recognize that their fluency in English makes them have an edge over their peers who do not speak the language. They change and develop their identity according to the context or the contexts they found themselves in. This group has identity as multiple, a site of struggle, and subject to change

Discussion

The findings reveal that English has a great effect on the respondents’ identity which is clearly constructed by it. In Sudan, English is associated with “Westernization” which impacts how these respondents perceive themselves and how they are perceived in society. Almost all the respondents acknowledged the fact that being competent in English positively positions them in society. Most of them are aware that the ability to use English is pragmatic as English is clearly valued academically and socially. Almost all the respondents observed that English is socially empowering as the people around them have noticeably higher opinions of them when realizing that they speak English well. The high perception of people towards them – whether it is salespersons who treat them with greater respect, classmates who seek their assistance with
English related material, or people who give them more attention when they speak in English – naturally grants these undergraduates more confidence in perceiving themselves.

The awareness of the pragmatism of learning English certainly contributes towards the subjects’ perception of the value in being conversant in English.

**Conclusion and Implications**

The findings revealed that English is considered the dominant language in all domains of life. In most cases, the participants asserted that English has empowered them. It can safely be said that in some cases English has improved the participants’ self-esteem and social status and made them believe that they are more knowledgeable than their peers those who have lower standards of English. Also, there appears to be some degree of othering experienced by the participants. However, these issues and the variables connected to them need to be further investigated. A similar study on the impact of English on identity could be beneficially carried in other universities in the different states of Sudan.

Studies on language learning and identity construction in Sudan institutions tend to explore the impact of language education policy on students’ identity development. Researchers focus on students’ overall language use in English-medium institutions. In Sudan, proficiency in English has recently begun to serve as a major key to academic success. Moreover, the emphasis on English language has led to an elitist education system in which there are relatively few “winners” and many “losers.” It appears that students from well-educated families are the “winners.” These students have experienced exposure to English language. They have the opportunities to travel abroad. Moreover, they have studied in international institutions where English is the only language of learning and communication. The present study contributes to the comprehension of the complex relationship between learner identity and English language proficiency.

**References**


