

## The Rise of English in Morocco and the Question of Identity: Ibn Tofail University Students as a Case Study

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**Abstract**

English, as the lingua franca of the world, is gaining considerable popularity in Morocco in response to the calls for globalization, social mobility, and neoliberalism. Given this new status of English in the multilingual scope in Morocco, it is highly interesting to study how learning English in EFL settings influences learners' identities, namely in tertiary education. This paper introduces an exploratory study that aims to highlight the impact of learning English as a foreign language on students' self-identities in Morocco. Therefore, the objective of this study is to track any possible impact of the target culture on beliefs, and values of learners of English and how exposure to the English language affects their perception of Moroccan culture as English majors. The study also aims to weigh the extent to which students are allowed /pushed to behave outside the norms of their cultural values by adopting an identity change model. This study utilized thematic analysis to qualitatively analyze data from focus group interviews aimed at understanding the impact of learning English as a foreign language on Moroccan students' self-identities. Four key themes emerged from the analysis: 1) self-confidence enhancement, 2) self-identity transformation, 3) identity negotiation in intercultural contexts, and 4) degrees of identity change. The participants' positive attitudes toward learning English and its influence on their self-identities were evident. The findings underscored how English proficiency affects self-confidence, cultural beliefs, and attitudes, revealing a complex interplay between language acquisition and identity shifts. The study contributes to understanding the evolving role of English in Moroccan society and its implications for individual identities amidst globalization.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In today's interconnected world, globalization has played a significant role in promoting the use of English as a global lingua franca. As the world becomes more connected through technology, trade, and communication, English has emerged as a key tool for international interaction. This globalizing trend has made English increasingly important in shaping the identities of individuals, particularly those who are learning it as a foreign language across

many countries around the world including Morocco where English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is gaining considerable momentum (Errihani, 2017). In this very context, English is playing a vital role in shaping the identities of learners at varying degrees enabling them with new perspectives, and visions and even embracing a universal culture that is dictated by globalization and the universal trendy values it promotes according to R'boul (2022). As individuals learn English, they are exposed to new perspectives, ideas, and ways of thinking that are often associated with the English-speaking world. These experiences can influence how learners perceive themselves and their place in a globalized society. In view of this, EFL learners fluctuate among different identity positions vis-à-vis how much they are exposed to the language [English] and how deeply they are immersed in its culture (Teng, 2018). Therefore, this chapter introduces part of an exploratory study that aims to foreground the impact of learning English as a foreign language on students' self-identities in Morocco. As it has been established on solid grounds, language and culture are inseparable entities and involved in a complex and intermeshed relationship. That is, understanding culture is substantial for understanding the language it is associated with since language and culture are highly interactive (Moll, 2013; Kramsch, 2014; Kavaklı, 2020). In the same vein, it is asserted that "language and culture are not separate but acquired together, with each providing support for the development of the other" (Mitchell and Myles, 2004, p. 235). This interconnection between language and culture dictates that English majors are impacted by the culture of that language at all costs. Indeed, the process of learning a foreign language, such as English, extends beyond the learning of linguistic skills. It also involves exposure to the culture associated with that language. In the case of English, which is widely spoken around the world, the target culture can exert a profound influence on learners' identities as people now construct hybrid, in-between, and transcultural identities that are not confined to one specific culture or language. These identities emerge at the intersections of various cultural, linguistic, and spatial influences, (Higgins, 2011). As in the case of Morocco, English, being regarded as a global language and a lingua franca of the world, has been on the rise in response to the calls for globalization, social mobility, and neoliberalism. Given the new advanced status of English in the multilingual scope in Morocco, it is highly interesting to study how learning English in EFL settings influences learners' identities, namely at the tertiary level through departments of English, and weigh the extent to which students hold on their values, beliefs and, self-identity before the tempting culture of the target language, (English). The research questions that guide this exploratory study are as follows:

1. In what way does studying English make learners different from non-English majors in terms of perception?
2. To what extent does learning English as a foreign language influence students' self-identities in terms of values and beliefs?
3. What type of Identity change is mostly experienced in learners of English as a foreign language?
4. To what extent does learning English as a foreign language impact students' self-confidence and self-esteem?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1.English in Morocco**

#### **2.1.1. The Place of English in Moroccan Education**

During the French protectorate, English language teaching was first introduced in Moroccan secondary schools. At that time, teaching and learning English was regarded as "a purely functional instrumental tool" and a gateway to achieving economic goals across vocational sectors such as tourism and international banking as well as in higher education (Hyde, 2004). English has been a wise consideration in all reforms adopted and executed by

the state. In 1999, The National Charter for Education and Training (NCET) which is a reform agenda that sought to promote the Moroccan School system at many levels, encouraged learning foreign languages including French, English, and Spanish to establish progressive and balanced multilingualism.

Again, the 2011 Constitution of the state encourages studying languages that are highly appreciated and widely spoken around the world. For that, it mandates that those foreign languages be introduced and taught as a means of establishing communication, promoting integration, and maintaining contact with other countries and communities in the spirit of establishing tolerance and mutual understanding with various cultures and civilizations. (Moroccan Constitution, 2011).

Concerning the most appreciated and widely spoken foreign languages in the world, the 2015–2030 national strategic vision, which has been prepared by the Higher Council for Education, Training, and Research in Morocco, has urged engagement and interaction with a global knowledge of societies as well as tolerance and openness to different cultures and civilizations. It has also prompted that pedagogical approaches to early learning should be adopted, to achieve equity, quality learning, and equal opportunities as far as access to languages is concerned (National Strategic Vision, 2015-2030).

Interestingly, English is gaining ground in Morocco as the most popular foreign language in the world as it is taught in secondary education starting from the third year of Middle School as well as being used as the medium of instruction in some higher education institutes and engineering schools. English is introduced in many private primary schools across the country. As a short-term goal, the Ministry of Education is planning to expand the teaching of English in State Primary schools, with a midterm goal of introducing it as a second foreign language in the fourth grade of primary education (The Higher Council of Education, Training, and Scientific Research, 2015). Along with that and following the official instructions mandated by the 2015–2030 national strategic vision, the Ministry of National Education and Vocational Training (MNEVT) has introduced the English Option Baccalaureate and scientific streams taught in English. These intentions of consolidating the place of English in the Moroccan education system have been driven by the urgent requirements of today's changing world in which English plays a substantial role. This great interest in English language learning has already been stated by Sadiqi (1991), as she claims that English, without a doubt, is an international language par excellence and a global tongue that is used across many disciplines to facilitate communication, cross-cultural relations, mutual understanding, and economic integration to name a few. Two decades after Sadiqi's study on the spread of English in Morocco, Buckner (2011) updates us with a chapter on the ongoing spread of English in Morocco. According to Buckner (2011), "Today, the rise of tourism in Morocco, with the country aiming to attract millions of new tourists over the next five years, and the growth of international trade, facilitated by Morocco's Free Trade Agreement with the US, are bringing new job opportunities to Morocco that increasingly require English skills" (pp. 233-234).

### **2.1.2. The shift to more English in Morocco**

With this shift to place more importance on English language teaching in Morocco, more people across the country including students have started to favour this shift and embrace this linguistic move. According to a recent survey which has been conducted by the British Council in Morocco, English is growing in importance among Moroccan youth who think of English as an important language for their development, social mobility, and cultural exchanges. Therefore, "The reasons why more Moroccans have learned English in recent years relate to its role as a global language and its importance for obtaining employment, travelling around the world, and accessing knowledge and culture" (British Council, 2021). The same idea has been advocated by McArthur (2004) saying that English is being labelled a 'global

language' due to its importance in global socio-economic contexts imposed by Globalization (p.3). In that, "English, uniquely, has come to be accepted as the symbol of a modern technologically advanced society" (Hopkyns, 2020).

Therefore, more and more students are now majoring in English Studies as English is gaining more interest in Morocco than ever before. The spread of English in public as well as in private schools and institutes is not an issue that disturbs scholars and researchers in the field of education. However, with a significant growing interest in learning English among Moroccan students, the target culture, mainly Western, is becoming more and more accessible and captivating students' attention in fascination. Based on this assumption, a great number of Moroccan students become more familiar with the American/British culture as much as, if not more than, the English language itself. Many of those students listen to American music, wear Western outfits, and even converse with an American/British style/accent and thereby to varying degrees absorb and embrace liberal thoughts which are hinted at directly or indirectly in whatever course study they are taking in English. Given its new powerful status as a "global academic language" (Jenkins, 2014, p.10) and being a gateway to academic success, "one would suppose that such a powerful language could not fail to affect its speakers on multiple levels" (Hopkyns, 2020). That's to say, students' identity is hypothesized to be influenced in some way, consciously and or unconsciously.

Again, shifting one's identity and embracing a Western culture cannot be regarded as an issue; however, it becomes very disturbing when such a change hinders and debauches effective communication and learning due to the overuse of or the total adherence to the target culture i.e., American/western culture. Again, it is problematic when the local culture and identity are disdained, underestimated, or even discarded. That is why, this study is carried out to delve into identity reconstruction facets among Moroccan University students, and how the target language and its culture may change the values, attitudes, and behaviours of its learners.

### **2.1.3. English beyond the walls of the classroom**

Recently, there has been an increase in English language use in public places, social media, and other online platforms. People mainly adolescents make use of English in public and social spaces such as campuses, streets, cafés, and elsewhere. Again, it has been observed that English is gaining popularity in social media. In that, they tend to use more English than any other language. So, English is taken as an important instrument in online activity. Besides, many newspapers and news channels, especially digital ones, have emerged in the Moroccan mass media landscape trying to provide news that appeals to the English-speaking community in Morocco as stated by (Belhiah & Abdelatif, 2016). This spread of English is due to its importance at a global level and to its prevalence in cinema and music industries which are diffused through applications and online media. Consequently, learning English goes beyond the walls of the classroom enabling students and learners of English with more opportunities to practice the language outside the school boundaries. In that, EFL learning has a positive backwash effect since "there is a very strong connection between education and the spread of English in Morocco" (Sadiqi, 1991, p. 69). More importantly, people have started using English in day-to-day business affairs due to the increase of multinational companies in Morocco and the increasing number of tourists. In tourism, English is regarded as an indispensable language, both in the private sector (hotels, tourist guides, etc.), as well as in the public one.

### **2.1.4. The English Boom in the Era of Globalization**

Besides the English Colonies, English is invading, due to the process of globalization, every part of the planet and Morocco is no exception as we have established earlier. So, more and more people are learning English to facilitate better communication with different people from different parts of the world. It has become a necessity nowadays to use English as a lingua

franca as dictated by globalization. Therefore, English remains the chosen language for communication among people as they interact for different purposes (Poggensee, 2016). Again, it is believed that for one to attain success, explore more opportunities, and gain recognition, one must learn English as a powerful tool. Correspondingly, Seppala (2011) confirms the same idea that English remains a significant factor towards realizing those goals and purposes. People believe they can attain a high level of self-sufficiency and climb the ladder of success with the help of mastering English as a basic requirement for promoting the economic sector in several ways; for instance, learning English provides people with the required skills in the job market and enables them to keep up with the demands of modern technology.

Mastering communicative skills has indeed been the main purpose behind learning a new language. However, globalizing English has made it difficult for NES not only to attain and boost better communication in English but also to help them seek to belong and identify with a global community that shares almost the same values and enjoys aspects of modernity. That is, learning another language involves the construction of new identities since using a foreign language will re-construct and shape the individual's sense of self (Benzehaf, 2023). In other words, a new sense of identity is being immersed which enables proficient learners of English the authority to adhere to an English-speaking community as language affects cultural identity according to Hatoss (2003) without losing the first culture. In the same vein, Johnson (2009) asserts that the globalization of English has challenged local cultures in many non-English-speaking countries including conservative ones as in the case of China. According to him, English is not only viewed as a mode of communication but rather as, "repositories of culture and identity" (Johnson, 2009, P. 137). In that, when learning or acquiring a new language, learners mingle different social identities. On the other hand, Lobaton (2012) argues that those who learn the language may drop some of their cultural aspects in the process due to the confusion caused by confronting values and different aspects of both cultures. In other words, learners get perplexed about what values and beliefs they should keep and maintain. In this case, they tend to adopt the dominant culture which is a result of much exposure to the language according to Hatoss (2003).

### **3. Language and Culture in ELT**

Some social scientists (e.g., Brown, 2007; Kuang, 2007; Savignon & Schulz, 2007; Sysoyev, 2005; Kramsch, 1998; Tang, 1999) have demonstrated that the relationship between language and culture is very much dynamic and the two are closely interconnected. They are simply representing "two sides of the same coin" (Nault, 2006, p. 314). Thus, language is commonly accepted to be part of culture as it has a great role to play in it. Therefore, they are best acquired/learned together according to Schulz, (2007). However, another slightly different perspective has been advocated since culture transcends language. That is, language is just an aspect of culture, not culture itself. It is through language that culture is spread, shared, and transferred from generation to generation. Eventually, it seems that both perspectives say a lot about the relationship between language and culture. As in the case of the spread of English, Pennycook (2017) relegates the causes and effects of the spread of English to a functional perspective. In his view, by and large, the subsequent expansion of the English language is seen as a result of inevitable global forces and thereby as neutral when detached from its original cultural contexts (mainly England and USA). In this sense, the English language is now a neutral and transparent medium of communication according to Pennycook. He also emphasized the idea that there is a structuralist and positivist view of language that suggests that all languages can be free of cultural and political influences.

Relatedly, Risager (2005) explores the link between language and culture by looking at them from two different perspectives. The first perspective claims that language is culture-bound since language is conceptualized to be closely interconnected with culture. In that, they

are viewed as two inseparable entities as they fit together and go hand in hand in the process of communication. The second perspective looks at language as being a flexible instrument that can be utilized with any subject matter anywhere in the world as in the case of English as an international language. This view makes language culturally neutral according to Risager. In this sense, language and culture are seen to be separated from a global perspective. Following what Risager states about the issue of separability and inseparability, we would confirm that the relationship between language and culture is highly complex bearing in mind that “language is always cultural in some respects” (Risager, 2005, p. 185). In line with this premise, Risager (2006) again highlights the connection between language and culture during communication. In that, she refers to communicative events which take place in social contexts as highly cultural instances. These instances are basically socio-cultural events in nature.

This dynamic relationship has implications for EFL learning as it suggests that understanding a language involves understanding its cultural context. EFL learners need to be aware of cultural nuances, idiomatic expressions, and cultural references to communicate effectively. Given that language is viewed as a means through which culture is transmitted across generations, learners not only acquire language skills but also gain insights into the culture of the target language. This can lead to a more holistic and authentic language-learning process. Thus, engaging in a successful journey of language learning requires understanding the cultural nuances that shape how the language is used. As students delve into these cultural aspects, they may find themselves adopting certain cultural elements and, consequently, experiencing a shift in their sense of identity.

#### **4. Language and Identity**

Identity, in truth, is a difficult concept to demystify as it is as complex and multifaceted as culture would be. The construct of identity has been labelled as one of the most pivotal concepts of our times (Dervin & Risager, 2014). It is indeed an ambiguous and slippery concept according to Buckingham (2008) as it has been recently used in so many disciplines and contexts serving divergent purposes. In fact, identity encompasses an amalgamation of experiences, memories, values, and relationships that set one’s sense of self. That is, identity is such a complex concept that it includes all the relationships and life experiences of being a child, a friend and even a language learner. People are defined by core characteristics that they have no control over such as race, skin colour, height, and socioeconomic status. However, they are also defined by the choices they make in their daily lives which are directly or indirectly dictated by the attitudes, values, and political opinions they hold. Therefore, identity is said to be in a state of change and evolution over the course of one’s life depending on the multiple roles being played. In Benzehaf’s study (2023), EFL learners report experiencing shifts in their identity, cultivating diverse identities through language use. This suggests that multilingual students are reshaping their cultural identities as modern, global, and intercultural citizens due to multilingualism's influence. As a language learner, for example, new attitudes are being molded and new visions of life are being embraced since language and culture go together. This experience of experimentation in learners of a foreign language triggers identity formation through discovering their potential through foreign language learning and finding opportunities to exercise that potential.

##### **4.1. Language / Culture and Identity Shift**

Norton (1997) considers “The relationship between language and identity as an intriguing one, partly because debates on theories of language are as inconclusive and indeterminate as debates on theories of identity” (p.409). While language learners converse using the target language, they keep organizing and reorganizing their belongings thereby negotiating and reconstructing their identities. (Norton, 1997).

In this very context, learning a new language is, by all means, a holistic process in which the entire person is involved physically, cognitively, and emotionally. Language learners are in a fluctuating position between comprehension of themselves as speakers of their native language (L1) and an awareness of themselves as learners of the target language, in terms of how they "identify" themselves, during this experience. By way of explanation, they construct a new identity when they learn a new language (Norton, 1997). Therefore, it is believed that identity construction through language use is an ongoing, continuous, and dynamic process (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2007).

Furthermore, language is a human gift, and it is assumed to be central to human cognition, identity construction, and self-development (Edwards, 2009). Norton (1997) argued that language both shapes and is shaped by one's identity. Additionally, the close link between language learning and identity reconstruction is commonly acknowledged among scholars such as (Edwards, 2009; Johnson, 2009; Norton, 1997, 2009) although discussions of identity theory seldom fall directly under the rubric of research in second language acquisition (SLA) according to (Ortega, 2009).

Language also reflects one's self-identity as it exposes many facets of a person's identity and determines how we interact with other people. Therefore, we tend to perform different roles in different contexts in society. We also speak differently depending on what language we use, where we come from, whom we interact with, where the conversation takes place, what purposes we want to attain, etc.

The relationship between learning a new language and the self-identity of the language learners has been explored by Gardner & Lambert (1972) who highlighted the importance of motivation in FLL. Later, Lambert (1981) devised a model called the Socio-psychological Identity Model which claims that successful language learners change their identities including some of their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours to fit into a foreign language group and adhere to their culture. In this sense, we highlight the importance of having a high level of linguistic security in connecting to an English-imagined community. According to Goa et al. (2007), the type of attitudes that learners have about the new language determines their motivation force to immerse themselves in the target language and thereby in the culture respectively. Hence, both motivation and proficiency have substantial roles in self-identity change among learners.

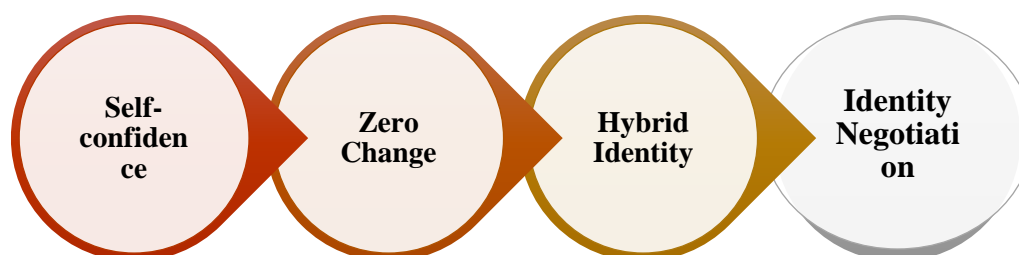
Inspired by the Lambert model, Goa et al. (2007) came up with a classification model which measures levels of identity change by classifying language learners into different categories. These categories are *self-confidence change* (learners' belief in their skills and potential), *Additive Change* (when learners switch between L1 and L2 making use of either depending on the context), *Subtractive Change* (when the target culture becomes the norm as it replaces the local identity), *Productive Change*, (when the target language and its culture reinforce more appreciation of the native ones), *the split change* (when there confusion to what to use in different contexts as different values and cultures come into conflict), and *Zero Change* (when there is no change observed as learners look at English as an instrumental tool only).

#### **4.2. Identity Change model**

In this study, we will maintain the classification of self-identity change among learners of English as a foreign language at the tertiary level in Morocco and we will stick to four main categorizations: Self-confidence, Resistance, Identity shift, and identity negotiation. These categories represent the level of self-esteem, zero identity change, acculturation in the target Culture, and holding the third place respectively. The results of the study will be discussed using the following model of Identity change which is inspired by (Gao et al, 2007).

Figure 1

*Adopted Identity Change model - Adapted from (Gao et al, 2007).*



- **Self-confidence:** The extent to which learning English helps learners boost their self-confidence, self-esteem and thereby, their self-concept.
- **Zero Change:** The experience of learning English with no impact of its aspects on individuals' identities.
- **Hybrid Identity:** The process of fusing two different cultures into one. The process entails embracing a different culture (target culture) and learning the values, beliefs and mannerisms of the target language community and thereby constructing a hybrid form of identity from both (local and target).
- **Identity Negotiation:** the quality of being decisive and evoking desired identities in situations of interaction using intercultural competence in different contexts.

## 5. MATERIALS AND METHOD

This exploratory study aims to highlight the impact of learning English as a foreign language on learners' identities through conducting a qualitative method that was geared towards creating a complete and detailed analysis of the issue as practitioners and researchers in the field of foreign language education. To address the research questions that this study sets to answer and to get better insight into possible future directions, in-person semi-structured focus groups were conducted with 3 groups of 8 students each to generate reliable rich data.

### 5.1.Method

This qualitative study explores the impact of learning English as a foreign language on Students' identities by tracing the relationship between English language learning and identity shift from the viewpoints of Moroccan language learners at the tertiary level. To this very end, a qualitative method was adopted to generate rich data from the participants in the study. This method was particularly considered in response to the complexity of the issue. Norton & Mckinney (2011) assert that identity change is a dynamic process that is difficult to measure as contextual factors and personal considerations come into play in this process. Besides, the topic is known for its dynamicity in terms of space and time. Again, the reason why a qualitative approach was employed in this research was that the study focused on the exploration of values, meanings, experiences, feelings, and beliefs vis-à-vis the issue under investigation (Tashakkori A, Teddlie C, 2003).

The data were collected by employing semi-structured focus-group interviews with 2 groups of 12 students each. The participants (male and female) were undergraduate students majoring in English studies and belonging to different levels (Semesters 2, 4, and 6



respectively) at Ibn Tofail University in Kenitra, Morocco. The reason why opting for focus group interviews instead of questionnaires was since verbal discussions are more fruitful and provoke deeper thoughts and truer statements. They are also suited for obtaining different perspectives on the same issue. So, the main purpose was to draw upon respondents' attitudes, feelings, and beliefs [about learning English] in a way that couldn't be attainable via other methods (Kitzinger, 1994 & 1995). It is true that these types of interviews often yield results that cannot be generalized, but they provide an in-depth insight on respondents' perceptions, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and motivations.

## **5.2. The participants and the procedure**

The participants involved in the study are 2 groups of EFL learners majoring in English studies at the University of Ibn Tofail in Kenitra, Morocco. The participants were chosen by stratified sampling and ethical considerations were carefully considered. The participants belong to various semesters (S2, S4, and S6) and thereby to different levels. The reason why choosing different students of different levels was to take into consideration whether the variable of proficiency in the English language contributes to identity change in EFL learners.

Focus group interviews were carried out using a semi-structured approach in which discussions were initiated by a few predetermined questions while the rest of the questions were not planned. Sub-questions were raised accordingly in case more highlighted answers were required. Again, any divergences in responses were re-directed smoothly to the main questions. The objective of adopting semi-structured interviews was to provide interviewees with an opportunity to explore important ideas related to the issue.

The two interview sessions lasted almost one hour and a half each and they were audio-recorded. It is also worth mentioning that very important notes were taken simultaneously during the interviews by the moderator with the help of another colleague for the sake of attaining objectivity and avoiding bias. Throughout the interviews, the applicant asked questions and interacted with the participants by backchanneling or repeating what each respondent had said to engage them in a fruitful discussion and elaborate on the topics in question with further information by asking engagement, exploration and exit questions. In the case of minimal responses, the interviewer probed those short answers with HOT (high order thinking) questions to give the respondents more chances to explain themselves thoroughly.

## **6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **6.1. Data Analysis**

The data generated from focus group interviews were analyzed qualitatively using a thematic analysis framework. This framework has been carried out for the sake of identifying, describing, and interpreting key patterns across themes within the issue of interest. This method of analysis has been applied to a variety of data types and used in a range of ways in applied research due to its flexibility and efficiency (Goldsmith, 2021). After transcribing the data into transcripts, the authors familiarized themselves with the data by reading them many times and going through the entire transcripts to identify and generate initial ideas. In doing so, interesting data were highlighted systematically, possible codes were collated into themes related to research questions and meaningful patterns were detected across the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

### **6.2. Findings**

The interview data yields four pivotal themes shaping the relationship between EFL learning and self-identity among Moroccan participants. These themes encompass enhanced "self-confidence" when speaking English, profound "Identity reconstruction/shift," the

strategic "Resistance" to cultural assimilation, and "Identity negotiation" amid diverse cultural contexts. These themes, recurring in the data, illustrate participants' dynamic experiences while learning English. Additionally, the data unveils patterns concerning motivation, learning styles, and teaching modes which can be exploited in further research. Also, the findings reinforce positive attitudes toward English and its culture, aligning with prior research like the British Council's study (2021). This convergence enhances the credibility of the results and underscores English's significance in Morocco.

### **6.2.1. Theme 1: Self-confidence: (self-concept and self-esteem).**

Observed patterns of identity change across the interview data suggest that self-confidence change was the most prominent of them all. Most of the participants claimed in so many instances during the interview that learning English is really boosting their self-confidence and thereby their self-concept. In other words, they simply find it easy to express themselves freely and talk about issues they cannot probe using their mother tongue as in the case of curse words, taboo topics, and issues of sexual connotation. According to one speaker from group 1, this was validated by her saying "... *I feel like English gives you more comfort to be speaking about those things [expressing love] openly without the therapy of being judged*". That is, learning English provides them with a comfort zone that enables them to talk about and tackle intimate issues with their friends and colleagues. English is seen as a powerful tool to unleash thoughts of concern with ease. As a case in point, another speaker said "*When I speak English, it is totally okay with me to talk about a love affair, a romantic rendezvous and even talk about things I cannot say in Arabic. I don't know but... I just feel comfortable*". For most of the interviewees shared almost the same view that English learning is boosting their self-esteem despite limited opportunities provided to converse in the language in an EFL setting. However, they constantly claim that they shift to English when it comes to expressing thoughts freely. These claims confirm the findings in R'boul's study in which he examines university students' language ontologies vis-a-vis the spread of English. Relatedly, he denotes that 'speaking English displays a modern identity that is perceived by students to be laudable and alluring to the others given its prominence and cultural puissance' (R'boul, 2020, p. 04).

### **6.2.2. Theme 2: self-identity change**

Before talking about the level of acculturation in learners interviewed, it is interesting to mention that most of the interviewees claimed that it was not the language that changed their identity, but it was about the culture. In consideration of that, the data confirmed the idea that language and culture are highly interconnected as was established in the literature. While studying the language, culture goes hand in hand with language learning. Again, it is worth saying the data included no single instance of total change since most of the interviewees held on to their core identity to varying degrees. However, there were instances where a high degree of shift was occurring especially when it came to values and beliefs such as respect, love, sexuality, tolerance, judgement, and prejudice to name a few. First and foremost, English was used to express and probe topics of intimacy as one of the speakers went on saying "*It doesn't seem right to me to express my feelings of endearment or sadness using Arabic .... Well, English is more expressive when it comes to this matter*". Second, it was hinted that the way they dress, and their lifestyles were not actually influenced by English language learning including culture but some of their beliefs were actually challenged. An interviewee said "... *it [English] doesn't change how I dress but it really changed the way I think and behave .... it changed my beliefs, how I see things even maybe in religion, race, sexism, and feminism ...*". Other claims were in line with this thought. For instance, one respondent said "*I practice my English through Rap songs, watching Netflix movies and reading short stories and novels... Some of them contain*

*sexual scenes, bad words, and sexual passages but I like it as long as they are interesting to me, but I watch movies I prefer to be on my own”.*

### 6.2.3. Theme 3: Identity negotiation

As far as this theme is concerned, it should be noted that it was difficult to judge whether an individual learner could negotiate his/her self-identity in a multitude of intercultural contexts. However, once asked about their presence in a target culture milieu, half of the respondents claimed that they would be inclined to be more open to a different culture and respect the values of that culture bearing in mind that they would keep their core identity as a Muslim. As a case in point, one of the respondents says: “... for example, if I am to go to the US or any other western country and live there, I understand that there will be many opportunities where my friends can invite me for a drink (Alcohol for instance), of course, I will appreciate their invitation but I will not drink, ... not because it's Haram [religiously forbidden], but maybe it is bad for the health”. These claims are just expectations which suggest identity negotiation in a different cultural milieu but as identity is dynamic, these thoughts might be re-considered once being there and living the experience physically. Another example which supports the idea of being open and tolerant towards other cultures was the claim of a female interviewee who said: “I totally respect people's lives including gays and lesbians. I don't care ... it's their lives. I should not tell them that they are wrong as long as they respect me”. This claim seemed to me as an opinion, but this was reiterated by another female respondent saying that before she studied English, she used to consider abnormal sexual inclinations and homosexual orientations as rude and weird practices in her local culture. However, after considerable exposure to the language namely English, she started to hold a neutral position. In that, I would claim that there is some normalization going on with those practices as English is the vehicle of western culture that is propagated through globalization. Again, the idea of belonging to an imagined community can be inferred from the data collected since the majority of interviewees aspire for a global culture that is characterized by tolerance, mutual understanding and embracing universal values which are actually aspects of the 21<sup>st</sup> century imposed by globalization.

### 6.2.4. Theme 4: Zero change

Across the data compiled, no single instance of zero change has been fully observed. All the respondents' answers to the questions that triggered possible identity shift fluctuate among slight changes to integration in the target culture. Even though a few interviewees claimed that their identity was not affected. Their reactions to some answers dictated that their self-identity was slightly changed due to the natural course of learning a different language. Yet, most of the participants showed their inclination to favour the target culture of English as a global language due to the vast opportunities it provides in a globalizing world.

### 6.2.5. Attitudes

There is no shadow of a doubt that all the participants in the three groups have positive attitudes towards learning English and towards the wide spread of English in Morocco. It seemed evident from all the answers if they favor English over French for future communication through institutionalizing it as the first foreign language in Moroccan Education. They all claimed that English helped them to some extent belong to an educated community through which they could learn more about world views and different cultures as well as get access to global knowledge. These claims are in line with the findings put forward by Belhiah (2020). More importantly, many of them were aware that solid proficiency in English is highly required in the job market for prosperous employees and for future careers. It is also worth mentioning that most of them expressed their desire to be teachers of English.

These attitudes, despite the positive aspects they bear within, may be regarded as signals of change at the level of self-identity. By saying so, we can claim that the process of change is already happening, and it will likely pervade as more people go for learning English alongside the neoliberal thoughts and westernized values it brings with it. This change probably will create more servants of capitalism and propagators of Western thoughts in the name of openness and prosperity.

### **6.2.6. Discussion**

Based on the findings above, English is taking over the linguistic scene in Morocco as established in the review of the literature. Students enroll in English studies through departments of English in great numbers which indicates that English is gaining popularity comparing to other foreign languages namely French. In line with this linguistic direction, the new status of English doesn't entirely depend on "Moroccan speakers' nostalgic and sentimental feelings towards the British or the Americans" (Errihani, 2017, p. 123). However, it is a reaction to the public calls for English as a global language. As hypothesized, learning English doesn't only involve learning the linguistic rules but brings more changes at the level of the individual. Learners' self-identities constantly undergo relative change bearing in mind that the target culture becomes more palatable through academic content, media and other sources which are introduced via the process of globalizing the English language.

In response to the first research question "in what way does studying English make learners different from non-English majors?", it is evident from analysis that learners feel special as English language learners in comparison to other non-English majors. Most of the answers collected from the focus groups rounded about respondents having the feeling of being worthy and proud of belonging to an imagined community of knowledgeable and tolerant people. This feeling stems from the power that English provides to its speakers. More importantly, English has given learners much room to be flexible and critical towards thorny issues including taboo ones and that's because of them being granted more access to worldwide knowledge through the use of English. This enabled power and agency through language learning which boosts learners' capacity to claim more powerful identities has been recognized by Norton (2013).

As far as the second research question "To what extent does learning English as a foreign language influence students' self-identities in terms of values and beliefs?" is concerned, the impact of learning English and its culture on learners' beliefs and values is unescapable but to varying degrees depending on the level of exposure to the language. According to the findings, the impact exceeds great access to global knowledge to changing ways of thinking and lifestyles. In that, respondents hinted at the idea of enjoying cultural activities and daily habits which are influenced by movies and songs. It should be noted that some values such as nationalism, respect, tolerance, and honesty for instance have been rethought in the frame of learning English as a foreign language. Thus, most of the respondents claimed that they enjoyed being world citizens as they respect people's views, opinions, and perspectives. In fact, this is a very good aspect that characterizes 21<sup>st</sup> century but that should not drag those speakers to adhere to values that go against their core identity as Arab and Muslim people. More interestingly, some respondents even sympathize with LGBTQ+ sexualities as they enjoy their rights in the frame of freedom of speech and individual liberties. So, more exposure to the English language, through academic content, movies and music that back up these trends in one way or another, puts them in the trap of normalizing those acts which are basically not acceptable in their local culture.

The findings drew very important conclusions vis-à-vis the question "What type of Identity change is mostly experienced in learners of English as a foreign language?". Indeed,

most of the participants in the study fell in the category of those whose identities have changed. Some of them claimed the change and they were aware of it, and it was evident from the way they think, the way they dress and the way they look at world realities; whereas others were slightly under change, and they were not even aware. A few of the respondents claimed zero change as they were loyal to their social upbringings, local traditions and Moroccan values despite the temptations introduced to them via the language. What is interesting here is that those who went under identity change displayed a very good command of the language and that is because they read a lot in English, and they exposed themselves too much to English and its culture. Those who remained relatively unchanged looked at the English language as merely an instrument. Besides, their level is as good as those who were under considerable change.

In reaction to the last question “To what extent does learning English as a foreign language impact students’ self-confidence and self-esteem?”, there is no shadow of a doubt that learning English really has a great impact on how they conceive themselves as speakers of English. The discussion with the interviewees was punctuated by so many instances in which self-confidence was highlighted. This means that English really provides its speakers with the power to express different ideas openly especially those which are refrained by local cultural values. Again, it was obvious that English helped them have a good self-image as they felt more confident despite mistakes being made. It is also worth mentioning that exposure to English in EFL contexts and elsewhere paved the way for them to boost their motivation to explore their potential.

All in All, the study findings paved the way to very interesting conclusions which should be highlighted so that interested people in the field of education can make sound judgements and thereby suggest pedagogical approaches for limiting cultural fusion which basically leads to distorted identities. It is also to be noted that much exposure to the language leads to an identity shift in most cases as English is gaining more ground in the Moroccan linguistic Scene. Therefore, we expect more instances of this type of shift with the absence of a critical pedagogy that enhances the critical thinking skills of learners of English.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

In an increasingly interconnected world, the role of language in shaping individual identities has become a topic of considerable interest and research. As societies globalize and cultures intermingle, the acquisition of foreign languages takes on new significance, potentially influencing how individuals perceive themselves and their place in the world. One language that has gained immense prominence in this context is English, known as a global lingua franca. For non-native speakers, learning English goes beyond acquiring a means of communication; it can lead to shifts in self-perception, values, and cultural affiliations. This study delves into the dynamic relationship between learning English as a foreign language and its impact on the self-identities of Moroccan students. The Moroccan context is particularly intriguing due to the nation's rich cultural history, diverse linguistic landscape, and growing exposure to global influences. Through qualitative analysis of focus group interviews, the research aims to uncover the intricate ways in which the process of learning English shapes and reshapes individual identities. By employing a thematic analysis framework, the study identifies patterns and themes that shed light on the nuanced connections between language acquisition and self-conceptualization. The emergence of distinct themes - self-confidence enhancement, self-identity transformation, identity negotiation in intercultural contexts, and degrees of identity change - underscores the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon. This investigation not only offers insights into the psychological and sociocultural dimensions of language learning but also contributes to our understanding of the broader societal implications of the growing prevalence of English. The study's findings hold relevance beyond the realm of linguistic

### **The Rise of English in Morocco and the Question of Identity: Ibn Tofail University Students as a Case Study**

studies, as they provide valuable insights into the evolving nature of identity in a world increasingly shaped by globalization and multiculturalism. So, by examining how English proficiency intersects with self-identity, this research addresses key questions surrounding the impact of language acquisition on personal beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour. The implications of the findings extend to educational practices, cultural policies, and social dynamics within Moroccan society. Moreover, they contribute to the ongoing discourse on the role of language in shaping individual perceptions and highlight the complexities of identity negotiation in a globalizing world. Indeed, this exploratory study which is qualitative in nature yielded interesting results which should be taken into consideration in other research projects in the field of teaching English as a foreign language in Morocco namely at the university level. Possible improvements are badly needed to encompass a wide range of participants for more insight into the issue at the national level. Professors of English in Moroccan Universities should also be taking part in this study to probe the issue from a partitioner perspective. Again, a similar study should be conducted with proficient speakers of English such as Master and PhD students to confirm and validate or revise the findings being explored in this study.

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