



English Learning and Self-Identity Transformation Among Vietnamese Vocational College Students

Huynh Thi Thao Vy ^{1*}, Tuan Anh Hoang ²

¹⁻² University of Transport and Communications, Hanoi, Vietnam

* Corresponding Author: **Huynh Thi Thao Vy**

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Abstract

This study examines how English learning influences the self-identity of Vietnamese vocational college students studying English as a foreign language (EFL). A questionnaire survey was conducted with 235 first-year students at Vabis International Vocational College, followed by semi-structured interviews with 10 randomly selected participants. Based on Gao *et al.*'s (2005) bilingual identity framework, the study investigated six dimensions of identity change: self-confidence, subtractive bilingualism, additive bilingualism, productive bilingualism, identity split, and zero change. The findings show that additive change recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.61$), followed by productive change ($M = 3.51$) and self-confidence change ($M = 3.48$), while subtractive change remained low ($M = 2.10$). These results suggest that students were generally able to engage with English while maintaining their Vietnamese cultural identity. Gender-based analysis revealed a statistically significant difference only in subtractive change ($p = .000$), whereas no significant differences were found in the other dimensions. Overall, the study highlights the predominantly additive and productive nature of identity development in this context.

Keywords: Self-identity, EFL, bilingualism, vocational education, English learning, Vietnam

1. Introduction

Language is not merely a communication tool; it is intimately bound to cultural values, behavioral norms, and personal identity. For Vietnamese students, learning English—the dominant global lingua franca—represents both an academic requirement and a transformative social experience. English is embedded across all levels of the Vietnamese education system, including vocational schools, where it aims to equip learners with professional competencies for global labor markets.

Gardner's (1985) ^[9] classical social-psychological model classifies identity changes arising from language learning as 'non-linguistic outcomes,' recognizing that language acquisition reshapes self-perception, communication styles, and value systems. For Vietnamese EFL learners, engagement with English can involve tensions between cultural preservation and openness to new influences—a dynamic that remains underexplored in vocational contexts.

Despite growing interest in language and identity, most Vietnamese research has concentrated on pedagogy and methodology, overlooking how foreign language learning reshapes learner identity (Norton Peirce, 1995) ^[14]. This study addresses that gap by investigating self-identity changes among Vietnamese EFL vocational students and exploring whether such changes differ by gender. Specifically, it is guided by two research questions:

1. Have EFL vocational college students undergone self-identity changes after learning English? What types of changes have they experienced?
2. Do EFL vocational college students' self-identity changes differ with regard to their gender?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Language and Identity

Identity is not a static construct; it is fluid, relational, and shaped through social interaction (Block, 2007; Norton, 2013) ^[13].

Norton (2013, p. 45) ^[13] defines identity as 'how a person understands their relationship to the world, how that relationship changes over time and place, and how the person sees possibilities for the future.' Language is central to this process: it both expresses and constitutes identity across multilingual and multicultural contexts (Yihong *et al.*, 2005) ^[17].

2.2. Theoretical Framework

Lambert (1975) ^[10] introduced the foundational distinction between subtractive bilingualism—where the target language displaces the native language and cultural identity—and additive bilingualism—where both linguistic systems coexist. Building on humanistic psychology, including Fromm's (1948) ^[6] productive orientation and Maslow's (1957) ^[11] self-actualization theory, Gao (2001, 2002) proposed productive bilingualism (symbolized as $1+1>2$), wherein proficiency in both languages mutually reinforces cognitive and cultural development.

This study operationalizes Gao *et al.*'s (2005) six-category model of self-identity change: (1) self-confidence change, (2) additive change, (3) split change, (4) subtractive change, (5) productive change, and (6) zero change.

2.3. Previous Studies

Gao *et al.* (2005) ^[8] surveyed 2,278 Chinese undergraduates across 30 universities and found that English learning significantly influenced self-confidence and produced productive and additive identity shifts, with gender and major as moderating variables. Anbreen (2015) ^[1] demonstrated that identity is dynamic in Pakistani EFL classrooms, while Azmi *et al.* (2021) ^[2] found that English learning does not erode Islamic self-

identity in Malaysian religious schools. Saida (2021) ^[16] reported that most Algerian EFL learners did not develop a wholly new foreign language identity, instead integrating L2 identity as complementary to L1. These findings converge on the conclusion that English learning can enrich rather than undermine native identity—a premise this study tests in the Vietnamese vocational context.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants and Setting

The study was conducted in the first semester of the 2024–2025 academic year at Vabis International Vocational College, Ho Chi Minh City. The total first-year population was 345 students. Applying Cochran's (1977) ^[5] formula at a 95% confidence level ($Z = 1.96$), a 5% margin of error, and $p = 0.5$, the minimum required sample was 182 participants. A total of 247 students completed paper-based questionnaires; after removing 3 incomplete and 9 biased responses, 235 valid cases were retained for analysis.

3.2. Instruments

A 28-item questionnaire measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) was adapted from Gao *et al.* (2005) ^[8] and contextualized for the Vietnamese vocational setting. Items were organized into six factors (Table 1). The instrument yielded a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = .765$, indicating acceptable internal consistency (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994) ^[15]. The questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese to ensure comprehension. Following the survey, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 randomly selected participants to triangulate quantitative findings.

Table 1: Questionnaire Factors and Item Distribution

Factor	Items	No. of Items
Self-confidence Change	1–6	6
Productive Change	7–10	4
Split Change	11–15	5
Subtractive Change	16–19	4
Additive Change	20–23	4
Zero Change	24–28	5

3.3. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) addressed Research Question 1. For Research Question 2, Levene's Test for Homogeneity of Variances was applied prior to group comparisons: One-Way ANOVA was used for factors meeting the homogeneity assumption, while Welch's ANOVA was employed where variances differed significantly. Qualitative interview data were analyzed thematically to complement and interpret the quantitative results.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Types of Self-Identity Change (RQ1)

Descriptive statistics across six factors are presented in

Table 2. Additive Change recorded the highest mean ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.678$), indicating that students broadly perceived English learning as expanding their linguistic and cultural repertoire while retaining their Vietnamese identity. Productive Change ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.676$) and Self-confidence Change ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.556$) followed closely, reflecting the positive cognitive and affective outcomes of bilingual development. Split Change ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 0.713$) and Zero Change ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 0.733$) occupied a neutral-to-moderate range. Subtractive Change was substantially lower ($M = 2.10$, $SD = 0.884$), suggesting that learners did not perceive a meaningful erosion of their Vietnamese identity.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Six Identity Change Factors (N = 235)

Factor	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Additive Change	3.61	0.678	High
Productive Change	3.51	0.676	High
Self-confidence Change	3.48	0.556	High
Split Change	3.27	0.713	Moderate
Zero Change	3.11	0.733	Moderate
Subtractive Change	2.10	0.884	Low

Within Self-confidence Change, the item 'I feel my own development when I overcome difficulties in learning English' yielded the highest score (M = 3.79), underscoring the role of challenge and perseverance in identity formation. Interview participants echoed this finding:

"At first, I was really shy and afraid to speak in English. But as I practiced more, I started to feel more confident. Now, I don't hesitate to answer questions in class."

Additive Change was most strongly reflected in context-sensitive language use: 'I use different greetings in English and Vietnamese depending on the situation' (M = 3.86) and 'I have an English name and a Vietnamese name, and I use them in different contexts' (M = 3.78). Interviewees confirmed this adaptive bilingual behaviour:

"I use Vietnamese with family but English with teachers—it depends on the situation."

For Productive Change, vocabulary expansion in both languages scored highest (M = 3.82): 'I find that learning English has expanded my vocabulary in both English and Vietnamese.' This aligns with Gao's (2001) 1+1>2 model, where bilingual proficiency generates cross-linguistic gains. Qualitative data reinforced this:

"I think more about grammar and structure now, not just in English but in Vietnamese too."

Split Change was most evident in emotional expression difficulties: 'When I use English, I feel I cannot express my emotions as fully as when I use Vietnamese' (M = 3.77). This finding reflects the affective asymmetry common among intermediate L2 learners, who have not yet developed the full pragmatic range of the target language. Subtractive Change items were all below 2.5, indicating that students did not feel their Vietnamese customs or language were being supplanted by English. These results align with Gao *et al.* (2005)^[8], Azmi *et al.* (2021)^[2], and Saida (2021)^[16], all of whom found that English learning generates predominantly additive and productive identity outcomes. The minimal subtractive change observed is particularly significant for Vietnam, where concerns about cultural erosion under globalization are prevalent.

4.2. Gender Differences in Self-Identity Change (RQ2)

Levene's Test revealed that equal variance was met for Self-confidence Change (p = .899), Productive Change (p = .196), and Zero Change (p = .846); One-Way ANOVA was applied to these factors. Homogeneity was violated for Split Change (p = .010), Subtractive Change (p = .007), and Additive Change (p = .036); Welch's ANOVA was used accordingly (Table 3).

Table 3: ANOVA and Welch's Test Results by Gender

Factor	Test Used	p-value	Significance
Self-confidence Change	One-Way ANOVA	.983	Not significant
Productive Change	One-Way ANOVA	.093	Marginal trend
Zero Change	One-Way ANOVA	.871	Not significant
Split Change	Welch's ANOVA	.380	Not significant
Additive Change	Welch's ANOVA	.235	Not significant
Subtractive Change	Welch's ANOVA	.000	Significant***

The only statistically significant gender difference was found in Subtractive Change (p = .000), indicating that male and female students experience identity loss differently. Female students appear more susceptible to—or more reflective about—subtractive shifts, potentially replacing some L1 cultural norms with L2 cultural frameworks. This aligns with Gao *et al.*'s (2005) finding that female students undergo greater identity transformation overall, which may be attributed to their higher linguistic sensitivity and cultural adaptability.

Productive Change approached marginal significance (p = .093), suggesting a tentative trend worth examining with larger samples. All other factors—self-confidence, additive, split, and zero change—showed no significant gender differences, implying that both male and female vocational students broadly share similar experiences of confidence growth, bilingual identity balance, and cultural conflict.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that English learning generates meaningful self-identity changes among Vietnamese EFL vocational students, with additive, productive, and self-confidence changes being most prominent. Crucially, subtractive change remained low, indicating that learners can engage with English and Western cultural influences without significantly compromising their Vietnamese identity. These findings hold particular relevance for language educators and curriculum designers in Vietnamese vocational contexts, where balancing global communicative competence with cultural preservation is a key pedagogical challenge.

Gender emerged as a significant variable only in subtractive change, with female students showing greater susceptibility to identity adjustment. Future research should investigate the long-term trajectories of these identity changes, examine the role of major and starting

age as additional moderating variables, and extend this framework to other vocational institutions across Vietnam. More broadly, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on language and identity by confirming that bilingual identity development in non-Western, vocational educational settings tends toward additive and productive outcomes—challenging deficit narratives that frame English learning as a threat to native cultural identity.

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