

# From Narration to Collective Performance Onstage: An Exploratory Study of Algerian EFL Students' multiple Identity

## Case of EFL Students, Bejaia University of Algeria

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**Abstract:** How does theatrical performance allow EFL students in Algeria to develop their identities? What type of identity do they negotiate onstage collectively? Does imagination onstage have a role in shaping EFL students' identities? This study addresses the above questions in the Algerian University setting. Many educational institutions in Western countries make use of interactive theatre in language classrooms to enhance the learning processes. However, little attention is given to theatre in the Algerian ones. This research study tackles the aspect of interactive theatre as an innovative method to be integrated in the teaching of English in Algeria. It aims at enhancing collective work among the students, and encouraging them to use their cognitive processes mainly imagination. Furthermore, it aims at finding out whether interactive theatre enables students to act out multiple identities within an imagined community of actors. Following the interpretive paradigm, three qualitative research methods are adopted in this paper. This includes participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and theatrical scripts analysis. A pilot study was conducted prior to the main data collection of this project. Three EFL students at the University of Bejaia took part in the pilot work. This step allowed me to confirm the feasibility of this study, to refine some of the research questions being addressed, and to go further in collecting data. The study's initial findings will be presented and further discussed in this paper.

**Key words:** Interactive theatre, identity, cognitive processes, imagined community.

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## 1. Introduction

English as a foreign language (EFL) becomes an essential learning component in the Algerian educational reforms. All Algerian students learn English from middle school to the final stage of secondary education, known as the 'baccalaureate exam'. Whilst, it becomes a specialty that requires other five years of learning at the university level for students, who choose it as their higher education field, after succeeding in their baccalaureate examination. However, many EFL students join their university education with a weak level in the four language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing). The issue then is to help them improve these skills throughout their five years of learning at the university, which are split into Bachelors and Masters degrees. Another issue is the methods and approaches that EFL teachers adopt to probe this aim. In effect, most of the methods are either traditional (teacher-centred) or learner-centred, but they lack innovation especially in teaching writing skill.

My concern in this paper is linked to exploring EFL cognitive processes, identities, and innovative methods in teaching writing to the students. My choice of this subject mostly came because of my previous experience as an EFL student in Algeria, and as an EFL teacher-trainee in both middle and secondary school education. My observation, which is a general perception that all Algerian EFL teachers share towards how writing is taught, finds that a strong focus is put upon teaching the academic side of writing. However, creating a new writing course where students can practice their narrative, reflective and imaginative skills; in addition, to practicing the grammatical aspects of English is not considered. Therefore, this research takes EFL Masters students at the University of Bejaia as a case study.

Participants in this study master many languages such as Berber, Arabic, French, Spanish and are developing their uses of English. This capacity of linguistic usage may give the learners with a vast imagination and rich repertoire of life stories, and experiences they lived in relation to their multilingual context. More importantly, this multilingual ability draws attention towards the pluralism of identity. For instance, they are not only students in an EFL class, but also sons, daughters, friends, teachers, and some might be husbands and wives. All these different roles involve the use of various languages, and identities that can be articulated in reflective writing and developed to more imaginative ones within the students' theatrical thinking. Therefore, providing these learners with the opportunity to write about those reflective experiences, and creating an innovative learning atmosphere such as transforming a simple life story narrated in the classroom into a sketch or a short interactive play can turn the learning of writing into a motivational skill. Therefore, interactive theatre will be used in this study as an 'imagined space' (Webber, 2008) that groups together different EFL students from Masters and third year bachelor classes. This grouping is characterised by the students' investment using English. Students' real life, cultural and social experiences are brought into this theatrical classroom to be turned into what Gallagher and Ntelioglou (2011) call 'collective writing' that can be performed onstage. This study adopts a post-structuralist approach to identity and makes use of socio-cultural theory of learning to probe the aim of this research. This latter consists of understanding whether the integration of interactive theatre in Algerian EFL classrooms provides students with an imagined space to negotiate their identities.

## **2. Related Literature**

### **2.1 Autobiographical writing: from different perspectives**

Autobiographical texts have several definitions in literature, but most of them refer to individual's self and self- stories brought into writing. For instance, Gusdrof (1991) believed that in autobiographical texts the author reflects on himself as object and witness for the story he experienced. The author, as the hero or main character in his piece of writing, coincides with the 'I', which is the content or the 'what' of the discourse in the piece. Gusdrof (1991) used the notion of 'mirror' to define autobiography, where he said that "autobiography is the mirror in which the individual reflects his own image" (p. 3). He argued that in such a mirror the real self concurs with the reflective self. The 'I' in narration is divided into different types, among them two that are important in this study as they may help me to explore how EFL students' identities are articulated in their experiences. These two types are defined as follows:

#### **2.1.1 The Narrating 'I'**

The narrating 'I' refers to the author and the present time narrator who is in the action of remembering, narrating, reflecting, and interpreting his/her past events and experiences to the reader. Narrating 'I' appears in various voices that the readers hear it speaks to them directly. These voices differ according to the event that the narrating 'I' talks about. Additionally, voices in narrating 'I' are always affected by certain factors such as difference in time, emotions, education, intellectual capacities, psychological, physical, and ideological distance (Watson & Smith, 2010, p.80). Students narratives samples in this study make use of the narrating 'I', that marks their roles onstage. This gives them features of identity negotiation.

#### **2.1.2 The Narrated 'I'**

The second one is the narrated 'I' who is different from narrating 'I' as it characterizes the past character (protagonist) that the reader meets while reading past events in the authors' life. Both Narrated and narrating 'I' are important in this study as they allow me to explore the identities developed in both writing and performance.

## **2.2 Theatre, Identity, and English Language Learning**

Implementing collective and interactive drama activities in language classrooms may help students to turn their narrative pieces they produce into scripts that can be performed to an audience interactively. These scripts can report social events that were not lived in real-life but brought into the classroom through imagination (Donelan, 2002). Schweitzer (2007, p.23) created a 'reminiscence theatre' to discover whether old people could remember events they experienced in their past. Schweitzer conducted sessions of observation for a group of old women in Greenwich. Her results demonstrated that these elderly ladies could tell lots of stories from their memories. Even, they could not just tell the stories, but they were also using their bodies to play those events, as if they are happening in the present time. That is gestures and emotional behaviour is central to theatrical performance. The conclusion is that the stories recalled by these old women can be transformed into playable scripts that can be performed in theatre (Schweitzer 2007, p :24). Indeed, narration might be an important aspect of the human brain that can be transformed from life to art (Hardy, 1977, p. 4).

Furthermore, recognizing the self or our identity, and knowing ‘who we are’ is an extreme need in psychology. This need to develop an identity can be realised through autobiography (Somers, 2008). As Somers notes, autobiographical texts lead into three basic dimensions: organising recent experiences into a set of memories; being able to forecast future events; making the most of others’ different experiences. These dimensions are elements of the world we need to experience. He explains that the first dimension promotes identity construction thanks to our memory which plays a role in telling our life stories, and the recognition of ‘who we are’. The second dimension grant us hope, expectation, and organization of our actions. However, the last dimension serves as a source for our formal learning and education (Somers, 2008). Telling our experiences is considered a ‘signifier’ for identity construction (Novitz, 1997). This perspective meets what Zatzman (2003) noted on theatre:

*“Drama educates through reflection, helping young people to retell, reshape, reinscribe, as they figure out who they are in the world. And our narratives, these acts of retrieval, can find theatrical form in the writing of monologues, which translate as central acts of memorial and reciprocity.”* (Zatzma, 2003, p. 36).

### 2.3 Post-structuralist View of Identity

Norton (2010, p. 241) states that identity refers to “how a person understands her relationship to the world, and how that relationship is constructed over time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future”. The concept ‘imagined communities’ allows us to understand learning in both its temporal and spatial dimensions (Norton, 2010). In other words, it relates the learners’ image of the future to their present actions and identities. These identities explore the creativity, hope, and desire to their formation (Norton, 2010). Unlike humanists who argued that a person has a unique and fixed core, poststructuralists consider individuals as being diverse, contradictory, dynamic, and changing over historical time and social space (Norton, 2010). Furthermore, poststructuralist theorists focus on the idea that identities are not only given by social structures but are also negotiated by agents who wish to position themselves (Norton, 2010). This is reflected in my research as I will argue that if the participants write about their life experiences and their desire to impose their voices as narrators in English, they will gain self-empowerment in the target language and develop their identities. Norton (2010, p. 241) defines ‘power’ as “the socially constructed relations among individuals, institutions, and communities through which symbolic and material resources in a society are produced, distributed, and validated”. Thus, in writing autobiographies, students will develop the desire to access the resources of English (power relations) used in their narration to gain self-empowerment in the community of English narrators.

Furthermore, Hunt (1999) encouraged her students to use their experience as a starting point for writing fiction. She also used the first-person narrator in the writing of her first autobiographical-based novel. Moreover, Grabe and Kalan (2014) explored the concept of writer identity in academic essays by emphasizing the first personal pronoun ‘I’ and they proposed a range of fictional writing tasks to understand the students’ power and their emergent identities. Yang (2012, p. 304) has stated that the notion of multiplicity does not only characterize identity, as claimed by poststructuralists, but also entails continuity of meanings through narration.

Furthermore, Kegan (1994) argues that each person experiences his/her world from a unique perspective, and to make sense of their subjective worlds, individuals must actively organize their experiences using guiding principles that allow them to construct meaning from their experiences. Thus, I believe that students can develop their multiple identities through self-narration of their personal life stories.

## **2.4 The Socio-Cultural Perspective**

Socio-cultural theorists claim that individuals' cognitive processes are fostered and their identities can be developed when the cultural and social context are brought into learning. This theory has many sub approaches. For instance, situated social practices is the most predominate one that I have adopted in this study. By situated leaning I refer to Sayers (2012) socio-cultural perspectives and techniques. For Sawyer (2012) students are creative and this creativity which is at first sight personal can be developed in the group where cultural and social experiences are treated. Sawyers calls this individual contribution 'collaborative emergence' because it emerges in collective work. Similarly, participants in this study move from the process of narration to performance. They start by creating a piece of autobiographical text that reflects their personal experiences in the social environment, and then they collectively turn these samples into theatrical plays. Therefore, students use their own cognitive and imaginative competences and then contribute in the social practice by sharing, discussing, reflecting, and revealing their voice in the group. This group work may allow them to negotiate several identity facets that they did not have the chance to articulate in individual learning, but in social-constructivism way of leaning (Jaramillo, 1996).

## **3. Research Design and Methods**

### **3.1 Participants**

I have adopted purposive sampling to recruit 23 students from the Department of English at Bejaia University, and I provided them with information sheets and consent form to engage them voluntarily in this study (I gave more detail on ethics below). These participants consisted of 20 females and Three males from Masters and third year Bachelor level. Their ages were between 19 and 32 years old.

The reason I used purposive sampling refers to some criteria that participants in this study need to meet. These features include: being a Masters student at the Department of English; being a former teacher trainee. This may help me work with participants who already reached an average level in writing, and can narrate essays in English. These participants are also flavored with their mixed ethnicity and cultural background, and I have already explained in the introduction. In other words, being Berber or Arab and multilingual. This may enhance their imagination.

### **3.2 Materials**

#### **3.2.1 Pilot Study**

Prior to data collection for this project, I have run one-week pilot study with three EFL students at Bejaia University. These students, who consisted of two females and one male, did not take part in the main data collection process. The pilot work included one session of free writing and theatrical performance. The students were gathered in the library and, they were involved in a writing task where they were required to narrate an essay about a personal experience they

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encountered in the external world. Later, I asked them to design a dialogue from one of the essays they wrote and perform collectively. This activity lasted for two hours, and it was followed by a 30 minutes semi-structured interview with the five participants. This pilot process helped me to refine my research questions and test the feasibility of the whole project.

### 3.2.2 Data Collection Procedures

I have conducted a two months exploratory module at Bejaia University. 23 EFL students from Masters and third year Bachelor level took part in it. This module went through the process of writing life experiences and performing them onstage collectively. The module comprised 10 sessions and each one lasted approximately for two hours. Many topics were tackled by the participants in their narratives such as religion, university experiences, social problems encountered in the Algerian society. These narratives were turned through group and peer work into theatrical scripts and performed onstage. I have collected the students' theatrical scripts for analysis (more details are given below).

I conducted semi-structured interviews after the course to investigate the participants' thoughts, feelings and perception concerning what they have developed in this exploratory course, mainly the notion of 'multiple identity'. In other words, these interviews allowed me to gather more data on the identities being negotiated in both narration and performance.

Ultimately, I kept an eye on the students' performance, interaction, and behavior during the exploratory module, and by using participant observation techniques. This allowed me to keep field notes on any development or issue raising in the classroom. This method underpinned the interview schedule in terms of delving into students' thinking in class through observation and interaction.

### 3.2.3 Initial Qualitative analysis and results

To interpret the primary data, five semi-structured interviews done with the participants, who took part in this study, were analyzed qualitatively. Also, three theatrical scripts were selected for analysis. The reason behind focusing on five is to come up with initial findings that relate to this project. These scripts resulted from the students' autobiographical stories and life experiences that they gave these titles: 'What about Islam', 'Cultural differences', 'Oh mama'.

I adopted thematic analysis approach to analyses the data. In this, I based the analysis process on Thomas and Harden (2008) strategy of thematic analysis that they named 'thematic synthesis'. The rationale behind using this technique is that it allows line-by-line coding instead of isolated words when dealing with people's experiences. It also follows a descriptive step towards coming up with the theme, organizing the descriptive pattern into a more general theme, and finally finding the 'analytical theme'. Thus, this allows the emergence of various themes that supplements the study inductively (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The examples below are extracts from some of the theatrical scripts and the semi-structured interviews used in this study, where a line-by-line coding was applied manually:

Example (1): (from one of the scripts)

Daughter: Mom, look at that woman! She is wearing a veil inside her house.

Mum: Please don't speak about veil. I don't like such things. I know Hijab existed years ago, but I don't want to wear it...

Daughter: Com on mum! Allah gave us Hijab to protect us and to be close to him and it is our duty in Islam.

Mum: You are not going to change my mind and don't forget that I am the mother and YOU are the daughter...

Example (2): (from the interviews)

**Q (1):** “How does acting your real-life experiences onstage affect your character? Do you feel there is a change in yourself?”

**A:** “**I feel responsible** at home when my mum works so I cook and I take care of my sisters though I am in the middle among my sisters so I can say that I am like a **second wife** because I am doing my **mum’s role**. While outside I am **responsible** ethically, I feel **responsible** towards giving others my real image. **acting** and showing this experience to others gave me confidence to tell others **what I am** and about how I am **suffering** at home....”

**B:** “it let me make my experience concert to others. And **I could** even perform with **my veil** which did not cause any problem for me on stage. I felt **my veil** completes myself **who I am**. What I am wearing now is **who I am** it is **my dignity** which I used while acting without problems... **I could** even talk about **Quran** in English and play **my dream** to become a **famous reciter of Quran...**”

**C:** “...in our society there is a big **difference** between **males** and **females**. For example, **men are free** to do whatever they want.... **soI tried to reflect** on what I see in society while playing to show to the world **what is inside me** .....I could share my thoughts with others. It helped me a lot to **developcharacters in myself** that I don’t behave in real life....”

The sentences highlighted in blue represents the line-by-line codes classified in the table below:

Figure (1): Synthesis thematic coding

Line-by-line coding	Primary theme	Themes organized	Analytical Theme
She is wearing a veil inside her house.  Don't speak about veil.  Common... It's our duty in Islam'  Don't forget that I am the mother and you are the daughter...	Daughter strong Islamic beliefs.  Mother criticizing her daughter's view  Daughter using critical thoughts and reflective thinking.  Mother is showing her personal voice. Mothers' self-empowerment against her daughters' religious belief	Different religious understanding  Critical-thinking  Power in revealing personal voice	Developing a religious identity onstage through multiple cognitive perspectives
My dream to be a famous reciter of Quran. I could even perform with my veil. What I am wearing now is who I am and my dignity. I could act without any problems....	Acting onstage with the veil.  Feeling Proud when acting with the veil.	Religious satisfaction on stage  Expressing the 'who I am' through the veil.	
There is a big difference between males and females Men are free to do whatever they want It helped me to develop characters in myself I tried to reflect on what's happening in society in (terms of differences between males and females)  I feel responsible at home I can say I am a second wife at home Acting gave me confidence to tell others what I am and what I am suffering at home	Desire to become like males in society Hidden gender Feelings of sufferance at home as females Feelings of social restrictions against females	Revealing a gender voice on stage	Gender empowerment in theatrical performance

### 3.3 Discussion

### 3.3.1 Developing religious identity onstage through multiple cognitive perspectives

As far as the table above demonstrates, some of the participants who acted their real-life stories onstage developed a religious voice intersected with critical thinking and reflective abilities. The use of 'I'- clauses such as 'I am the mother', and the use of high intonation when they expressed their thoughts on stage might be defined as a 'performative voice' or identity negotiation. However, most of those stories being performed focused on different religious struggles in society such as the discussion between the mother and her daughter, where the latter was trying to convince her mother to put on the veil. Whereas others used the stage as an imagined space for religious satisfaction as it is illustrated above (I could act with the veil). Therefore, the stage was a space where these participants could play various roles reflecting on religious dimensions and then performing religious identities via collective interaction, thinking, reflective learning and power. This can coincide with post-structuralist views on identity. In other words, identity is multiple and fluid (Norton, 2010). In the other plays, the same participants performed other roles and new experiences, which also revealed other identity facets.

### 3.3.2 Gender empowerment

As it is illustrated in the above table, the participants in this study used theater to express their desires to become like males or vice versa. Most of the students in this research were females. This is due to some limitations in this study. Therefore, females' performance is mostly predominant. Performing men's roles onstage was a desire that emerged from lack of freedom and some social restriction in the context where this study was done. Thus, females in this study preferred to play males' roles onstage to satisfy an internal desire of doing what men do in real life. They showed their self-positioning in the imagined community. This is parallel to Brewer's standpoint of gender performances in theatre. Brewer (1999) states that theatre is one of the techniques that females used historically to negotiate their problems and empower themselves in different spaces where they have been rejected. They used theatre as way to make themselves known and heard in their society, and raise awareness against females' marginalization, Brewer noted "Women's theatre has proven to be one of the most social forms of women's cultural production; performances have often worked as a form of group consciousness." (Brewer, 1999, p. 3). Thus, this study allowed EFL participants mainly females to gain a gender voice on stage.

## 4. Conclusion

This study aims at exploring Algerian EFL students' multiple identities and the role of cognitive skills in shaping those identities onstage. Three qualitative procedures were used: semi-structured interviews, participants observation, and theatrical scripts analysis. A synthesis thematic coding was applied to five interviews and three scripts written by the participants. The initial themes emerging from the thematic coding showed that the implementation of interactive theatre in EFL classrooms allowed the students to negotiate multiple religious voices or 'identities' onstage, and to impose their gender voice through performing males/females' roles reflecting on each ones' experiences in the Algerian society. The cognitive processes that were interfering with these emergent voices are mostly critical thinking, imagination, and reflection. The analysis of this study will be more extended for further research.

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