

Virtual Identity Construction Among Iranian EFL Learners: A Grounded Theory

Somayeh Hosseinzadeh^{1,*} - Seyyed Mohammad Reza Adel²- Gholamreza Zareian³

¹ M.A. TEFL Student, English Department, Hakim Sabzevari University

² Assistant Professor, English Department, Hakim Sabzevari University

³ Assistant Professor, English Department, Hakim Sabzevari University

ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this study was to investigate how virtual identity is constructed and projected through learning English among Iranian learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) while interacting in the virtual space. In other words, this study intended to use an inductive exploratory approach to gain an influential explanation of the effective factors on EFL learners' virtual identity construction. [1] and [2] Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) was applied in this work and sixteen EFL learners (8 high school learners and 8 university students) were interviewed. The recorded interviews were transcribed and the data were subsequently coded and analyzed using the MAXQDA software. Data analysis using GTM yielded six categories: learning English context, learning English obligations, learning English facilities, affective conditions, synchronous learning, virtual zone privacy. These sub-categories resulted in a core category of EFL learners' virtual identity construction. The results were discussed in the context of EFL teaching and some pedagogical implications were also proposed.

Keywords: Identity, virtual identity, EFL learners, grounded theory methodology, virtual space

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite the recent studies on virtual world and EFL learning (e.g. Abbattista et al., 2009; de Jong Derrington, 2013; Abdullah, 2014; & Issa, 2016), little is known about the role of English learning in EFL learners' virtual identity construction. Most of the existing literature on these subjects has been focused on quantitative methods (Mwakapina, Mhandeni, & Nyinondi, 2016), using phenomenography (Nascimento & Melnyk, 2016) and/or an ethnographic research in studying EFL learning and identity construction (Abdullah, 2014). Nonetheless, it sounds that qualitative methods (such as grounded theory) can provide new and valuable visions into the experience of EFL learners' English learning in the virtual space and afterward their virtual identity construction.

The central research question is: How is virtual identity constructed through English language use in social interaction in the virtual space? This question is answered on a number of levels that are presented in the analysis chapter, but to understand what enables and supports virtual identity construction among EFL learners, and due to a lack of prior research into this context, Grounded Theory was employed. Because virtual identity in academic studies is described as "an incipient, yet burgeoning field" (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 244) and is constructed through the feeling of belonging to a virtual group, communicating with the help of slang, and acquiring technical knowledge (Thomas, 2000), investigating the process of its construction with the holistic view provided by Grounded Theory enables the capturing of the influence of many situational variables involved. Although this approach for studying the identity work has been argued for by others as well (e.g., Iman & Boostani, 2010), virtual identity construction and collaboration within the English learning in the virtual space has not been previously studied; it, therefore, justified an exploratory approach.

This grounded theory study intends to use an inductive approach to gain an in-depth exploration of the main factors influencing the EFL learners' virtual identity construction. So, it is guided by the following research questions:

1. How is the virtual identity of senior high school and university EFL learners constructed by learning English in the virtual space as a means of communication and sharing knowledge?
2. What are the significant factors that may influence EFL learners' virtual identity construction?

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.2. Identity

Norton (2000) defines identity as “how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how that person understands possibilities for the future” (p. 5), while Johnson (2003) argues it as “relational, constructed and altered by how I see others and how they see me in our shared experiences and negotiated interactions” (p. 788). As it is seen, identity is a dynamic construct negotiated by individuals in a social setting rather than a state attained or reached.

For Bakhtin, a word is a world. He declares that ‘an individual’s becoming, an ideological process, is characterized precisely by a sharp gap between. . . The authoritative word (religious, political, moral; the word of a father, of adults and of teachers, etc.) that does not know internal persuasiveness, and. . . The internally persuasive word that is denied all privileges, backed up by no authority at all and is frequently not even acknowledge in society’ (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 342). Unlike dialogic language, ‘the authoritative word or discourse is monologic, distant from context, unanswerable, and embodies different sources of authority (tradition, generally accepted truths, official lines).

Moreover, according to Richards (2006, cited in Wardhaugh, 2012), “identity is something that is formed and shaped through action”, and demonstrated through performance and action. Identity is formed from interaction with others and is the outcome of our being socialized, i.e., our experiences with the outside world as we have dealt with that world in all its complexity. Consequently, a lot of factors influence it: race, ethnicity, gender, religion, occupation, physical location, social class, kinship, leisure activities, etc. Identity is constructed in dealing with such factors and in dealing with members of groups for whom these factors are among their identifying characteristics. An identity may also change because identities can sometimes be quite malleable as the circumstances of our lives change. “Language is a profound indicator of identity, more potent by far than cultural artifacts such as dress, food choices, and table manners” (Wardhaugh, 2012, p. 7). “In other words, a cultural identity is shared by the same group of people who feel comfortable and secure around each other” (Kim, 2012).

Erikson, who was the first scholar who drew attention to the notion of identity (Kroger, 2006), viewed adolescence as the period when individuals have to accomplish the task of constructing an identity of the self or the ego identity. Creation of an ego identity represents the integration of existing accumulated experience, skills, talents, and opportunities offered by various social roles into one compact and complex identity of the individual. For Erikson, the issues of vocational decision making, ideological values, and sexual identity were the basis of ego identity (Erikson & Stone, 1959; Erikson, 1968). Erikson argued that adolescents are in a period of psychosocial moratorium, during which time they can explore alternative roles and identities. Those who do so are more likely to be satisfied with their identities, and adolescents’ reflections about themselves, their characteristics, and social position help them explore and construct their identity (Nurmi, 2004).

Erikson’s (1968) theory about identity was subsequently elaborated by Marcia, who viewed identity as a process and developed an approach to measure an adolescent’s identity status at any given point (Marcia, 1966, 1976). For Marcia, the concepts of exploration and commitment were key to identifying where an adolescent was in his or her identity development.

Identity is a multi-dimensional construct and scholars have distinguished between different aspects of identity, such as personal, social, gender, ethnic and, more recently, virtual identity.

2.3. Virtual Identity

Internet communications worldwide have created new spaces for social life, these spaces being qualified as ‘virtual’. The notions of person, place and time are contrasted from those in reality and identity is emancipatory, as Benwell and Stokoe claim:

In cyberspace (virtual space), space, time and identity it would seem are no impediments for doing whatever we want to do, or being whomever we wish to be. Identity on the internet is playful, creative, impressive and limitless, and (so popular discourse would have it) an entirely different proposition from identity in the real world (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006, p. 243).

The virtual world offers its millions of users a fertile environment in which to socialize and engage in digital communication, immersed in a world where it seems like anything is possible and imagination is the

only

limit. The acquisition of a virtual identity involves various linguistic acts. Users must familiarize themselves with the creative vocabulary of a virtual world in order to reflect in-group identity.

According to Thomas (2000), virtual identities are constructed through the feeling of belonging to a virtual group, communicating with the help of slang, and acquiring technical knowledge. Skills, such as the ability to use certain software, control a chat room, or search for new software, is becoming an integral part of self-evaluation; these digital skills are valued highly and “belong” to the adolescent’s virtual identity. Thomas also claims that children and adolescents’ virtual identity are very flexible and changes in accordance with current cultural icons (fashion and music trends, etc.), which may consequently help them to test various self-images.

Virtual identity construction also includes virtual self-presentation, which includes the different ways by which users present themselves to other virtual users. Keep in mind that in less anonymous but more private contexts, such as social networking sites, such information may be more readily available. But in more anonymous online contexts, such as chat rooms and bulletin boards, even basic information such as gender, age, physical appearance, physical attractiveness, and race may not be readily available (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Subrahmanyam, Garcia, Harsono, & Lipana, 2009; Suler, 2012).

Students are facing the new challenges of the 21st century induced by globalization, information explosion and international competition (Cheng, Chow & Mok, 2004). Higher order skills or so-called 21st-century skills are fundamental to the success of knowledge workers (Galarneau & Zibit, 2007). Learning goals, including cultivating critical thinking, developing generic skills, lifelong learning, seeing things in multi-perspectives, collaborating with others as well as enhancing social awareness become more important.

To make learning meaningful, students must be able to relate their knowledge to life experiences and interactions with others. Students cannot internalize their knowledge and apply it in other situations if such knowledge is acquired merely by rote-learning (Law, 2005). Moreover, Glasersfeld (1989) suggests that learning as a constructive activity. Knowledge cannot be reduced to a stock of retrievable ‘facts’ but concerns the ability to compute new results. In Piaget’s term, it is operative rather than figurative.

Virtual world provides a suitable platform for putting the above ideas to practice. The focus of learning should be on learning how to learn, think and create. The learning can be a discovering and reflect the process. The virtual environments can also help them learn deep content and higher order skills (Dede, Clark, Ketelhut, Nelson, & Bowman, 2005). It is evident that high engagement and interactions (Prensky, 2006), and individualized learning are critical for enhancing motivation, communication, a diverse range of skills and intellectual development in the educational process (Wang, 2009).

2.4. Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM)

Grounded theory methodology has been used to guide the collection and analysis of empirical data for this study. GTM is an inductive method, which means that typically only a very broad review of literature takes place before collecting the data (Gorra, 2007). However, in addition to this initial review, the literature is visited again after the data collection has been completed. This study has followed this approach with the benefit that a second review of the literature could be guided by the findings from empirical data collection procedures - pilot study and interviews. Particularly the development of the final GT categories, which was supported by written and visual memos, has prompted the review of the further literature. So, the researcher immersed himself in the process of finding suitable participants for this study, conducting interviews, coding, categorization, and data analysis.

GTM uses a form of purposive sampling, known as theoretical sampling, where participants are selected according to criteria specified by the researcher and based on initial findings. Early analysis of data indicates issues that need exploration; hence the sampling process is guided by the on-going theory development. Data collection and analysis take place in alternating sequences (see Fig. 1).

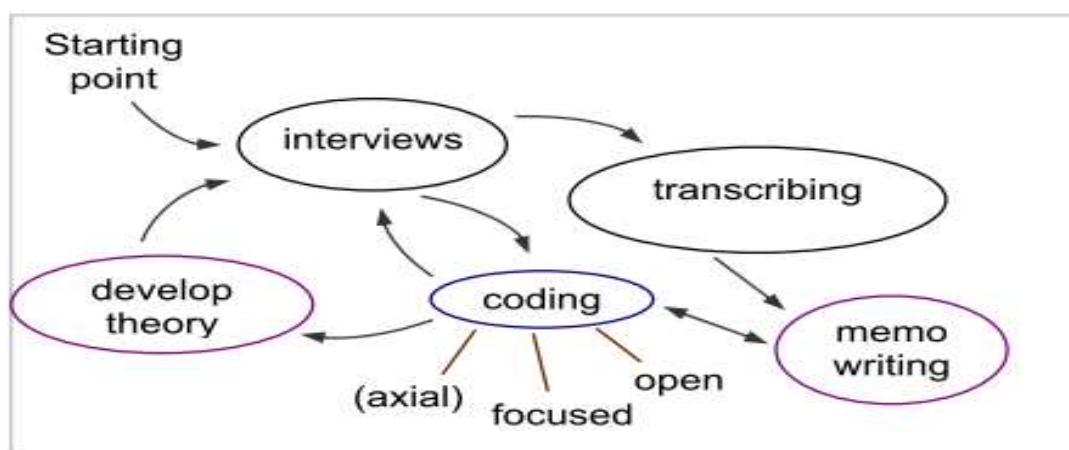


Fig. 1. Steps in developing a grounded theory

3. PREVIOUS STUDIES

Iman and Boostani (2010) on a qualitative study examined leisure as a context for identity formation among the high school students in Shiraz, Iran. Twenty diverse male students (3rd grade of secondary school) from different high schools participated in this study. To engage in dialogue with participants about their leisure activities and their consequences for their identity, Iman and Boostani used an in-depth, open-ended interview to collect the data. Data analysis using qualitative grounded theory methodology yielded eight categories and a core category. The categories led to the conclusion that post-traditional context and resource of leisure time culminated in reflexivity in the participants' identity.

Sheykholslami (2010) in his research, drew on theories that describe interrelationships between identity, language and the media to investigate how the Kurds utilize two forms of electronic media—satellite television and the Internet—to construct their identities. He generated the data for his study from four sources: a Kurdish satellite television channel (Kurdistan TV), a variety of Kurdish Internet sites, literature reflecting on the place of the new media among the Kurds, and informal interviews and personal communications with Kurdish media producers and audiences. Strategies including participant observation and online ethnography were used to select data. The study also underlined significant differences between those two forms of new media in relation to identity construction and language use. Whereas satellite television seemed to foster mutual intelligibility among the speakers of different Kurdish varieties, the Internet tends to further diversify the language across alphabet and regional lines.

Arya, Hartwick, Graham, and Nowlan (2011) addressed the issue of using virtual spaces as a learning environment. They stated that with the advances in e-Learning systems, the education community shows a growing interest in using online tools for educational purposes. The case studies presented in their paper demonstrated how a 3D Virtual Environment could be used as a learning tool by providing a virtual space. They offered a framework for language learning for English as Second Language students and a simulated archaeological excavation site for History students, in the context of Carleton Virtual, a 3D virtual environment for Carleton University. Based on the results that showed the advantages of using the virtual space as a learning environment, they argued that Virtual Space can be a new framework for learning.

Thus, this research study is done because few studies have been carried out on this topic, and more importantly, based on grounded theory methodology, yet! There is a big gap in this area, so this study aims to use an inductive approach, grounded theory, to gain an in-depth explanation of the role of learning English, specifically, in the virtual space, on EFL learners' virtual identity construction and vice versa.

Enko (2014) in a study applied grounded theory methodology to an examination of creativity and self-determination among four amateur creative writers. Applying a grounded theory approach to their interview responses, revealed a novel middle-range theory for the role of autonomy. For those respondents, autonomy was necessary, yet not by itself sufficient for their creative writing. A model of self-determination was posited with autonomy as the core category and authorship beliefs and autonomous regulation of the creative process as sub-categories. Based on Enko's model, autonomy-supportive surroundings were reported as positively influencing the development of the respondents' creative talents.

Thus, this research study is done because few studies have been carried out on this topic, and more importantly, based on grounded theory methodology, yet! There is a big gap in this area, so this study aims to use an inductive approach, grounded theory, to gain an in-depth explanation of the role of learning English, specifically, in the virtual space, on EFL learners' virtual identity construction and vice versa.

4. METHIHO

The research methodology used for this study was grounded theory, "where the emerging theory helps explain, in conceptual terms, what is going on in the substantive field of research" (Fernández & Lehnmanm , 2005, p. 2).

4.1 Participants and Setting

The sample size for this study consisted of 16 participants: 8 senior high school students consisting of 4 male and 4 female students of Talented High Schools in Esfarayen, and 8 senior university students, 4 males and 4 females who were studying English Literature at Hakim Sabzevari University (HSU). The average age of high school students was 16.25 and they were all active in the virtual space. University participants were, also, members of the social networks in the virtual space, and their mean age was 22.5.

4.2 Instruments

The study was carried out using the data collected through 16 in-depth interviews. All the interviews were audio-taped by the researcher's mobile phone. In addition, a qualitative data analysis software, MAXQDA, was used for coding and analyzing the data.

4.3 Procedures

Data was collected between March and May 2016. The steps involved in using the grounded theory method developed by Strauss and Corbin (1998) were used to guide the researcher in the collection and analysis of data. Data obtained from the individual interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and analyzed. The format for the in-depth interviews contained several questions that served as a guide for the researcher. A general overarching question acted as a catalyst to elicit the thoughts, ideas, and perceptions of the participants. Follow-up probing questions further explored and clarified the emerging concepts, categories, and relationships between the categories. Questions were adjusted throughout the interview process and became more focused as the theoretical framework developed. The initial two interviews lasted about an hour, both yielding rich information. All the interviews were conducted in Persian, the participants' and the researcher's mother tongue, then transcribed and translated into English.

Open coding began with the first interview where the researcher broke the data down into conceptual codes.

Data segments and concepts from each interview were continuously compared with one another and analyzed for similarities and differences. Categorization involved grouping similar concepts together and giving them an abstract label. Categories referred to conditions, actions/interactions, or consequences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Following categorization, the process of axial coding began where categories were examined for how they related to the subcategories. The comparative analysis phase ensured that data obtained from each interview were constantly compared until categories were saturated. Thus, the analysis of data was simultaneously occurring as data was being collected. As theoretical saturation of the categories was reached, the selective coding process began. During the selective coding process, the core category was formed. Once the central category was selected, a theoretical scheme was developed. The core category integrated the other categories with the central idea it represented.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

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Data analysis yielded seven categories: learning English context; learning English obligations; learning English facilities; affective conditions; Synchronous learning; virtual zone privacy; and EFL learners' virtual identity construction (the core category) (Fig. 2).

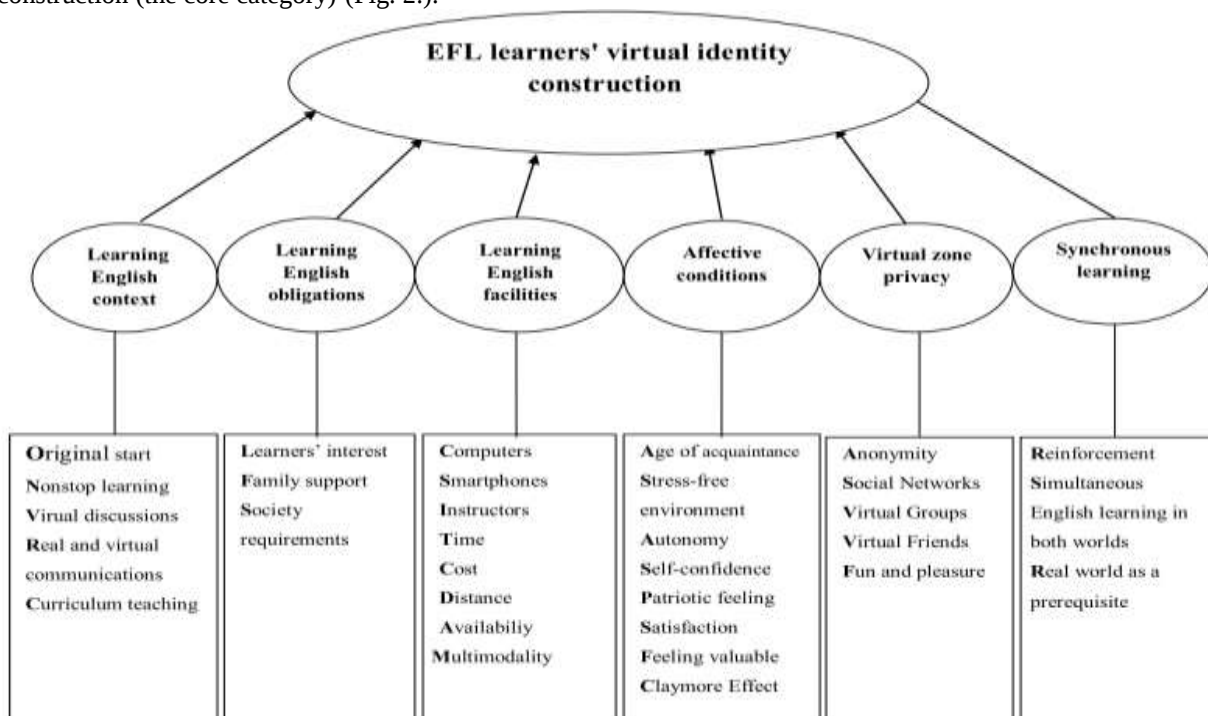


Fig. 2. A proposed model of EFL learners' virtual identity construction

Each category, including the core, was sub-divided into sub-categories whose meanings derived from the data (Fig. 2). Each category will now be presented, supported by data quotes from the interviewees who are identified by pseudonyms in order to keep their privacy. This will be followed by a cumulative discussion of the findings in relation to the prevailing literature.

5. 1. Learning English Context

The category *learning English context* points to the interviewees' first familiarity with learning English and afterward, their initial use of the virtual space for that purpose (sub-category: original start). Furthermore, it discusses the communicational and educational reasons which directed the participants to begin and keep on learning English in real-world private institutes and in the virtual space, consequently (sub-categories: *nonstop learning*, *virtual discussions*, *real and virtual communications* and, *teaching curriculum*) (Fig. 2).

Regarding their *original start*, most of the interviewees in this study spontaneously stated that they started learning English as a foreign language (EFL) at the early years of their life .

"I have started learning English since the time I was ten years old... I was a student of grade four at the elementary school." (Esmaeel)

"I started learning English when I was eight years old." (Mona)

The interviewees' remarks are in line with the widespread belief in the "critical period hypothesis"(CPH) proposed initially by Penfield and Roberts (1959), and was made widely popular by Lenneberg (1967) who wrote the *Biological Foundations of Language*.

In addition to the early age of acquaintance with English, approximately, all the EFL learners in this study declared that they started and continued learning English in private language institutes which have had a considerable influence on their foreign language learning process and consequently their virtual identity construction.

"I started learning English as a foreign language in a language institute when I went to the secondary school. I continued going to the institutes till the highest level." (Hossein)

It seems that language institutes have had a remarkable role in making the EFL learners interested in learning English more and more, and in the case of the university students in this study, it motivated them to study English academically as their university major. This finding confirms Kim's exploration (2011) who

found

that the experience in sticking to private institutes had a significant impact on the students' motivation. He explored that the learners who attended private institutes showed higher levels of instrumental and intrinsic motivation. This is more evidently seen in the university students' comments.

"I studied English there and got interested in learning this international language more and more."
(Yaser)

"I continued learning English in English language institutes till the last year of my senior high school... during those years, I got interested in English more and more and even I passed my TOEFL degree successfully." (Marzi)

Together with above-mentioned interviewees' statements, "nonstop learning English" in real world situations and further in the virtual environment has been stressed, too, by almost all other participants in this study.

"I registered in a language institute and continued learning English up to the last year of my senior high school... and more importantly, after that, I have been using English in the virtual space regularly."
(Lili)

It can be concluded that the virtual space is an English context available for all EFL learners to communicate through this world with lots of English speakers and EFL learners around the globe.

"... When we as EFL learners do not have an English real life situation around us, virtual space is the best choice for having a quasi-real English atmosphere." (Sahar)

Furthermore, the participants declared that they have had some virtual discussions, following their real English classes, which have been influential on their English learning and identity construction. All these utterances are in line with Arya et al., (2011), who addressed the issue of using virtual spaces as a learning environment.

5.2. Learning English Obligations

The covering term *learning English obligation* was used as an umbrella for the requisites which steered the participants to start and continue learning English in real-world private institutes and therefore, in the virtual space. This category includes the sub-categories: *learners' interest*, *family support* and, *society requirements* (Fig. 2).

Regarding the requirements for learning English in the real world in general, and in the virtual space specifically, the participants noted that they have learned English in both worlds fondly and described it as an "interesting experience".

"I studied English there and got interested in learning this international language more and more."
(Yaser)

"Communicating with English speakers in the virtual space was a really interesting experience."
(Mona)

The EFL learners in this study have been self-motivated to learn and use the English language regularly in the real and virtual environments, which confirms the importance of motivation and interest in language learning territory (Dörnyei, 1994).

Besides being interested in learning English, the interviewees emphasized the role of their family support in their acquaintance with English and the virtual space afterward. This is in line with Clarke (2009) who illustrated that powerful partnerships with parents are absolutely necessary if children learn English as a second/foreign language are to have positive outcomes in the early childhood setting. Quotations below stand as some evidence indicating the role of the *family* in this field.

"Following my family's advice, I registered in a language institute and started learning English more seriously." (Naser)

"When I was younger, My older brother worked with his computer and I got acquainted beside him with the virtual world a little." (Mitra)

On this subject, according to what have been declared by the participants in this study, the *society requirements* play an important role in their purpose of English learning and at later stages in their virtual identity construction. All these remarks are in tune with Jambor (2011) who denoted that learning English has become a necessity for people in all aspects of life.

"Nowadays knowing English is a necessity and it empowers our characters." (Erfan)

"In general, learning English is a necessity." (Yaser)

However, referring some statements like “By being equipped with English language as an international language, I benefit a high social prestige among the society.” by the interviewees, it can be inferred that by learning and knowing “English as a lingua Franca” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 157), the EFL learners experience a tremendous increase in prestige. Concurring this idea, Phyak (2016) explained that the English language which has been supplemented by its growing role as a global lingua Franca around the world serves as a sign of upraised social prestige.

5.3. Learning English Facilities

The category *learning English facilities* is a representative term for the facilities which paved the way for the interviewees’ English learning in the virtual space (sub-categories: *computers*, *smartphones* and, *instructors*) and, regards the sub-categories: *time*, *cost*, *distance*, *availability* and, *multimodality* (Fig.2) as the main features of the virtual space which real-world English classes suffer from.

The increasing development of technology, especially in the area of communications, has led to a better understanding of the virtual world which has been widely used among the people (Rice, Haynes, Royce, & Thompson, 2016). Impressive progress of the *smartphones* as the most common tools of communication these days and ,earlier, different types of *laptops and computers* facilitated the multimodal communication all over the world. In the realm of English learning, these instruments have been really effective (Warschauer & Healey, 1998; Chinnery, 2006; and, Stickler & Shi, 2016).

The influential role of the computers and smartphones in EFL learners’ familiarity with the virtual space and learning English there, has been highlighted by the participants over and over in this study.

“ I think about it was two or three years ago... At the age of fourteen. At that time, I could work with computers and the internet..” (Sahar)

“ When I was in the fourth grade of elementary school, I installed the first computer game on my computer. I found that knowing English is necessary.” (Sobhan)

As a result, it can be said that the smartphones can prepare opportunities for learners to be in touch with both the English knowledge and the instructors, because it is the most popular and available device for communication (Lee & Kim, 2016).

Alongside family, computers, and smartphones, *English instructors* play a crucial role in the students’ English language development (Zheng & Zhou, 2014) and living in the virtual space (Yeh & Wan, 2016). The interviewees in this study emphasized on this fact by expressing some utterances like what Yasin said:

"At school, unfortunately, my English teacher was not good enough at teaching English and preferred to learn English in a private language learning institute. It was a really important decision because it made my future to a great extent, I think. It increased my self-confidence and sense of value."

Approximately all of the EFL learners in this study pointed to ' being *economical*' as one of the most significant attributes of the virtual space.They believed that the English learning in the virtual space can save money, energy and time. For example, Esmaeel complaining about the *cost* and *time* limitation of the English classes in the real world, stated that:

" The real world English classes, unfortunately, are held in a limited time They are not so cheap that every learner can afford."

In the case of language learning in real world classes Lili added:

"There is no time boundary in using the virtual space, you can have access to what you want and need without spending too much time and money. It also makes sharing the information more easily."

In this line, among the reasons stated by the participants which led to their familiarity with the virtual space, in addition to being expensive and time specified English classes, the distance between the place they used to live (e.g., the dormitory for university students) and the private institutes, was mentioned as another problem attached to the real world English classes. For example, Marzi indicated her complaints in this way:

" I was going to an English language institute for learning advanced conversation. Actually, it was an expensive class for me and also, I could take part in that class with difficulty because it was held in the evening and far from the dormitory in fact..."

and, Azam uttered:

"... when I was living in the dormitory, it was hard for me to go to the institute because of the long distance so, I resorted to the virtual space."

As a deduction, turning to the virtual space to learn English as a solution for overcoming the distance problem, perceived in the interviewees’ opinions, confirms the suitability of the virtual space for distance education (Holmberg & Huvila, 2008).

Another feature of the virtual space that uttered as the most significant one by almost all of the EFL learners in this study, is its availability. In other words, in their idea, anyone can use the virtual space simply by having access to the internet any time (Abdullah, 2014). For instance, Hossein, stated that:

"Among the main differences between the virtual environment and the real world, regarding learning English, I can point to the virtual space availability everywhere and whenever we need."

One of the other distinctions between the real world and virtual space in terms of English learning is the *multimodality* of the virtual space which offers plenty of facilities simultaneously to EFL learners (Domingo; Michelson & Valencia; and, Tan, O'Halloran, & Wignell, 2016).

"By the lens of the virtual space, we have easy access to the world of science, including the best online dictionaries and helpful applications and Softwares for English learning. We can search our needs and requests in English and communicate with English speakers all over the world" (Mina)

5. 4. Affective Conditions

The category *affective conditions* in this study cover the following sub-categories: *age of acquaintance*, *stress-free environment*, *autonomy*, *self-confidence*, *patriotic feeling*, *satisfaction*, *feeling valuable*, *claymore effect* (Fig. 2). This category, in general, refers to some psychological barriers in real-world English classes which have been removed to some extent in the virtual learning space and, meanwhile it pays attention to the effects of learning English in both real and virtual worlds on the participants' personality.

It was revealed that the familiarity of almost all of the high school students with the virtual world dates back to the mean age of fourteen when they were some secondary high school students.

"I have been using the virtual space from two years ago when I was 13 years old." (Reza)

"... But my independent familiarity with the virtual space dates back to two years ago when I was 14." (Mitra)

However, most of the university students asserted that they have become acquainted with the virtual space more seriously, since the first year of studying in the university:

"Actually, from the time using the smartphones became common among the people, it was my first year of college, I have used the virtual space more seriously." (Azam)

"More seriously, I became familiar with the virtual world in the first year of studying in the university." (Naser)

With attention to the above-mentioned statement by Naser, one of the interviewees, and some other participants, it can be concluded that the virtual space is, to a great extent, free from psychological barriers. It means that, in the case of language learning, EFL learners may potentially suffer from some sort of anxiety, stress or be afraid of making mistakes in English classes while these impediments have been diminished to a great extent in the virtual learning space. The other interviewees remarked as well:

"In the classroom, because of stress and anxiety, I cannot show my abilities well but, in the virtual space I feel free and there is no fear of making mistakes." (Marzi)

The participants, also, believed that the virtual space is a useful for introverted learners:

"I think the virtual space is a good opportunity for introverted learners which cannot communicate with others easily in real world situations. The virtual space gives them the chance of sharing their thoughts and feelings without any stress, anxiety, and fear of laughing at." (Yasin)

Described as a stress-free environment, some interviewees announced that learning English in the virtual space results in some sort of autonomous learning.

"It can lead to learner autonomy, too." (Hossein)

Contiguous with autonomy, all of the EFL learners in this study affirmed that learning English in both the real world and the virtual space has increased their *self-confidence* a lot. Congruous with this interpretation, Abdullah (2014) noted that the virtual space's capacity for giving people the ability to use and improve their English boosts their confidence. In addition to enhancing their self-confidence, the interviewees admitted that being able to communicate in English has made them *feel valued* and *satisfied* among their communities.

"... Being able to communicate and talk in an international language like English in the virtual world, can improve our sense of self-confidence, satisfaction and make us feel valued." (Erfan)

Furthermore, some interviewees explained their *patriotic feeling* as the result of knowing English and applying English knowledge at the service of defending the country rights in their virtual communications and real world interactions:

"Knowing English as an international language has aroused my patriotic feeling during my interaction with foreigners, particularly, when I chat in the virtual space." (Mona & Naser)

Given that, basic notions such as language can either “diminish a sense of national identity or reinforce it” (Rivers, 2013, p. 198), as a result, it can be offered to highlight the role of patriotism as an important aspect of national identification in the learning of foreign languages.

Based on the interviewees’ ideas, using the virtual space too much, without any specific purpose and management may kill their time, waste their money and, lead to some sort of Internet addiction, which is one of the commonest social knots among the young learners (Nandhini & Krishnaveni, 2016). Interpretation of the participants’ viewpoints shows the *claymore effect* of the virtual space. It means that the virtual space looks like a claymore which can be effective and useful if it is used purposefully and in an appropriate way, otherwise, it will be too harmful and dangerous (Winter, Krämer, Rösner, & Neubaum, 2015)!

“In my point of view, the virtual space is like a claymore, I mean it has both useful and harmful effects.” (Erfan)

“If you refer to the virtual space only for the purpose of learning and promoting your English knowledge, it saves your time, money and energy. If not, it can be harmful, kill your time and waste your money, too!” (Tahmineh)

5.5 Virtual Zone Privacy

This category encompasses the following subcategories: *anonymity*, *social networks*, *virtual groups*, *virtual friends* and, *fun and pleasure* (Fig. 2). *Virtual zone privacy*, in this study, refers to anonymous/known EFL learners’ presence in the virtual space with regard to their membership in virtual English groups and communicating with their virtual friends from different regions of the world and examines its likely effects on the participants’ English learning and virtual identity construction. And finally, with reference to the interviewees’ viewpoints, it introduces the virtual space as an environment for having fun and pleasure beside learning English and any other educational purpose.

One of the manifested differences between two groups in this study, high school versus university students, is their desire to be or not to be anonymous in the virtual space. Regarding the high school students’ remarks, it can be interpreted that anonymity in the virtual space does matter for these groups of EFL learners. They feel free and secured under the anonymity umbrella. But university students had different opinions in this case:

“I use some characters as my ID in Telegram. Anonymity lets me feel more comfortable and share my ideas and feelings.” (Yasin, a high school student)

“My friends and I are using our real names as our virtual space ID and everybody feels free, secure and happy with that. The virtual space made me an international person who is satisfied with his national identity.” (Esmaeel, a university student)

As the main contexts in which anonymity makes sense, we can hint at the *social networks* in the virtual space (Balakrishnan, & Gan; Issa, 2016). In this study, the term *social networks* refers to different blogs and websites relevant to learning English, and the most commonly used social pages among the interviewees as EFL learners. During their interviews, the participants pointed to the plentiful effects of using the English websites on promoting their English knowledge.

Therefore, based on the interviewees’ viewpoints which are in line with Al-Qallaf and Al-Mutairi (2016), English blogs and websites are powerful tools which together with other kinds of pedagogical practices can have a positive influence on learning and promoting EFL learners’ English language. The participants mentioned *InterPals* and *TED* as the most influential websites in their English progress.

“I was a member of *InterPals* and used to chat with my foreign friends in English there. *InterPals* had a great effect on my English.” (Azam)

“TED includes countless English talks on many scientific, cultural, and academic topics. I recommend all English learners visit this really exclusive English website and use their favorite presentations.” (Naser)

The force to speak English in virtual groups was reported as an important factor in improving the participants’ English (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. A Telegram English group

“ In Telegram English learning groups, all members have to talk in English and that is very helpful to me because I can learn and use many vocabularies, idioms, and expressions of English Language.”
(Mona)

Among the current social networks, *Telegram*, *Instagram*, and *WhatsApp* were cited as the most commonly used communication tools by the participants, and English groups and channels of above-mentioned

virtual spaces had been remarkable in developing their English knowledge. For example, Naser, one of the university students, who is currently experiencing EFL teaching in a private institute stated that:

"I am a member of English groups and channels in the Telegram and two years ago, I was a member of WhatsApp. My institute students and I are in touch with each other via Telegram. We communicate in English there. It has been really useful and effective in promoting our English."

Across membership in virtual English groups, the interviewees indicated that communicating with *virtual friends* from different countries with different cultures, beliefs, and worldviews, has been very effective in promoting their English and virtual identity construction.

"Communicating with different people from different regions of the world in English has promoted my worldview and opened my eyes and mind to the universe. I have accepted the true values of English speakers, which are in line with humanity. I have been really growing thoughtfully during the years of being in the virtual space." (Hossein)

5. 6. Synchronous Learning

By *synchronous learning* in this study, the researcher means that according to the interviewees' opinions, the virtual space looks like an English context (as noted before in this study) where EFL learners can practice and apply what they have learned in real-world English classes and reinforce their English knowledge.

"I have some virtual friends from different countries that we are in contact and practice talking in English with each other by the means of virtual space." (Sahar)

"For us, Iranian EFL learners, the virtual space sounds a real English context where we can apply our English knowledge in communication with English speakers and put it into practice." (Mina)

They also stressed that learning English in the virtual space must be accompanied with English learning in the real world. In other words, the interviewees put great emphasis on the simultaneous English learning in both real and virtual worlds.

"I think learning English in the virtual space should be accompanied with going to real classes in English language institutes outside, the real world I mean. These two worlds can not be separately used for learning English." (Esmaeel)

Furthermore, some of the participants deemed the real world as a prerequisite for the virtual space in terms of learning English.

"Learning English in the real world classes should be used as a prerequisite for our purpose of learning English in the virtual space." (Yasin)

The category *synchronous learning*, in general, matches Saniboo and Sinwongsuwat (2016) research findings, who showed that the students' oral English performance remarkably improved through the use of online lessons and classroom interaction with an English speaker. The learners engaged in classroom interaction, however, became significantly more fluent and had a wider range of vocabulary than those learning through online conversations. Therefore, it is suggested that English instructors and EFL learners use virtual space not as the only language learning environment, but as a supplement to real-world English learning process to strengthen and foster their English knowledge and skills.

6. CONCLUSION

The focus of this study was to find out the Iranian EFL learners' virtual identity construction phenomenon. Data analysis using GTM developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) yielded six categories: learning English context, learning English obligations, learning English facilities, affective conditions, synchronous learning, virtual zone privacy and, a core category: EFL learners' virtual identity which was found that it is constructed from the aforementioned six interrelated components (Fig. 4).

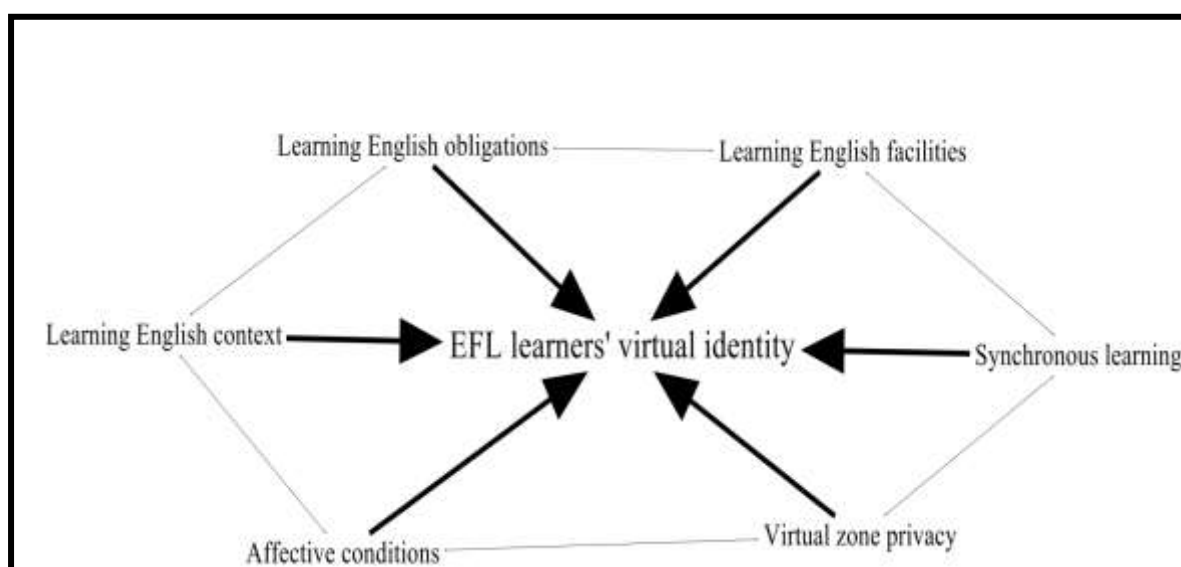


Fig. 4. The core category (EFL learners' virtual identity) and its sub-categories

Because the virtual identity construction among EFL learners has not been previously studied, using an exploratory approach, a comprehensive explanation on this subject was presented in this study. Thus, considering the fast development of the communication technologies, widespread use of different types of smartphones among the youth, more especially the EFL learners, and, regarding English as the most commonly used language in international communications, the findings of this study will be helpful for EFL instructors in private institutes, schools and universities, curriculum designers, and academic researchers, more especially, in the field of sociolinguistics.

At the end, it is suggested that further research on EFL learners' virtual identity construction pay more attention to their gender, major of study and their level of language proficiency as variables needed to be investigated carefully.

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