

# EFL Learners' Cultural Identity: A Case Study on Level Eight Female EFL Students at King Khalid University

Amal M. Al-Beshri

English Department, Applied Colleges, King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia

**Abstract**—This study aims to investigate the effect of learning English on the cultural identity of EFL learners. It also aims to examine learners' attitudes toward the influence of the English language on their cultural identity from their perspective. Participants included 103 level eight female learners from the English Department in the College of Education at King Khalid University in Abha, Saudi Arabia. The data was collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The findings indicated that the learners' cultural identity had changed through learning English, and this change was a result of adopting features from Western culture. Moreover, prolonged exposure to, and understanding of, the English language helped learners to develop a level of awareness of the differences between the Saudi and Western cultures. Furthermore, it was found that the vast majority (90%) of the learners had a positive attitude toward the influence of learning English on their cultural identity. The results further indicated that the learners looked at the English language as a superior language and associated it with success in their lives. Finally, the study concludes with recommendations for curriculum designers, teachers, and parents on how to minimise the effects of learning English on the cultural identity of learners.

**Index Terms**—second term, culture, identity, English language

## I. INTRODUCTION

In our globalized world today, the English language plays a fundamental role in essential fields such as education, economics, medicine, and science. A significant amount of the world's knowledge about these crucial fields is written in English which means learning English is important to access this knowledge (Crystal, 2012). In Saudi Arabia, English occupies a vital role in the educational system. It is taught either as a school subject or as a special major in universities. However, some scholars predict that English is going to become the medium of instruction in academic institutions in Saudi Arabia. Elyas (2014) believes that students are taught intensive English courses to prepare them for studying at all the universities where the courses will be taught in English.

Nowadays, the English language has become more than a school subject to its learners; it has become a tool to enrich their knowledge, to communicate with the outside world and to express their feelings to others. Moreover, it has become something they want to master (Pishghadam & Sadeghi, 2011). Although learning a powerful language like English brings with it benefits such as increased knowledge and self-confidence, it can also adversely affect local languages, cultures, and identity (Hopkyns, 2014). The process of learning a foreign language such as English helps students attain a new perspective about their own society and culture. Furthermore, it also allows them to view and understand other societies and cultures from a new perspective as well (Osler & Starkey, 2000; cited in Pishghadam & Sadeghi, 2011). However, this new perspective can not only positively change a student's view of their identity and culture, but it can also change them negatively, too.

The concepts of language, culture, and identity are strongly connected to one another. For instance, Gunderson (2000) asserted that the concepts of language and culture overlap. They cannot be separated because they have no or little meaning apart from one another. To interact in another language, one's culture must interact with the culture of those who speak that language. Similarly, to understand one's culture, we need to access his/her language directly because every culture is transmitted through its own language/s. Therefore, it is clear that a language such as English is not and cannot be just a language. It is a language that is always accompanied by its dominant culture (Hopkyns, 2014). As a result, learning a second or foreign language like English in any community requires paying great attention to the culture of that language (Hinkel, 2015).

Norton (1997) asserted that individuals develop their identity by how they use a language whether it be their first language or an additional language. Research on language learning from the 1970s to the 1980s viewed the language learners' identities in terms of fixed personalities, different learning styles, and motivation to learn languages. However, the recent research on language learning identities has followed a post-structural understanding that describes identities as multiple, fluid, and always changing due to specific historical and cultural conditions (Norton & Toohey, 2011). This new perspective makes it clear that the learners' identities are far from being fixed or unitary especially if they are exposed to another language and another culture. Based on this perspective, identity can be defined as "how a person understands

his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (Norton, 2000, p. 5).

In the process of learning a foreign language, a second identity is internally developed through contact with a new culture; as a result, the learner’s beliefs, views of the world, and identity change. Moreover, the learner’s feelings and different ways of thinking and interacting can become confused or disturbed (Brown, 2007). Equally relevant is the present study’s educational setting where students learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in a non-native English-speaking country. It is a complex learning process that involves negotiating new identities to accommodate new values and to function effectively in the target language. Consequently, after being exposed to another language and culture, learners of a new language may appreciate their language and cultural values more or depreciate them more (Pishghadam & Sadeghi, 2011).

An individual’s identity has many elements that can be influenced by different social, personal, and linguistic factors (Hopkyns, 2014). One of these elements is cultural identity which is the key concept that this present study is attempting to explore. According to Hall (1996), cultural identity can be seen from two perspectives. The first one is that we can look at the cultural identity as a stable, fixed culture, or the culture of a whole society as a “one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self,’ hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’ which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common” (p. 394). The second perspective describes the cultural identity as flexible, dynamic, and ever-changing. The cultural identity of individuals that “undergo constant transformation [and are far] from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (p. 394). Indeed, the challenge of maintaining learners’ own cultural identity in the face of learning a global language such as English is an issue that EFL learners face during their university years of learning English. Therefore, the present study, which is limited to King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia, investigates the effect of learning English on EFL female students’ cultural identity.

#### A. Statement of the Problem

Learning English as a Foreign Language has given EFL learners access to the target culture. The learners get to view Western people’s lifestyles and values, listen to their music, read their literature and integrate themselves into the culture. Thus, this may lead to a shift in the learners’ cultural identity and their general attitude toward their own culture. According to Huizhu (2012), one aspect of identity change can be described as *relational* which means that an individual integrates him/herself in relation to other individuals (Huizhu, 2012; cited in Anbreen, 2014). Being influenced by Western culture is normal in our globalized world. However, it becomes problematic when it negatively affects the learners’ view of their own culture or the target culture and consequently affects their learning process. This study investigates the issue of cultural identity by focusing on how the learners show the continuation or change in their cultural identity after learning English. Moreover, it focuses on EFL learners’ attitudes toward the influence of learning English on their culture.

#### B. Study Questions

The study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do EFL female learners show continuation or change in their cultural identity as a result of learning EFL during their graduation year (i.e., last semester) at KKU?
2. What are the attitudes of female university students of EFL toward the shift in their cultural identity at KKU?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Language, culture, and identity have attracted many researchers’ attention for the last ten years, and they have investigated the issue of culture and identity from different perspectives. The following sections discuss the existing empirical research on the topic. The first section presents previous studies on the attitudes toward English and Westernization. The second section presents previous studies on the effects of learning English on national identity, and the third section presents previous studies on the effect of English on learners’ cultural identity.

#### A. Previous Studies on Attitudes Toward English and Westernization

It has been noted that almost all of the previous studies focusing on the learners’ attitudes toward the English language and Western culture have found mainly positive attitudes. For example, Haq and Smadi (1996) examined Saudi university students’ attitudes toward the notion of Westernization, national identity, and their religious commitment. The results revealed that the use of English does not negatively affect the participants’ national identity or weaken their religious commitment, nor does it even make them Westernized. Moreover, Findlow (2006) investigated the linguistic-culture dualism in three higher education institutions in the United Arab Emirates. The study aimed to examine how Arabic and English are involved in reshaping Emirate identities through collective higher education. The results showed a conflict in desires and attitudes toward the English language as it is seen as a reflexive tool that changes cultures.

Furthermore, Morrow and Castleton (2011) examined the attitudes of 40 participants from 14 different Arab countries toward the English language and found the students to be almost entirely positive. A year later, Hagler (2012) investigated the attitudes of Saudi university students toward Western culture and found out that 62% of male participants and 70%

of female participants had positive views about Western culture and were very eager and curious to learn more about it. Similarly, Alkaff (2013) examined the attitudes of 47 level-one students toward the English language. The findings revealed that most of the students had positive attitudes toward the English language and a desire to improve their use of the language.

Such positive attitudes might be due to looking at the English language as a highly prestigious language associated with superiority and success. Al-Jarf's (2008) study investigated the attitudes of 470 female Saudi Arabian undergraduates toward the position of the English language in their lives. The results indicated that 96% of participants viewed the English language as a superior language due to its position globally, and 91% of them related English to success in life.

#### *B. Previous Studies on the Effect of English on National Identity*

Regarding the effect of English on national identity, Elyas (2014) investigated the Saudi EFL learning identities of first-year university students. The participants were required to write stories about what influences their language learning process. The study used narrative analysis to analyze the participants' stories, and the findings revealed that the EFL learners firmly aligned themselves with stories relating to globalization, the information age and individuality. The learners' identities were independent of and unconstrained with their society's values. Moreover, the investigated students valued online communication with English native speakers and were very fascinated by and immersed in Western culture.

A year later, Anbreen (2015) examined the influence of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) on the national identity of Pakistani students. The participants were 40 students who were learning English as a Second Language (ESL). The results showed that the students' identity was fluid and had changed. The author asserted that learning English changed the learners' identities by increasing their confidence and making them independent from their families while also changing their attitudes toward their former social relationships with others. Most importantly, the author believed that the learners' identity change is related to context change. He asserted that when the learners changed their context from high school to the university context in which they were majoring in English, their identity altered to meet the needs of the new environment. Moreover, the author asserted that "students even in non-native context use ESL knowledge to shape their identities and view the future prospects via these identities" (p. 386).

Recently, Sa'd (2017) investigated the identity construction of 45 EFL Iranian learners. The results showed that the investigated learners relied upon several concepts such as different personalities, ethnicity, religious affiliations, traditional customs, and values to describe the concept of identity. Moreover, the majority of the participants believed learning English has positively changed the way they perceive their identity, and they showed a strong tendency to be integrated and identified with the cultural and linguistic norms of Western societies.

#### *C. Previous Studies on Culture and Identity*

Regarding the EFL learners' cultural identity, Seppälä (2011) investigated how the influence of the English language and Western culture affects the cultural identity of Chinese university students. The results showed that learning English had changed the perspective and the attitude of the Chinese students toward their culture and Western culture. Moreover, attitudes toward the English language were mainly instrumented to get a better job and to cope with the globalization of the world. Furthermore, the author asserted that young Chinese students are intrigued by the Western lifestyle of independence and freedom; consequently, this led them to adjust their cultural identity to cope with what they have learned from the English language.

A few years later, Hopkyns (2014) investigated the attitudes of female Emirati university students' regarding learning English, and the effect of global English on their culture and identity. The results indicated that the participants had positive and negative attitudes toward the impact of English on their cultural identities. The positive views toward the effects were that learning English made them more confident, independent and able to communicate with other foreign people. On the other hand, some students felt that learning English had hurt the Emirati culture such as through the loss of some Arabic language, the changing of clothes and habits, and the desire to look and act like Westerners.

A year later, Razmeh and Davoodi (2015) analyzed the impact of learning English on the Iranian EFL learners' culture and identity. The participants were 50 bachelor's degree students and 50 master's degree students majoring in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language). The results indicated that the young participants (the baccalaureate students) were fascinated by Western culture and were more interested in shifting their identities. Furthermore, the findings showed that MA students had an awareness of both their own culture and the target culture, and they were able to protect their cultural identities better than the BA students.

Although all of the previous studies mentioned above have been conducted inside and outside the Arabian Gulf region and have investigated similar issues related to language and culture, the present study is different from them. While those studies have approached cultural identity by focusing only on the learners' attitudes toward Western culture, this study investigates both the changes that undergo the learners' cultural identity while learning English and their attitudes toward the shift in their cultural identity. In general, the present study aims to add to the growing body of knowledge in the Arabian Gulf region as it increases awareness of language, culture, and identity.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### A. *Sample*

The target participants of this study were 103 Saudi Female EFL level-eight university students majoring in the English language at King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia. They were studying English between three and six years. Most of them (66%) had learned no other languages besides English and their mother tongue of Arabic though some of them (34%) claimed that they were learning Turkish or French as well. Furthermore, 60% of the participants claimed that other members of their family speak English fluently such as their brothers and sisters while 40% asserted that they are the only English speaker in their families. The reason behind choosing level eight specifically is that the students at this level tend to have a more prolonged exposure to and a better understanding of the English language than other levels have.

#### B. *Research Instruments*

The research materials for this study consisted of a questionnaire as well as a semi-structured interview. First, the questionnaire consists of three main parts. The first part of the questionnaire was named "Language and Culture". The second part was labeled "Saudi Culture vs. Western Culture". Finally, the third part was called "Attitudes Toward the Effect of English on Culture". The questionnaire was taken from a Seppälä (2011) study on Chinese students. However, the researcher made the appropriate changes in the questionnaire to meet the needs of her research context. All the statements were translated into the Arabic language to ensure the students' full understanding of the statements since the concept of cultural identity might be new to the participants. Second, there was the interview with interview questions that were divided into three parts. The first part of the interview was named "General Views About the Saudi and Western Cultures". The second part of the interview was called "The Impact of English on Learners' Cultural Identity". Finally, the third part of the interview was labelled "Attitudes Toward the Effect of the English Language on Saudi Culture".

#### C. *Procedure*

The researcher employed a two-part method. First, the questionnaire was administered to 103 Saudi female university students by their teachers. The researcher was present and explained the concept of cultural identity to the students and encouraged them to ask about any statement they did not understand. The informants were given 15 minutes which was deemed a sufficient amount of time to complete the questionnaire. After collecting the questionnaires, the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program was used to analyze the questionnaire statistically. Second, after analyzing the questionnaires, the interviews were conducted. Out of 30 respondents, 11 were randomly selected for the interview. The participants were encouraged to express themselves freely, whether in Arabic or English, to attain highly personalized data without limiting the nature of the participant's responses. The interviews were analyzed using the content analysis method. First, they were searched through to find possible themes and similar attitudes. Second, the information was coded under specific themes. Finally, some examples were selected from the answers, to demonstrate both the common and abnormal responses. The examples from the interviews are transcribed, and for some, translated word for word. Moreover, the examples taken from the informants' interviews are separated with numbers from 1 to 11 using the abbreviation "Stud" for "student".

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### A. *Results*

##### (a). *The Questionnaire*

The findings of the questionnaire are divided into three parts. The first part of the questionnaire was named "Language and Culture". The second part was labeled "Saudi Culture vs. Western Culture". Finally, the third part was called "Attitudes Toward the Effect of English on Culture".

##### 1. *Language and Culture*

This part presents the results regarding the informants' general attitudes toward the position of the English language in their lives, and the impact of learning English on their perceptions of their culture and the target culture. The results are shown in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1  
MEAN PERCENT OF THE LEARNERS' VIEW OF THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Questionnaire Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.1. Learning English in Saudi Arabia today is important.	67.0	32.0	0	1.0
1.2. The increasing need for and use of the English language in Saudi Arabia has changed the culture of the Saudi people.	16.5	55.3	26.2	1.9
1.3. I think learning the English language has affected my cultural identity.	13.6	31.1	46.6	8.7
1.4. I think that studying English (language and culture) has changed my opinion about the Western world (culture, people, and way of life).	16.5	57.3	25.2	1.0
1.5. I think that studying English (language and culture) has changed my opinion about Saudi or my own (culture, people, language, way of life).	5.8	24.3	55.3	14.6
1.6. The English language is the only channel through which I can learn about other cultures and introduce my culture to people in other countries.	25.2	39.8	32.0	2.9

As can be seen in Table 1 above, the vast majority of the informants (99%) agreed that learning English in Saudi Arabia today is important, and only one informant disagreed. Regarding the effect of learning English on the Saudi people and their culture in general, 71.8% of the informants agreed that the cultural identity of the Saudi people in general has been influenced by the use of the English language while the remaining 28% of the informants disagreed. However, when it comes to the learners' own cultural identity, 44.7% of the informants agreed that learning English has influenced their cultural identity while 55.3% of the informants disagreed.

Furthermore, the majority of the informants (73.8%) agreed that studying English has changed their opinion about the Western world while the remaining 26.2% of the informants disagreed. Moreover, the statement that was most disagreed upon was number 1.5, "I think that studying English (language and culture) has changed my opinion about Saudi or my own (culture, people, language, and way of life), with 70% of the informants responding in disagreement, and only 30% in agreement with the statement. However, almost as much indifference was seen in statement number 2.6: "The English language is the only channel through which I can learn about other cultures and introduce my culture to people in other countries. To this statement, 65% of the informants agreed and 34.9% disagreed.

## 2. Saudi Culture vs. Western Culture

This part shows the results regarding the learners' preferences and attitudes toward the Saudi and Western cultures and the mixing of the two. Table 2 summarizes the results of this part.

TABLE 2  
MEAN PERCENT OF LEARNERS' PREFERENCES BETWEEN THE SAUDI AND WESTERN CULTURES

Questionnaire Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2.1. I find the Saudi culture/way of life more appealing to me.	18.4	43.7	32.0	5.8
2.2. I find Western culture/way of life more appealing to me.	9.7	34.0	44.7	11.7
2.3 I think my culture is the same as that of most Saudis.	14.6	61.2	19.4	4.9
2.4 I think my culture is different from that of most Saudis.	6.8	21.4	60.2	11.7
2.5 I think that mixing the Western customs with the Saudi way of life is a good thing.	15.5	35.0	31.1	18.4
2.6 I think that mixing the Western customs with the Saudi way of life is not good.	13.6	35.0	42.7	8.7
2.7 When I compare myself to my grandparents or other members of my family who have not studied English, I feel my cultural identity is different from theirs.	32.0	40.8	23.3	3.9

As shown in Table 2 above, 62.1% of the informants chose Saudi as their preferred culture while 37.8% of the informants disagreed with the statement. In contrast, 43.7% of the informants agreed that the Western way of life is more appealing to them while 56.4% of the informants disagreed with the statement. However, regarding the learners' way of life, 75.8% of the informants agreed that their way of life is the same as that of most Saudis while the remaining 24.3% disagreed. Correspondingly, the majority of the informants (71.9%) disagreed that their way of life is close or similar to that of most Westerners while 28.2% agreed.

Moreover, regarding the informants' attitude toward mixing the Western customs with the Saudi way of life, a little over half of the informants (50.5%) agreed, and the other half (49.5%) disagreed. Furthermore, the statement that was most agreed on in this part was number 2.7: "When I compare myself to my grandparents or other members of my family who have not studied English, I feel my cultural identity is different from theirs." To this statement, 72.8% of the informants responded with agreement and only 27.2% disagreed with the statement.

### 3. Attitudes Toward the Effect of English on Culture

This part illustrates the results regarding the informants’ attitudes toward the effect of English on their future in general and on their cultural identity in particular. Table 3 summarizes the results of this part.

TABLE 3  
MEAN PERCENT OF LEARNERS’ ATTITUDE TOWARD THE EFFECT OF ENGLISH ON THEIR CULTURE

Questionnaire Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
3.1. I think that speaking English will affect my future.	45.6	39.8	9.7	4.9
3.2. I think this effect of the English language is a positive effect	54.4	41.7	3.9	0
3.3. I think this effect of the English language is a negative effect.	1.9	3.9	53.4	40.8
3.4. I think that learning English has changed the cultural identity in a positive way.	26.2	64.1	8.7	1.0
3.5. I think that learning English has changed the cultural identity in a negative way.	1.0	9.7	68.9	20.4
3.6. Learning about Western culture has helped me to enrich my own culture.	23.3	61.2	13.6	1.9
3.7 Learning English has helped me understand the cultural differences between Saudi and Western culture.	30.1	59.2	6.8	3.9

As shown in Table 3 above, the results indicate that the definite majority of the informants believe that learning English will affect their future with 85.4% having responded with agreement and only 14.6% having responded with disagreement. Moreover, 96% of the informants believed that the effect of English on their lives is positive while only 4% believed that the effect is negative.

Nevertheless, regarding the learners’ attitude toward the change that learning English caused in their cultural identity, most of the informants (90.3%) strongly agreed that learning English had positively changed their cultural identity. Meanwhile, the remaining 10.7% believed that learning English has negatively changed their cultural identity.

Regarding the last two statements in the questionnaire which focused on how the learners benefit from learning English, 84.5% of the informants agreed that learning about Western culture has helped them to enrich their own culture, and only 15.5% disagreed. Moreover, 89.3% of the informants agreed that learning English has helped them to understand the cultural differences between Saudi and Western cultures, and only 10.7% disagreed.

#### (b). The Interview

The findings of the interview are divided into three parts, namely: 1) General Views About the Saudi and Western cultures, 2) The Impact of English on Learners’ Cultural Identity, and 3) Attitudes Toward the Effect of the English Language on Saudi Culture. Priority was placed on providing original quotes from the interviews, and as mentioned before, each quote has a number which is placed after the abbreviation “Stud.” for “student”.

##### 1. General Views About the Saudi and Western Culture

This part of the interview presents the findings concerning the learners’ views of Saudi and Western cultures. The first question of the interview was: “What does the word ‘culture’ mean to you?” It was found that the majority of the informants (73%) view the word culture as the way of life, the behavior, the clothes, and the norms that define a group of people and differentiate them from others. Meanwhile, the remaining interviewees (27%) described it as the traditional ideas and customs that a group of people follow in their lives.

Moreover, when it comes to describing Saudi culture, the informants had differing opinions. For instance, 36% of the informants described it using words such as “restricted”, “protective”, “stable and never changing”, and “ancient”, while 45% of the informants described the Saudi culture in relation to religion. They asserted that Saudi culture is inseparable from Islam, that it follows the teachings of Islam in its actions even though the people themselves do not follow it. The remaining 18% of the informants described the culture in relation to the Saudi people stating that the Saudi people themselves are incapable of accepting new ideas that go against Saudi customs which makes them inflexible. Moreover, one informant brought up the importance of ancient values and traditions to the Saudi culture stating that: “Our culture in Saudi Arabia follows ancient ideas and beliefs and makes it as traditional rules that everyone should follow blindly” (Stud. 3).

However, when it comes to describing Western culture, most of the informants had a very similar opinion. Question 1.3 asked: “From your point of view, how would you describe Western culture?” Most of the informants (63%) described it using the words “open-minded” and “peaceful”, and as “a culture that is very open and very acceptable to new ideas which help its people to live in harmony and peace.” On the contrary, 18% of the informants described it using the word “racist” and went on to say that it is “a culture that looks down on other cultures and is very racist toward foreign people.” Meanwhile, the remaining 18% of the informants described it using the word “freedom” and as “a culture that gives its people the freedom that they need to express themselves.” However, one informant has negatively expressed that they are given too much freedom and that sometimes people misuse it.

##### 2. The Impact of English on Learners’ Cultural Identity

This part presents findings from the interviews regarding the effect of the English language on the informants' cultural identity from their perspectives. Question 2.1 asked: "Has learning English changed your opinion or view of Saudi or Western culture?" Over half (54%) of the informants asserted that their view of the Saudi culture did not change at all while learning English. However, the remaining 45% of the informants stated that learning English had changed their view of the Saudi people. They continued explaining that they used to think that old Saudi traditions and customs were put to limit the freedom of the people, but after being exposed to another culture they believe it exists to protect their identity. Still, some of them claimed that after witnessing how open other cultures are, they believe that the Saudi people need to open their minds to new ideas and change in general. Moreover, one informant stated that learning English has changed her view of the role of women in Saudi Arabia, saying:

"I used to think that a woman should only think about her house and her husband and that being successful is not on her path, but after seeing how Western women fight for their rights. I believe that women can be successful and have an important role in their countries" (Stud 10).

Regarding Western culture, 18% of the informants claimed there had been no change whatsoever in their opinion about Western culture. Nevertheless, the vast majority (81%) of the informants answered with "Yes definitely" asserting that after learning English, their opinion changed about the Western people and culture. Most of them expressed that, during their first two years at university they were very influenced and fascinated by Western culture, but with the growing knowledge and understanding of the English language, they had become very aware that Western culture is not as perfect as they thought, and that it has its own flaws just like any other culture. One of them explained:

"I used to glorify the West. 'WOW! The West! We have to be like the West', but that changed because I've got a deeper insight into their culture and I learned that we are the same and that our society has something special that no society in the world can come close to" (Stud 11).

The second question was divided into two parts and was aimed at finding out whether the informants believe their cultural identity has changed or not while learning English. Question 2.2 asked interviewees to "Compare yourself now to yourself before learning English. Has learning English changed your culture, your behavior or your way of life? Moreover, 18% claimed their culture had not been affected or changed by the English language. While the majority of the informants (82%) agreed that learning English had altered their culture, asserting that only a part of their own culture has changed and not their entire culture.

Question 2.2.1, the second part of the question, asked: "How did your culture, behavior, and ideas change?" The informants explained how learning English has altered their cultural identity. Some of them asserted that they had adopted some features from Western culture, such as being open-minded, accepting of others' opinions, and being more independent. Others expressed that they had become eager to learn more, be successful, and read a lot about other cultures which is a feature they believe they adopted from the West. However, some of the informants believed that after learning English they have become free from old Saudi traditions and restricted customs. One informant claimed the most significant change in her culture is in how she socializes with others. She explained that:

"I used to think I had to socialize with everyone, especially in family gatherings, and it was hard to find someone who thinks like you. But after learning English, I learned that you don't have to socialize with people you are not interested in. I become attached to people who have the same mindset and speak English, and it has become easier to find them these days" (Stud 8).

Moreover, some informants claimed that since they learned English, they could only express themselves in English. One of them explained that:

Now I can only use English to express my feelings especially when I talk to my friends because they know English... and I know other people don't, so this also makes me stay away from them... the people who don't speak English (Stud 6).

Regarding Question 2.3 about the informants' preference between the Saudi and Western cultures, 36% of the informants chose the Saudi culture claiming it's the culture they were born in and the culture of their family. However, 45% of the informants chose Western culture claiming that although the Saudi culture is at their root, they believe their way of life is closer to the West. Moreover, one informant chose both cultures claiming that she adopted from both Western and Saudi cultures to form her own culture. Meanwhile, another informant chose neither of the two cultures asserting that she has her own culture which is apart from both Saudi and Western cultures.

### *3. Attitudes Toward the Effect of the English Language on the Cultural Identity*

This part presents findings regarding the interviewees' attitudes toward the influence of the English language in general and on their own culture in particular. Question 3.1 asked: "Do you think there is a need for learning the English language in Saudi Arabia?" All the participants answered with "Yes of course" claiming that, English nowadays is necessary for many essential things like getting a job, learning about other cultures, coping with world knowledge, communicating with others, and even for economic and tourism in the country as one informant expressed that:

"So many Westerners come here to Saudi Arabia... and there will be so many Westerners here who only speak English, and we cannot actually have them as tourists if we don't have the language to communicate with them" (Stud 11).

The question that followed was Question 3.2.: "Do you think the need for English will affect the culture of the younger Saudi generation?" Although this question was not asked to three (3) interviewees directly, they did state something about

the matter. Almost all of the informants agreed that English will affect the Saudi culture. In fact, 45% of them stated that this effect will be negative and that they are already witnessing that effect nowadays with the young EFL female learners in level one and four. While the remaining 54% stated that it is hard to decide and that it could have both a negative and positive effect depending on how the people learn the language and how they use it.

The last question in the interview was Question 3.3.: “Do you think learning English has affected your culture positively or negatively?” To this, all the informants answered with “Of course positively”. In fact, 27% of the informants stated that English has positively raised their confidence, enabled them to communicate with people from other countries, and helped them to share their own culture and learn about different cultures. Meanwhile, 36% of the informants claimed that the English language enabled them to be more open to new ideas and helped them to plan their future. Moreover, 37% of the informants expressed that English has helped them to be independent and successful in their lives. One informant explained that learning English and reading about the contribution of Western women helped her to realize that the role of women is found in more places than just the household.

## B. Discussion

### (a). *Saudi Culture in the Roots, Western Culture on the Minds*

After presenting all the results of the study from both the questionnaires and the interviews, it can easily be concluded that the learners’ cultural identity had changed and was strongly affected by the English language. Based on the participants’ answers to Question 2.1 about the effect of learning English on their views of their culture and other cultures, it was concluded that, during the four years of learning English, the learners had gone from being influenced by the Western way of life and imitating the West to an appreciation of the Saudi culture. This indicates that the change in the learners’ cultural identity was gradual, starting from glorifying Western culture to an awareness of the cultural differences, and for some, to an appreciation of their own culture. Similar results were found in the studies of Seppala (2011) and Hopkyns (2014).

Regarding the participants’ answers to the question about the change in their cultural identity, it was concluded that most of the participants still perceive their culture as Saudi in root and that they only adopt from Western culture the things that are missing in their Saudi culture such as accepting others’ opinions, being open-minded, and being passionate for learning and success. It was also concluded that learning English has raised the students’ self-confidence and made them feel comfortable to communicate with others. Moreover, learning English for four years has granted the learners access to world knowledge such access has allowed them to know about target cultures, and therefore, they could compare it with their own culture. Consequently, this knowledge and comparison of the two cultures changed their opinion about their own culture and helped them to see the uniqueness of their Saudi traditions. It also enabled them to adopt some things from Western culture and add to their own Saudi culture. This indicates that the learners have developed a level of awareness of the cultural differences between the Saudi and Western cultures, and this awareness was the result of prolonged exposure to and understanding of the English language. Similar results were found in the studies of Elyas (2014); Anbreen (2015); and Sa’d (2017). Regarding the learners’ preference between the two cultures the Saudi and Western, the learners did not show any desire to abandon their own culture completely and imitate the West. Therefore, there was no evidence of Westernization in their answers in both the questionnaire and the interview. This result is similar to the results found in the study of HAQ and Smadi (1996).

### (b). *Superiority of the English Language*

The answers to the questions about the importance of learning English in Saudi Arabia indicated that the vast majority of the participants (99%) believe that learning English is a must in Saudi Arabia. The main reason is that English is known as a global language or the language of the world, and it is believed that it is the only channel through which one can learn about other cultures; therefore, it is needed for communicating with others. Another reason for needing English is to progress in studies and careers. It seems that most of the informants believe that English guarantees success in life as they attached it to getting jobs in Saudi Arabia. Another reason is that by using English, one can better access the world’s knowledge given the fact that everything on the internet is written in English nowadays. It is undeniable that female EFL learners look at the English language as a superior and dominating language. This view of English is similar to the findings found in Al-Jarf’s (2008) study and Hopkyns’s (2014) study.

### (c). *Attitudes Toward the Effect of the English Language on Saudi Culture*

Regarding the participants’ attitudes toward the effect of learning English on their culture, the majority of the participants (90%) showed a great deal of positivity when it came to the influence of learning English on their lives and ways of thinking. The informants spoke positively about how learning English helped them increase their confidence, be independent, be more open-minded, and most importantly, granted them access to the world’s knowledge. Previous studies mentioned in the related literature review section also found mainly positive attitudes toward English (Alkaff, 2013; Findlow, 2006; Hagler, 2014; Hopkyns, 2014; Morrow & Castleton, 2011).

Furthermore, for some learners, English was a channel through which they were able to communicate with foreign people, learn about other cultures, and share parts of their own culture with the outside world. This knowledge has brought them an awareness of the differences between the Saudi and Western culture. Consequently, this awareness has helped

them to only adopt some things from Western culture regarding what is proper in their culture. This view was also mentioned in previous studies such as Seppälä (2011).

Nevertheless, some informants reported that being exposed to other cultures helped them to gain an understanding of their own culture and values and enabled them to change some of the old traditions. For some informants, English helped them to reassess their role as women in Saudi society, whereas for some, being able to express deeper personal feelings in English was a way to have privacy from others. This indicates that the learners used English as a tool to liberate themselves from old customs and Saudi traditions and also as a way to socialize with people who speak English and to isolate themselves from others. This view was also mentioned in previous studies. For example, Hopkyns (2017) in her doctoral thesis expressed that “English was also seen as liberating by some Emirati participants... students who were ‘different’ in some way using English as a way to escape from conventions” (p. 247).

Although the effects of English on the personal lives and the cultural identity of the informants were mainly viewed as positive, some informants reported in the interview that the impact of English on the Saudi culture might be negative in terms of clothes, habits, and maintenance of the Arabic language. This result is similar to the results found in Hopkyns’s (2014) study. However, some informants had a positive view about the 2030 vision stating that hopefully by introducing the Chinese language and culture alongside the English, the Saudi culture or way of life will positively change and cope with the other cultures, too.

## V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### A. Conclusion

This study investigated the cultural identity of female EFL learners at King Khalid University. The results of the study showed that the EFL learners’ cultural identity had changed due to learning English. This change in their cultural identity results from adopting some features from Western culture and adding them to their Saudi culture. Moreover, the results indicated that prolonged exposure to the English language gave the learners an awareness of the cultural differences between Western and Saudi cultures. This awareness of cultural differences helped them better appreciate their own culture and values. Furthermore, the learners’ attitudes toward the impact of English on their cultural identity were relatively positive. They believe learning English has made them more confident and granted them the opportunity to learn more about other cultures and introduce their own culture to others.

### B. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are set forth for curriculum designers, EFL teachers, and for further research:

1. For curriculum designers, the study recommends that it would be helpful to include topics from both Saudi and Western cultures and introduce cultural differences between them instead of focusing on one culture. As Hopkyns (2014) suggests: “With English surrounding the students in everyday life and in higher education, they may benefit from greater inclusion of local culture, in its many forms” (p. 12).
2. For EFL teachers, it is highly recommended to use teaching methods that encourage expressing students' own identity, such as translanguaging. As Sayer (2013) asserted "using translanguaging allowed space in the classroom for discussions and allows learners to negotiate meaning and affirmed their identities as bilingual learners" (p. 23).
3. Moreover, the researcher also suggests that EFL teachers encourage their learners to take ownership of the English language and to use it to show the traditions and values of their own culture through college workshops and activities, blogs, or any of the modern media applications. As Holliday (2014) recommended: “Learners should carry their own cultural experience into English and stamp it with their own identities” (p. 1; cited in Hopkyns, 2014).
4. For further research, studies can be conducted to investigate the usefulness of using teaching methods such as translanguaging in preserving learner's cultural identity. Moreover, to research this area further, it would be helpful to conduct a longitudinal study to investigate the impact of English on students’ identities as they progress from one level to the other. Such studies can help in identifying where awareness of the English language occurs and how students acquire this awareness.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Mazeegha Ahmed Al Tale for her insightful feedback throughout this research.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Al Haq, F., & Smadi, O. (1996). Spread of English and Westernization in Saudi Arabia. *World Englishes*, 15(3), 307-317.
- [2] Al-Jarf, R. (2008). The Impact of English as an International Language (EIL) upon Arabic in Saudi Arabia. *Asian EFL Journal*, 10(4), 193-210.
- [3] Al-Kaff, A. A. (2013). Students’ Attitudes and Perceptions toward Learning English. *Arab World Journal*, 4(2), 106-121.

- [4] Anbreen, T. (2015). The Influence of English Second Language Learning on Pakistani University Students' Identity. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 192, 379-387.
- [5] Brown, H. D. (2007). *Principles of language learning and teaching* (5th ed.). NY: Pearson Education, Inc.
- [6] Crystal, D. (2012). *English as a global language*. UK: Cambridge university press.
- [7] Elyas, T. (2014). Exploring Saudi Arabia's EFL student identity: A narrative critical approach. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 3(5), 28-38.
- [8] Findlow, S. (2006). Higher education and linguistic dualism in the Arab Gulf. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 27(1), 19-36.
- [9] Gunderson, L. (2000). Voices of the teenage diasporas. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 43(8), 692-706.
- [10] Hagler, A. (2014). A study of attitudes toward Western culture among Saudi university students. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives*, 11(1), 1-14.
- [11] Hall, S. (1994). Cultural identity and diaspora. In P. Williams & L. Chrisman (Eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (pp. 392-403). New York: Columbia UP.
- [12] Hinkel, E. (2005). *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning* (Ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- [13] Holliday, A. (2014). *Using existing cultural experience to stamp identity on English*. Retrieved March 23, 2019, from <http://adrianholliday.com/articles>
- [14] Huizhu, H. (2012). *Mutual influences between learners' identity construction and English language learning in the first year of university study in China* (Unpublished M. Phil thesis). University of Hong Kong, China. Retrieved January 13, 2019, from <http://hub.hku.hk/handle/10722/173913>
- [15] Hopkyns, S. (2014). The effects of global English on culture and identity in the UAE: a double-edged sword. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives*, 11(2), 1-21.
- [16] Hopkyns, S. L. (2017). *A conflict of desires: global English and its effects on Cultural identity in the United Arab Emirates* (Unpublished Doctoral thesis). University of Leicester, United Kingdom.
- [17] Morrow, J. A., & Castleton, B. (2011). The impact of global English on the Arabic language: The loss of the Allah lexicon. In A. Al-Issa, & L. S. Dahan (Eds.), *Global English and Arabic* (pp. 307-334). Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang.
- [18] Norton, B. (1997). Language, identity, and the ownership of English. [Introduction, Special Issue]. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(3), 409-429.
- [19] Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: gender, ethnicity and educational change*. Harlow: Longman.
- [20] Norton, B., & Toohey, K. (2011). Identity, language learning, and social change. *Language teaching*, 44(4), 412-446.
- [21] Osler, A., & Starkey, H. (2000). Intercultural education and foreign language learning: Issues of racism, identity and modernity. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 3(2), 207-221.
- [22] Pishghadam, R., & Sadeghi, M. (2011). Culture and identity change among Iranian EFL teachers. *Ozean Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(3), 147-162.
- [23] Razmeh, S., & Davoodi, A. (2015). *Identity and Culture Shaped by Foreign Language Learning: A Case of Iranian University Students*. GRIN Publishing, Iran.
- [24] Sa'd, T. (2017). Foreign language learning and identity reconstruction: learners' understanding of the intersections of the self, the other and power. *CEPS Journal*, 7(4), 13-36.
- [25] Seppälä, M. (2011). *The effects of the English language on the cultural identity of Chinese university students* (Unpublished Master's thesis). University of Jyväskylä, China.
- [26] Sayers, P. (2013). Translanguaging, TexMex, and bilingual pedagogy: emergent bilinguals learning through the vernacular. *TESOL Quarterly*, 47(1), 63-88.

**Amal M. Al-Beshri** is from Khamis Mushait, Saudi Arabia. She completed a bachelor's degree in English language from King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia, in 2014. In 2019, she obtained an MA in Applied Linguistics from the same university.

Currently, she serves as a lecturer at the Faculty of Applied College, King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia. She has undertaken projects in designing English courses for deaf students. During her MA studies, she actively participated in several research conferences held at King Khalid University. Presently, she is engaged in two research projects that explore second language attrition and interlanguage traces among EFL teachers. Her research interests encompass the domains of identity, language and culture, and digital literacy.

In addition to her academic pursuits, Ms. Al-Beshri is an active member of the national platform for voluntary work in Abha, Saudi Arabia. She has contributed to numerous voluntary projects, particularly those aimed at assisting college students.