| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Exploring the Impact of English Language Clubs (ELCs) on the Cultural Identity Formation of Junior High School Students in Morocco

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| **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study explores how participation in English Language Clubs (ELCs) influences the cultural identities of junior high school students in Morocco, with a specific focus on a long-standing club initiative called My English House. As English continues to assert its presence as a global language, Moroccan youth are increasingly exposed to cultural values and worldviews beyond their local contexts. Drawing on cultural identity theory and classroom ethnography, this research investigates how students engage with and negotiate cultural meanings through club activities such as debates, performances, and multimedia projects. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and analysis of students' creative outputs. The study aims to offer insights into how extracurricular English learning spaces contribute to identity construction and cultural hybridity in a Moroccan context, with implications for educators and language policy planners.

Introduction

In recent years, the English language has gained unprecedented prominence across educational, economic, and cultural spheres in Morocco. Once dominated by French and Arabic in both formal education and daily communication, the Moroccan linguistic landscape is experiencing a shift, with English increasingly seen as a global gateway to opportunity and modernity (Slimani & Iguider, 2023). This growing status of English has led to its adoption beyond the formal curriculum, notably through extracurricular initiatives such as English Language Clubs (ELCs). These clubs, often student-led or facilitated by motivated educators, create informal spaces where language learning intersects with identity formation, creativity, and intercultural exchange.

In such contexts, language learning becomes more than the acquisition of grammar and vocabulary—it becomes a process of engaging with new cultural frameworks, values, and worldviews. According to Norton (2013), language learning is closely linked to identity, as learners invest in language with the hope of accessing imagined communities. For Moroccan adolescents, participation in ELCs may represent such a space where they begin to construct or negotiate new forms of cultural identity influenced by global English-speaking cultures.

Existing research underscores the transformative potential of English learning on identity. For instance, El Bahri et al. (2023) observed that university-level English learners in Morocco often undergo a process of identity reconstruction as they internalize aspects of Anglophone culture. Similarly, Abdelkafi et al. (2024) highlight how students may experience internal conflict or duality, navigating between local traditions and the global cultural elements embedded in English use. Although these studies offer valuable insights, most focus on older learners in higher education settings, leaving a gap in understanding how younger learners— particularly junior high school students—experience and negotiate these identity shifts.

At the secondary school level, English Language Clubs provide a unique context for such exploration. In contrast to formal classrooms, ELCs encourage expression through activities like drama, debate, project-based learning, and engagement with music, film, and literature in English. These practices not only enhance communicative competence (Souhila & Ryma, 2023) but also

expose learners to a range of cultural perspectives that may influence their sense of self. Yet, little is known about how these experiences affect students' cultural identities, particularly in formative years when identity development is highly dynamic.

This study draws from the researcher's firsthand experience as the founder and facilitator of My English House, an English Language Club that has been actively engaging junior high school students in a range of communicative and culturally enriching activities over the past several years. Observations of students' growing enthusiasm, confidence, and creative expression prompted deeper questions about how their engagement with English in these informal settings may be shaping their cultural self-understanding. Accordingly, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How do junior high school students in Morocco experience cultural identity formation through their participation in English Language Clubs?
2. What cultural values, practices, or worldviews do students engage with or adopt through club activities?
3. How do students negotiate their local identities in relation to the global cultural references encountered through English?

By exploring these questions through a qualitative lens, this research contributes to the broader understanding of the sociocultural dimensions of English language education. It offers practical insights for educators and policymakers aiming to support identity-safe and culturally responsive learning environments in an increasingly globalized world.

1. Literature Review

1.1. The Role of English in Morocco's Educational and Cultural Landscape

Over the past two decades, English has been steadily rising in status within Morocco's multilingual context, traditionally dominated by Arabic and French. The increased global relevance of English in higher education, technology, business, and entertainment has encouraged many Moroccan institutions to promote it as a "language of the future" (Slimani & Iguider, 2023). As a result, English is increasingly embraced not only in formal education but also in informal learning environments, such as media consumption and youth culture. According to Bekou and Ben Mhamed (2023), this growing interest in English is also accompanied by questions of identity, with learners often associating English proficiency with modernity, empowerment, and access to global networks.

This shift towards English reflects broader socio-cultural dynamics, wherein young Moroccans are negotiating between traditional values and global influences. Faouzi (2023) highlights that English language instruction in Moroccan high schools often introduces students to Western cultural norms, sometimes subtly influencing their sense of belonging and identity. This makes the English language more than just a tool for communication; it becomes a vector for cultural change.

1.2. Language Learning and Identity Formation

The relationship between language and identity has been a central focus in applied linguistics and sociocultural theory. Norton (2013) emphasized that language learners invest in a new language because of the identities they hope to achieve through it. Language becomes a means through which individuals express, reshape, and sometimes contest their social identities. In contexts such as Morocco, where multiple languages coexist within distinct cultural and symbolic systems, learning a foreign language can lead to complex identity negotiations.

El Bahri et al. (2023) found that Moroccan undergraduate students majoring in English often internalize aspects of Anglophone culture, such as individualism, self-expression, and critical thinking. Similarly, Abdelkafi et al. (2024) reported that English learners often experience a sense of duality between their public identity—grounded in local norms—and their private identity, shaped by exposure to global cultural content. These findings are significant in understanding how learners adapt or resist foreign cultural elements through the lens of language acquisition.

Although such research has explored identity reconstruction at the university level, limited attention has been paid to younger learners, especially those at a critical stage of identity development. This gap underscores the importance of studying junior high school students, who are both impressionable and highly active in navigating peer influence, social belonging, and future aspirations.

1.3. The Impact of Extracurricular English Activities on Learners

English Language Clubs (ELCs) offer a non-formal learning space where students are exposed to English in meaningful, enjoyable, and socially rich contexts. These clubs often emphasize creative expression, group collaboration, and the exploration of global cultures through debates, plays, public speaking, and multimedia projects. According to Souhila and Ryma (2023), ELCs significantly enhance learners' communicative competence while fostering confidence, critical thinking, and intercultural awareness.

Aoujil and Benattabou (2021), in their study on Morocco's Access Program, concluded that extracurricular exposure to English increased students' motivation and improved their willingness to communicate, often leading to more positive self-perceptions. Moreover, Faouzi (2023) observed that participation in such clubs allows learners to experiment with new identities—adopting new personas in roleplays, expressing personal stories in a foreign language, and identifying with global youth culture. In the same vein, Fredricks and Eccles (2006) suggest that increased participation in extracurricular activities is linked to better academic performance, enhanced psychological skills, and more supportive peer relationships.

Despite these benefits, there is still a lack of research exploring how these informal learning environments affect learners' cultural identities specifically, especially in early adolescence. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring how junior high school students in Morocco engage with, resist, or internalize cultural elements through their participation in English Language Clubs.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative exploratory research design, aiming to understand how participation in English Language Clubs (ELCs) influences the cultural identities of junior high school students in Morocco. A qualitative approach was selected to gain rich, in-depth insights into the students' lived experiences, beliefs, and identity negotiations within the context of the English club (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focus was on capturing participants' voices, meanings, and perspectives in their natural setting, rather than testing hypotheses or measuring predefined variables.

2.2. Research Setting and Context

The research was conducted in My English House, an English Language Club operating in a Moroccan junior high school. The club has been running annually under the guidance of the researcher, who also serves as its facilitator. The club provides a space for students to engage in communicative, creative, and culturally diverse activities such as drama performances, debates, storytelling, music, and multimedia presentations. The club's informal and student-centered nature makes it a valuable setting to investigate how English language engagement intersects with cultural identity formation.

2.3. Participants

Participants consisted of 12 junior high school students (ages 13–15) enrolled in My English House during the academic year 2024–2025. They were purposefully selected based on their regular participation and willingness to share their experiences. The sample included both male and female students from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. To maintain ethical integrity and protect participant anonymity, pseudonyms were used in all reporting of data.

2.4. Data Collection Methods

Data was collected through three qualitative methods:

2.4.1. Semi-structured interviews

Individual interviews were conducted with all 12 participants. These interviews focused on students' perceptions of the club, their relationship with English, and the cultural values they associate with using the language. Interviews lasted approximately 30–45 minutes each and were conducted in a mix of English and Arabic to ensure clarity and comfort.

2.4.2. Participant observation

The researcher conducted ongoing, naturalistic observations during club sessions. Detailed field notes were taken, focusing on language use, group dynamics, cultural references, and identity-related expressions in both verbal and non-verbal forms.

2.4.3. Student artifacts

Students' creative outputs (e.g., short plays, personal essays, posters, and digital projects) were collected and analyzed as expressive representations of cultural identity and affiliation.

2.5. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-step model by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was chosen for its flexibility and depth in identifying patterns across qualitative datasets. After transcription, the interview data and observation notes were coded inductively to identify emerging themes related to cultural identity, language use, and self-perception. The analysis was iterative and reflexive, allowing for constant comparison across data sources.

2.6. Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, strategies such as triangulation, member checking, and reflexive journaling were employed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation was achieved using multiple data sources. Member checking involved inviting participants to review and verify the accuracy of their interview transcripts and the interpretation of their statements. Reflexive journaling helped the researcher remain aware of personal biases and positionality throughout the study.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant educational authority. Informed consent was secured from all participants and their guardians prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and students were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any stage without any consequences.

3. Researcher Positionality and Role

In this study, the researcher assumed the role of a participant-observer, a position that enabled close engagement with participants while maintaining a reflective, analytical stance. As the founder and facilitator of My English House, the researcher had established rapport and trust with the students over several academic years. This existing relationship fostered a safe and familiar environment in which participants could express themselves openly and authentically.

The participant-observer role offered a unique vantage point for understanding the nuanced, day-to-day interactions that shape identity within the club. Rather than observing from a detached distance, the researcher was immersed in the activities—guiding discussions, coordinating projects, and participating in cultural and creative tasks alongside the students. This allowed for the collection of rich, contextualized data grounded in authentic student behaviors, language use, and expressions of self.

At the same time, the researcher remained conscious of the potential influence that this dual role might have on participants' responses and behaviors. To mitigate bias and enhance credibility, detailed field notes were kept after each session, focusing not only on observable behaviors but also on the researcher's reflections and emotional reactions. This reflexive practice helped maintain a critical awareness of the researcher's influence on the research setting and ensured a balanced interpretation of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The researcher also actively sought to balance involvement with objectivity by minimizing directive input during student-led activities and encouraging peer-led expression. This positioning aligns with interpretive qualitative paradigms, where the researcher is seen not as a neutral outsider, but as a co-constructor of meaning alongside participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

4. Findings

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, observation notes, and student artifacts revealed four interrelated themes that shed light on how junior high school students experienced cultural identity transformation through participation in My English House: (1) Embracing Global Youth Culture, (2) Negotiating Between Local and Global Identities, (3) Building Voice and Confidence Through English and (4) Rediscovering School as a Positive Space for Growth.

4.1. Theme 1: Embracing Global Youth Culture

Many participants expressed a growing connection to global youth culture through their engagement with English. Club activities involving music, film, and online content were particularly influential in shaping how students perceived themselves in relation to the wider world.

"*I love singing in English because I feel like I am part of something big... like the people on YouTube or TikTok,*" said Salma, a 14-year-old participant.

Several students began integrating Anglophone cultural expressions—such as slang, fashion styles, and digital media preferences—into their everyday lives. Field notes recorded frequent references to international celebrities, trending songs, and social media challenges discussed during club meetings. These interactions suggest that English served as a cultural bridge through which students connected with a globalized youth identity.

4.2. Theme 2: Negotiating Between Local and Global Identities

While students enthusiastically engaged with global content, many also expressed a tension between their Moroccan identity and the cultural values embedded in English-speaking media. This duality emerged strongly in discussions around personal values, family expectations, and language use at home.

"*At home I speak Darija, but in the club, I feel more free to be myself when I speak English,*" shared Anas.

Students often described code-switching between cultural contexts, indicating a process of negotiation rather than rejection of local identity. Some incorporated English expressions into their Moroccan Arabic speech, symbolizing the hybrid identities they were constructing.

This theme illustrates the dynamic process of cultural adaptation, where students do not abandon their Moroccan roots but rather navigate between overlapping cultural worlds. The club served as a safe space for this exploration, allowing students to reconcile their evolving global identities with local cultural values.

4.3. Theme 3: Building Voice and Confidence Through English

A key observation throughout the study was the way in which participation in My English House enhanced students' self-confidence and voice. Through drama performances, storytelling, and group projects, students developed a stronger sense of self-expression.

"*Before the club, I was shy and scared to speak. Now I can talk in front of people and say what I think,*" said Rania, a 13-year-old participant.

Student artifacts, such as personal essays and recorded roleplays, revealed increasing comfort with articulating opinions and engaging in critical thinking. This development was often linked to the freedom of expression students associated with English as a language and the club as a space.

4.4. Theme 3: Rediscovering School as a Positive Space for Growth

One of the salient themes that emerged from the study is the transformative impact of English Language Clubs (ELCs) on students' attitudes toward school. Participation in ELCs fostered a more positive perception of the school environment, as students reported feeling more engaged, motivated, and connected. Through these extracurricular activities, learners began to focus on self-discovery and the development of their personal and academic potential. This shift in focus contributed to a noticeable reduction in negative behaviors and attitudes such as absenteeism, reluctance to attend school, school-related anxiety, and involvement in bullying. As one student shared, "*Before joining the English club, I used to skip classes a lot. I didn't feel like school had anything for me. But the club helped me realize I'm actually good at expressing myself in English, and now I look forward to coming every day*." Such testimonies reflect a growing sense of belonging and enthusiasm for learning, highlighting the role of ELCs in promoting a more inclusive, supportive, and empowering educational experience.

As noted in field observations, students took leadership in organizing events, mentoring peers, and suggesting new topics for discussion, which are signs of growing agency and cultural confidence.

The findings of this study reveal that participation in the English Language Club My English House significantly shaped the cultural identities of Moroccan junior high school students. Through thematic analysis of interviews, observations, and student artifacts, three key themes emerged:

a) Embracing Global Youth Culture: Students connected with global trends, music, media, and youth expressions through English, viewing it as a gateway to a broader cultural landscape. This engagement fostered a sense of belonging to a transnational youth identity.

b) Negotiating Between Local and Global Identities: Participants often balanced their Moroccan cultural heritage with the values and lifestyles presented through English. This negotiation process highlighted the hybrid nature of their evolving identities, where English was not a replacement for, but a complement to, local traditions.

c) Building Voice and Confidence Through English: The club environment encouraged students to express themselves more openly, take risks, and develop public speaking and leadership skills. English became a medium for empowerment, creativity, and personal growth.

d) Rediscovering School as a Positive Space for Growth: This theme captures the way English Language Clubs (ELCs) helped reshape students' emotional and psychological relationship with school. Through engaging and creative extracurricular experiences, students began to view school as a place of opportunity, personal growth, and connection, rather than stress or punishment. The supportive environment of ELCs encouraged students to explore their talents, boosting their motivation and reducing issues like absenteeism, reluctance, and school-related anxiety. Ultimately, ELCs played a key role in transforming school into a more welcoming and meaningful space for learners.

Vignettes and student work samples further illustrated these themes, showing how English club activities enabled students to explore and perform multiple, layered identities in a supportive and dynamic space. The club functioned not only as a language learning environment but also as a cultural arena for self-discovery, social interaction, and identity formation.

While the benefits of English Language Clubs (ELCs) were widely acknowledged by both students and myself as a club facilitator, several challenges emerged that hinder their full potential and sustainability. Firstly, students' academic timetables often do not accommodate or prioritize extracurricular engagement, limiting equal access to ELCs activities. As one student noted, "*Sometimes I really want to join, but I have classes during the club time*." Secondly, student participation remains voluntary, and club capacity is limited by both space and students' willingness to enroll. This means not all interested students can benefit from the club experience.

From a facilitator's perspective, sustaining extracurricular activities is demanding, especially with a full teaching schedule and other administrative responsibilities. Running the club requires significant time, effort and engagement, which can be difficult to maintain without institutional support. Moreover, a lack of adequate equipment and materials—such as audiovisual tools, stationery, and access to digital resources—further restricts the quality and scope of ELCs activities.

These voiced challenges highlight the need for better institutional planning, support, and resource allocation to ensure ELCs programs and sessions are sustainable and accessible to all students due to their significance in boosting students' linguistic and non-linguistic development.

5. Discussion

This study set out to explore how participation in an English Language Club influenced the cultural identities of Moroccan junior high school students. The findings suggest that English language learning in informal, creative, and student-centered contexts can serve as a powerful vehicle for cultural negotiation, identity expression, and personal growth. These results both reinforce and expand upon existing literature in applied linguistics, identity studies, and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education.

English as a Gateway to Global Youth Culture

Participants in My English House embraced English as a means of accessing global youth culture. This is consistent with findings by Alim et al. (2009), who emphasize the role of English in constructing youth identities globally through pop culture, music, and

digital media. English functioned not only as a linguistic tool but also as a cultural passport, allowing students to feel aligned with global trends and to articulate shared values with peers beyond national borders (Norton, 2013).

The students' gravitation toward global media also reflects what Pennycook (2007) calls the cultural flows of English—where language learning is inseparable from the consumption and creation of global cultural products. Salma's playlist, for example, illustrates how students use English to construct emotionally resonant identities that transcend their local context.

Hybrid Identities and Cultural Negotiation

While English allowed students to affiliate with global culture, the findings also reveal a simultaneous process of negotiating their Moroccan identities. Students expressed both pride in their heritage and excitement about engaging in/with new cultural norms. This dynamic interplay aligns with Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "third space," where learners form hybrid identities that emerge through interaction between local and global discourses.

This dual affiliation echoes findings from Kramsch (2009), who argues that language learners operate in symbolic spaces of in-betweenness, where they mediate multiple cultural positions. The narratives of students like Youssef, who questioned how to integrate traditional values with global self-representations, underscore the complexity of identity formation in an era of globalization.

5.1. English Club as a Space of Empowerment

A striking finding of this study is the way in which My English House functioned as a transformative space for student empowerment. The club's informal, supportive atmosphere encouraged students to take creative and intellectual risks, resulting in greater self-confidence and communicative competence. This mirrors research by Cummins and Early (2011), who argue that meaningful participation in literacy-rich, student-centered environments fosters agency, especially among marginalized youth.

One of the participant's poster and monologue performance exemplify how EFL learners can develop not only linguistic fluency but also a stronger sense of voice—the capacity to express thoughts, emotions, and opinions in socially meaningful ways (Norton & Toohey, 2011). In this context, English becomes not just a subject of study but a tool for identity construction and civic engagement (Bundick, 2011).

5.2. The Role of the Facilitator-Researcher

The participant-observer role played by the researcher enabled an insider perspective that deepened the understanding of students' identity negotiations. However, it also required reflexivity to address the power dynamics and potential influence on students' behavior and responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This dual role highlights the ethical and methodological importance of positionality in qualitative research (Holmes, 2020).

Taken together, the findings affirm that English Language Clubs like My English House offer more than language practice; they serve as cultural incubators where students can explore, perform, and negotiate their identities in meaningful ways. These insights contribute to ongoing discussions about the sociocultural dimensions of English learning in multilingual, postcolonial contexts such as Morocco.

6. Conclusion and Implications

6.1. Conclusion

This exploratory qualitative study investigated the impact of participation in an English Language Club (My English House) on the cultural identities of Moroccan junior high school students. Through interviews, participant observation, and student-generated artifacts, the study found that students used English as a medium to connect with global youth culture, negotiate hybrid cultural identities, and develop a stronger sense of voice and confidence.

These findings support the view that English language learning is deeply intertwined with identity work (Norton, 2013; Kramsch, 2009). In the context of an informal, student-centered English club, language use became a vehicle for personal expression, cultural exploration, and social empowerment. Rather than viewing English solely as a school subject or a tool for economic mobility, students in this study approached the language as a living resource for self-construction and connection.

The club created a space where learners could experiment with new ways of being, both linguistically and culturally. Importantly, it also provided a safe environment for students to reflect on the values, expectations, and aspirations that shape their identities as Moroccan adolescents growing up in a globalized world.

6.2. Implications

English teachers, particularly in EFL contexts, should recognize the role of identity in language learning and create opportunities for students to express themselves creatively and culturally. Integrating music, drama, personal storytelling, and multimedia projects can make learning more relevant and engaging. Teachers are encouraged to foster environments that support cultural hybridity and open dialogue about identity, rather than enforcing rigid models of "native-like" English use.

The findings highlight the need to move beyond purely structural or grammar-based curricula in favor of culturally responsive pedagogy. English programs should include components that promote critical thinking, intercultural awareness, and identity exploration, especially for adolescents. Curriculum developers might consider integrating club-like, project-based learning modules that mirror the organic, expressive nature of informal learning spaces like My English House.

Language education policy in Morocco and similar multilingual contexts should recognize the sociocultural dimensions of English learning. Support for extracurricular programs, English clubs, and teacher-led initiatives can serve as vital complements to formal classroom instruction. Funding, training, and institutional recognition of such programs can help democratize access to meaningful English learning experiences, especially in underserved schools.

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