Negotiating Local Identity in EFL Reading Classrooms: Reflection through Critical Dialogue and Social Issues

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Abstract

Locality and identity play a crucial role in reading practices. In this study, we explored how Thai students in a culturally diverse EFL reading classroom negotiated their local identities through critical dialogue engaged in social issues. To examine this interplay, we investigated how critical dialogue practices influenced students' reflection on locality and identity in reading. The participants of this study were 30 EFL English major students enrolled in a fundamental reading and writing course at a public university in Northeastern Thailand. We collected qualitative data from the participants' reflective journals, teachers' field notes, and interviews, and analyzed them using analytic induction and thematic analysis. Findings reveal that the participants actively negotiated their identities through their locality in reading practices and expressed their thoughts in relation to linguistic, religious, and sociocultural experiences. The findings indicate that the participants negotiated, presented, and affirmed their identities through reading practices by actively engaging in reflective discourse. Our findings suggest that students' locality and identity could establish connections between texts and lived experiences, and subsequently foster their confidence in self-expression. All the findings consequently highlight the vital role of critical dialogue in EFL reading practices, and the significance of locality and identity that shape student engagement.

Keywords: locality and identity, critical dialogue, EFL reading practices

Introduction

Identity is a multifaceted and evolving sense of self that can be shaped by social location, cultural background, and personal experiences (Grumet, 1988; Hall, 1990; Islam and Khan, 2017; Yosso et al., 2009). This process could shape individuals' lives, and foster our belonging, motivation, critical thinking, and lifelong learning (Deci and Ryan, 2000; McAdams, 2009; Wertsch, 1991). For educators, understanding identity construction is important as it directly influences language use and classroom practices, where language plays a vital role in shaping learners' identity (Grumet, 1988; Yosso et al., 2009). This is intertwined with their social interactions and serves as self-representation (Cameron and Larsen-Freeman, 2007; Edwards, 2009; Miller, 2003; Norton, 2013). In this process, individuals' identities could be shaped while they are navigating social complexities. Their engagement of language and identity then reflects its subjectivity produced in various social sites with power relations perceived based on lived experiences.

In EFL contexts, students' identities and localities are central to classroom practices, presenting challenges as students' identities are historically and culturally linked to their funds of knowledge and

perceptions of English (Moll et al., 1992; Teng and Bui, 2020). As Pennycook (2007) and Teng (2019) emphasize, it is crucial to address social meanings beyond linguistic achievement. Language learning serves as both a tool for integration into academic spheres, and an identity marker that shapes learning experiences in relation to cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991; Leibowitz et al., 2005). The interplay of identity and locality influences students' lived experiences, indigenous languages, and self-representation in classroom activities (Chavez, 2007; Gómez Lobatón, 2012; Morita, 2004), highlighting the diverse perspectives that shape students' identity within EFL contexts.

The same challenges apply to EFL reading, where the complex relationship between students' identities and their interpretations of texts, shaped by diverse backgrounds, can be an obstacle (Petchkham, 2018; Wichanee and Thongrin, 2024). Many traditional teaching methods prioritize literal understanding and linguistic elements, while neglecting students' cultural perspectives (Huang, 2015; Sek et al., 2021) This results in a passive learning approach, as described in Freire's (2002) concept of banking education, where students memorize information without critical engagement.

By contrast, critical dialogue offers an alternative by encouraging students to become critically aware as they read. Rooted in critical pedagogy (Freire, 2002), dialogue fosters critical awareness and empowers students to acquire language from their own perspectives. It co-constructs new knowledge by combining local backgrounds with personal understanding (Leeman and Rabin, 2007; Ogodo, 2024). Engaging with texts through a critical lens allows students to connect their identities with the conveyed meanings, drawing on their cultural backgrounds and funds of knowledge. This approach facilitates critical interpretation, empowers students to actively participate in learning, and creates space for critical literacy and dialogue in the classroom.

Despite the growing literature on critical literacy in reading instruction, research on critical pedagogy and its intersection with locality, identity, and EFL reading classrooms remains limited. Thus, this study aims to explore how students in a culturally diverse EFL reading classroom negotiate their local identities through critical dialogue on social issues. This goal could be achieved through the following research questions (RQ): 1) How does students' locality influence their identity negotiation and reading practices in an EFL reading classroom? and 2) How do EFL students in a culturally diverse reading classroom negotiate their local identities through engagement with reading practices and social issues? Through critical pedagogy used as a framework for critical literacy and critical dialogue, this study provides insights for educational practices that highlight the role of students' locality and identity in shaping their reading practices.

Literature Review

Identity can shape instructional practices and influence how teachers approach students' learning and engagement (Grumet, 1988), and challenging dominant ideologies within the curriculum (Yosso et al., 2009). However, there is a lack of research on the intersection of critical pedagogy and identity negotiation in EFL reading classrooms. Consequently, this study explores integrating critical dialogue (Freire, 2002) in EFL contexts, with emphasis on locality, identity, and critical practices.

Locality and Identity

Locality refers to students' residential areas, social structures, geographical locations, cultural norms, and educational contexts. In EFL contexts, locality significantly impacts students' sociocultural capital and language acquisition (Islam and Khan, 2017). In other words, locality could shape students' attitudes, motivations, and communication styles by linking linguistic elements to their historical and cultural backgrounds (Canagarajah, 2005; Rizzi, 2013). In this sense, locality provides a rich array of cultural resources, and enriches learning by integrating lived experiences into language acquisition. According to Li (2021) and Nurlia and Arini (2017), when students relate their cultural backgrounds to reading texts, they tend to engage more deeply and construct ideas more effectively.

As reported in previous studies, integrating students' local cultural elements into teaching could foster their cross-cultural competence. According to Nambiar (2020), English lessons that incorporate students' cultures could improve their language skills and self-esteem. Along the same line, integrating students' local experiences into reading classrooms could enhance their engagement with texts, and thus foster deeper cultural understanding and effective language learning (Fu, 2018). These findings indicate that local capital plays a crucial role in EFL classrooms in terms of students' meaningful learning experiences and self-esteem. This means that teachers, when incorporating both local and global elements into teaching, could help students observe their own identities in their learning process.

Identity is a multifaceted and evolving concept. It is fluid, adaptable, and influenced by social contexts (Buckingham, 2008; Stets and Burke, 2003). Thus, identity could be shaped by individuals' relationships with the world over time (Norton, 2013; Wenger, 1998). In EFL contexts, students' identity is dynamic, meaning that it includes social identities, identity loss, and construction (Kanno, 2009; Noels, 2009). EFL students' identities could be constructed and negotiated by their localities intertwined with their thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors, where language serves as a bridge to community and belonging. In this sense, identity could be constructed or influenced by interactions with interlocutors like teachers or peers.

In EFL reading instruction, students' locality and identity play a crucial role in their learning engagement. Kuo et al. (2023) assert that self-expression enhances students' connections to texts, highlighting the necessity of considering cultural identities for interpretation (Hall, 2014). However, instruction in EFL contexts often emphasizes native speaker norms, leading to alienation and anxiety as students attempt to fit into the target language community (Robinson and Clardy, 2011), contributing to identity loss during the language learning process.

Critical Practices

This study was conducted using the lens of critical pedagogy, aiming to transform passive learning into active engagement by encouraging students to question the status quo and seek meaning through reading activities (Freire, 2002). As McLaren (1988) emphasizes, critical pedagogy could connect classroom teaching, knowledge, institutional structures, and social relations within the community. It promotes self-consciousness and social awareness, encouraging students to build social skills and engage in democratic communities through reflection (Pennycook, 2007; Wink, 2000). Critical literacy, aligned with this approach, reveals social layers in language learning. In reading, texts are socially and ideologically constructed, reflecting the multifaceted perspectives of writers, which include linguistic, cultural, and

political elements (Gee, 2014; Luke, 2012) that go beyond language skills to involve socially constructed and locally negotiated practices (Norton, 2013).

Critical literacy values students' knowledge, which allows them to integrate their local contexts into reading practices, where students make use of their personal and cultural resources to co-construct meaning based on historical and cultural backgrounds alongside target knowledge (Greenberg and Moll, 1990; Lewison et al., 2002). Lewison et al. (2015) propose a four-dimensional model of critical literacy dealing with the commonplace, multiple views, sociopolitical issues, and action for social justice. This model encourages students to explore different perspectives, understand power dynamics, and promote social justice through transformative actions, where teachers and students can discuss language presentation, analyze cultural boundaries, and thus create democratic classroom spaces (Cho, 2010).

In teaching, critical dialogue—an essential component of critical pedagogy—enables teachers to integrate students' cultural and historical perspectives into lessons (Freire, 2002). This approach allows students to bring their lived experiences into classroom practices, fostering reflection and identity awareness. Teachers should help students understand their own identities as well as those of others so that they make EFL instruction more meaningful. However, the use of critical pedagogy tools like critical dialogue to support identity negotiation in EFL reading classrooms remains limited.

This study views critical pedagogy as a foundation for integrating critical literacy and dialogue in EFL classrooms, especially with diverse students. Analyzing multiple meanings in texts helps students link local knowledge to broader social contexts, which then enables them to promote their roles within larger systems and foster greater identity awareness (Lesley, 2004).

Identity Construction or Negotiation in EFL Classrooms

Identity construction or negotiation in EFL classrooms is a dynamic process, influenced by various factors. While research in this area is limited, studies have revealed how students negotiate their identities through classroom interactions. Our analysis identifies five key themes: power dynamics, language use, cultural sensitivity, social issues, and ideological narratives in textbooks.

First, a central theme is power dynamics in identity negotiation between teachers and students. Gómez Lobatón (2012) showed how EFL students in Colombia navigated power structures, while Morita (2004) found that Japanese graduate students in Canada faced marginalization, impacting their identity negotiation. These studies highlight the role of power hierarchies in shaping student identity, although research in contexts like Northeastern Thailand is limited.

Second, language plays a vital role in constructing students' identities and sense of belonging. Teng (2019) linked students' self-perceptions as English learners to their investment in language learning. Then, Teng and Bui (2020) showed how English learning influenced Thai students' connection to international communities. Also, Thongwichit (2013) explored how students' use of first language (L1) contributes to identity negotiation. Further research could explore more on how students' reading practices in multilingual settings interact with their cultural backgrounds, and consequently, influence their identity.

Third, students' cultural sensitivity is crucial for constructing or shaping their identity, especially for those from diverse backgrounds. Kuo et al. (2023) revealed that a lack of cultural sensitivity hindered international students' identity formation. McLaren (1988) promoted critical pedagogy as a means to

challenge cultural norms. However, there has been little research on how these factors influence identity negotiation in EFL reading within Thai contexts.

Fourth, integrating social issues into EFL reading instruction is vital for students' identity development. Wichanee and Thongrin (2024) revealed how critical literacy practices helped Thai students actively engage with critical issues like inequality. Buitrago (2017) explored how gender narratives facilitated discussions on social identities. However, little attention has been paid to research on how EFL students from diverse backgrounds negotiate these issues through critical literacy and critical dialogue.

The final theme emphasizes the role of EFL textbooks in shaping students' identities through embedded ideological messages. Wongsantativanich et al. (2018a) analyzed four Thai beginner textbooks across different historical periods: Ladder of knowledge (Richard L. Morant, late 19th century), Direct method reader for Thai students (M.L. Manich Jumsai, 1930s), English is fun (Ministry of Education, 1980s), and Projects: Play and learn (Chirasak Phibunchon and Sunee Akaramas, 2000s). Findings show shifts from hierarchical depictions to globalization influences. Further analysis (Wongsantativanich et al., 2018b) identified nationalism, morality, and discipline in the Direct method reader, with morality still reinforcing traditional values.

These studies explored the dynamic nature of identity in EFL contexts. Despite significant research on identity construction, gaps remain. There is little research examining how local factors—such as students' locality, L1, religious beliefs, and socio-cultural systems—affect identity negotiation in EFL reading classrooms (Norton, 2010), particularly in Northeastern Thailand. Moreover, few studies explore how students from diverse backgrounds engage with social issues through reading or the role of critical dialogue (Wichanee and Thongrin, 2024) in shaping their identities.

To address these gaps, we explore how students in a culturally diverse EFL reading classroom negotiate their local identities through critical dialogue. This study highlights two major areas: 1) the influence of students' locality on their identity negotiation and reading practices, and 2) the presentation and affirmation of their local identities through engagement with reading practices and social issues. The study seeks to enhance understanding of how local identity intersects with reading practices in EFL classrooms.

Methodology

Research Context, the Course, and the Participants

This study was conducted in a small university situated in upper Northeastern Thailand, which involved students from diverse ethnic groups. Most students were of Thai Lao (39 percent), and Phu Tai (31 percent) descent. They were also from local ethnic minorities, including Yo (11 percent), Kaloeng (10 percent), So (6 percent), and Thai-Puan (3 percent). In this study, we explored the interplay of students' locality and identity in reading practices with a fundamental reading and writing course, where we encouraged the participants to engage with social issues through reading and critical dialogue. The course was aimed at enhancing reading comprehension, developing critical perspectives, and providing a space for students to reflect on their identities. The participants were 30 first-year English major students enrolled in the course in the second semester of the 2021 academic year. Through purposive sampling, participants from various ethnic backgrounds in the Northeast were recruited, with English proficiency levels ranging from A2 to B1 according to the CEFR basis.

Research Design

In this study, we explored how students in an EFL reading class constructed, negotiated, or contested their identities within a real-life classroom setting. We used qualitative research methods (Patton, 2002), emphasizing the participants' reflection on their identities (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Mezirow, 2006). We collected data from teacher observations and field notes, semi-structured interviews, and students' reflective journals. While on tasks, we used critical dialogue (Freire, 2002; Lewison et al., 2015) to promote the participants' reading comprehension, critical analysis of texts, and the skills in the reading-writing connection.

Data Sources and Triangulation for Ensuring Credibility and Reliability

To achieve credibility and reliability in qualitative analysis, we applied data triangulation (Denzin, 2017) in the study by incorporating three data sources. The first was semi-structured interviews, where we collected data from students, analyzed them to align with the research questions, and explored the students' critical consciousness development (Freire, 2002; Patton, 2002). These interviews were piloted and validated by critical education experts (Flick, 2014). In the second data source, researcher field notes were recorded through participant observation (Creswell and Creswell, 2018), focusing on classroom interactions, verbal and non-verbal expressions, and critical pedagogy activities (Jorgensen, 1989). These notes guided follow-up interview questions. The third source included student reflective journals, which documented their experiences with course materials and activities. These journals provided insights into their understanding of critical concepts and identities (Moon, 1999). They could be written in Thai or English to ensure the participants' comfort and deeper reflections.

Research Procedure

This study was conducted in a real-life setting (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018) of a small, public university in Northeastern Thailand. A reading and writing course using a critical pedagogy approach was taught for a semester (Freire, 2002). Following a thorough informed consent process, the research involved students enrolled in the course. Multiple data sources (Creswell and Creswell, 2018) were collected throughout the semester. These sources included classroom observation and field notes, students' reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews. During teaching sessions, we observed the participants' learning behaviors and interactions related to the critical pedagogy activities (Murawski and Lochner, 2011). Our field notes captured the data from these sources. After each class unit, the participants were prompted to write reflective journals. These journals explored their experiences with the course materials and activities, and their evolving sense of identity within the EFL reading context (Moon, 1999). We then collected the participants' reflective journals regularly and reviewed them throughout the semester for our initial interpretations. After the instruction, we interviewed the participants using semi-structured interviews (Creswell and Creswell, 2018) focusing on their experiences in the course and their evolving sense of identity within the EFL reading context.

Teaching Procedure

With the critical literacy model (Lewison et al., 2015) that values students' personal and cultural resources, we selected seven reading texts based on the participants' interests and needs. These texts, including literary writing, narratives, autobiographies, fairy tales, and news (See Table 1), were used

biweekly along with writing practices. Each text was covered within two weeks. This allowed the participants to reflect, modify, and retell their ideas to write their reflective journals.

Table 1 Reading texts in this study

Reading texts	Themes
"Ariel"	Love, beauty, privilege
"Pat and Paulette"	Gender diversity
"Boys or girls: Why do we even have to prefer?"	Gender discrimination
"Coco Chanel"	Fashion and autobiography
"The necklace"	Capitalism, social classes
"Wonder"	Differences in society
"A very old man and enormous wings"	Beliefs and norms

The teaching approach followed a four-step reading process: pre-reading, while-reading, post-reading, and beyond reading (Wichanee and Thongrin, 2024). In the pre-reading stage, we introduced the texts connected to the participants' lived experiences for discussion. We used critical questions to encourage dialogue related to their cultural backgrounds and knowledge (see Table 2). In the while-reading stage, we conducted small group work to promote the participants' cognitive development, allowing them to share local and cultural perspectives. We focused on comprehension activities and critical dialogue to encourage the participants to express and debate ideas using their cultural backgrounds. These stages enhanced the participants' linguistic competence and prepared them for deeper critical literacy.

Table 2 Critical questions

Where might you find this text? How can you tell this?
What is the topic?
What is its purpose? (What is its genre?)
To whom is it written?
Who probably wrote it – what would their position be? In what institution?
Why was the text written? Are there any economic/material interests affecting why it was written in the way it was?
How does the language of the text help to achieve its purpose?
What other ways of writing about the topic are there?
What sort of ideal reader has this text constructed?

We then used the post-reading stage to activate critical analysis. In small groups, the participants interrogated biases, power, beliefs, or hegemonic ideologies in the texts. They were assigned to critique hegemonic power and explore perspectives within their groups before sharing their findings with the class. This stage extended the analysis to sociopolitical contexts relevant to the participants' lives.

In the beyond-reading stage, assignments integrated critical reading with writing practice included presentations, role-playing, and writing short paragraphs. The participants identified and

negotiated examples of inequality from the texts and took action to transform injustices. Students then analyzed demonstrative sentences from the texts and practiced their own writing. Completing all stages, participants would achieve both linguistic aspects, and become aware of cultural representations of the texts and their own identities that could be constructed in their learning process.

Data Analysis

Data were qualitatively analyzed using analytic induction (Katz, 2001) and thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). For analytic induction, we analyzed teacher notes and student journals, focusing on the participants' localities and identities in reading practices. This method helped us uncover unexpected insights, such as students' acceptance of identities through shared cultural roots. With thematic analysis, we analyzed interview transcripts, identifying "reminiscent moments" (Braun and Clarke, 2006) like student resistance to gender norms. Then, the data were categorized into themes. To mitigate bias, we employed a peer-checking process for data analysis, involving two independent coders familiar with the cultures and contexts of Northeastern Thailand. This reliability process helped address ambiguities in the data and strengthen the credibility of the findings.

Ethical Considerations in the Teacher-researcher Role

We acknowledged ethical concerns regarding the teacher-researcher role, especially potential bias and power dynamics (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). We ensured research integrity by integrating peer checking with the two independent raters mentioned earlier and by informing the participants about the voluntary nature of their participation, confidentiality, and anonymity, in accordance with ethical guidelines (BERA, 2018). These measures preserved the validity and trustworthiness of our findings.

Results and Discussion

Through multiple data sources, the findings discussed below feature two key research questions, answered through numerous extracts from the participants' reflective journals and excerpts from their interview transcripts.

RQ1: How does students' locality influence their identity negotiation and reading practices in an EFL reading classroom?

Locality in Reading Practices

With regards to reflection on the roles of locality in reading practices, an analysis of qualitative data revealed the participants' reflection on such a point from various perspectives. Based on the implementation of critical dialogue, they were exposed to a criticality that moved beyond their personal experiences to explore others. That is, the discussion foregrounded the nuances in localities and cultures from diverse cultural contexts. The roles of locality in reading practices were reflected through various points, namely the roles of L1, religious beliefs, and local living situations.

    1. Roles of students' L1

        The first dimension of locality disclosed in the analyzed data was the participants' L1 implementation in reading practices. Evidence from a reflective journal mentioned how their L1 played a facilitative tool

to help them comprehend meaning of reading texts and to reach for a deeper meaning of the terms, in which the participants were able to relate their first-hand experiences to the meaning-making process.

Extract 1

When I read the texts with words that I superficially understand the concept like the term "frustrated," my friend and I understood that it was about anger but I am not sure if it was the exact meaning the author wanted to convey. Then, I got an explanation from a member of another group who explained the concept more clearly since she spoke in the Phu Tai language. That was helpful (Student 05 [Pseudonym], 2024).

Excerpt 1

Researcher: During your discussion about social issues with your group members, you expressed the term *uk ang* (อุกอั่ง) (วิตกกังวล, anxiety) to represent your idea, why did not you just put it in Central Thai language?

Student 07: I automatically said it without knowing it (giggle). I couldn't think of it in Central Thai language though. The word is very common in Northeastern language and I think it is the right word to say in that discussion.

Researcher: Do you often use Northeastern language when you describe things, feeling, or situations?

Student 07: Very often, there are many words in Northeastern language that match better with what I really want to say, and it is like a common language we use to explain anything to each other.

Researcher: Can you relate the use of Northeastern language in classroom setting?

Student 07: When it comes to learning new vocabulary, many times I find it better to clarify the definition in our own language. Like the term "high-maintenance" is better matched with *yak* (ยาก) in our language. I understand the meaning of *yak* (ยาก) rather than *rueng mak* (เรื่องมาก) (Student 07 [Pseudonym], 2024).

From the extract above, the students applied their indigenous language to their meaning-making process when encountering points that were unclear in practices. For example, they found the Phu Tai term "*yak*" more comprehensible than the Central Thai phrase "*rueng mak*" when interpreting the English term "high-maintenance." Their use of L1 in reading practices reflects Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the role of language as a mediational tool in cognitive development. The extract and the excerpt indicate that the participants relied on their L1 to construct meaning and scaffold their understanding of English texts. The experiences of Student 05 and Student 07 in using the Phu Tai language to clarify meaning show how their linguistic resources facilitate deeper comprehension. This could alleviate possible anxiety in language learning in case where the participants could not construe the literal meaning of the target language (Thongwichit, 2013). Moreover, the additional analysis from the teacher's observation field notes captured the participants' discussion using their indigenous language to understand and negotiate meaning of reading texts. And it explained their history on the given issues for the group members. The field notes also helped us to understand another aspect of L1 used in reading activities.

In practice, critical dialogue opened the space for the participants to share and discuss their perceptions of reading issues. L1, in this regard, was taken to bridge their local experiences to the ideas presented in the texts. In this sense, the more students benefited from using L1 in language practices, the more confident they became to use their indigenous languages in the learning process. The following extract and excerpt address how the participants altered their perception of using L1 in classrooms.

Extract 2

I had better understanding in my reading practices when the teacher explained the meaning and concept of the terms in Thai. Sometimes, my friends and I related the concepts presented in the reading texts by using our local languages *and I felt relaxed when I did that.* I think it helped in some ways when we got stuck in reading practices *(*Student 30 [Pseudonym], 2024).

Excerpt 2

Researcher: In classroom or group discussion, when your friend uses L1 to explain the meaning of the texts, do you feel you want to use it or do you stick to English?

Student 24: If I am familiar to the meaning of the text, I continue using English or Central Thai but I sometimes use L1 to make the meaning clearer.

Researcher: Can you tell me why?

Student 24: It is more natural and *I want us (group members) to fully understand the meaning of the text we are reading.*

Researcher: Do you think L1 helps with reading English texts, or it impede your learning progress?

Student 24: *It helps with explaining the meaning.* For example, when my friend explained the term "brush against" to me in Northeastern (*sun,* ชูน). *I understand what the author is saying much better.*

Researcher: How do you feel when you friends use L1 in this way?

Student 24: I feel like *we read as a team* and I *feel more secure that way.* It does not block me from learning English. Instead using L1 gives me confidence since I know I have better understanding of the meaning (Student 24 [Pseudonym], 2024).

The extract above clarifies the shift from insecurity in their own language to having more confidence in their language expression in English classrooms. This phenomenon mirrors the role of locality as a culturally responsive approach, where the participants could negotiate meaning from their understanding. As noted in a teacher's field notes, it took around a month for the students to become comfortable enough to read aloud with more confidence and to reduce their shyness in expressing themselves in English through utterance and literacy practices.

2. Religious beliefs

The second aspect explored in the participants' reflections on locality was the relationship between religious beliefs and the main ideas presented in the reading texts. Premises from the field notes recorded the participants' reflection in their reading activities. They tended to insert their local religious beliefs into reading activities consistent with the story portrayed in the texts. The participants, then, recounted their local religious rituals where men were taken as key informants in all ceremonies. The premise from the field notes seemed to be supported by a statement in a reflective journal. The story told about gender

stratification, which was congruent with the participant's history in their local village, where females are believed to be inferior in religion-related rituals.

Extract 3

When I read the text about gender discrimination, I thought about how my village members celebrated our local festivals by *Kong 14* (the Fourteen Moral Codes). *All of my female relatives were traditionally requested to prepare food, drinks, and sacred things for the men who would be the main managers in the events. I did not want to share this at first*, I was not sure if others would do the same. Later on, my friends also mentioned a similar practice in their villages, so I felt more comfortable to share how my village handled all those events (Student 07 [Pseudonym], 2024).

The participants' reflections on religious beliefs in reading practices reveal the intersection between local cultural knowledge and textual interpretation. For instance, Student 07 referenced *Kong 14*—the fourteen practices or traditional moral codes of the ethnic Lao people, which outline social governance. They emphasize traditional roles of women as daughters and their expected roles of subservience within their households. We found that the participants, including Student 07, applied this understanding of gender roles from their local context to interpret literary texts. This process involved the participants' transitioning from retelling local stories to constructing meaning from broader contexts, where the whole process demonstrated how their personal histories and lived experiences shape their literacy acquisition. Additionally, the participant's account highlighted gender discrimination in religious ceremonies, and illustrated how masculinity is positioned as superior through ingrained norms and religious doctrines (Duangwises, 2019). This finding conforms to Bourdieu's (1991) notion of cultural capital, where deeply embedded societal structures could influence individuals' perceptions and practices. Furthermore, we also found a connection between the participants' religious beliefs and their reading of texts—such as "A very old man with enormous wings," which explores faith and belief systems that govern human behavior. This finding suggests that the participants' identity negotiation could be shaped by their cultural frameworks which are deeply rooted within their society. This finding supports Gee's (2012) discourse theory, which asserts that learners interpret texts through the lens of their socio-historical contexts and lived experiences.

Excerpt 3

Researcher: How could you explain the ways that religion and practices are important in your local community?

Student 14: From my experiences, almost every incident in my community has to be involved with sacred places like temples or shrines where people go for guidance or advice in life, or they may do some rituals in the paddy fields in which the rice goddess lives.

Researcher: What is the reason?

Student 14: I think it is kind of a ritual people have practiced from generation to generation. They believe in something powerful and supernatural. It is similar to the story we read, "A very old man with enormous wings." If he appeared in my village, I am sure that people would react almost the same as villagers in the story (Student 14 [Pseudonym], 2024).

Excerpt 3 exhibits the participants' locality in a form of beliefs subject to sacred places and people in various geographical locations. The similarities between practices in their local backgrounds and religious narratives in the texts were elicited in discussion that took place in critical dialogue. The interview transcript, again, reassures the participants' capability to relate the supernatural beings in reading texts to their sacred local experiences. As was pointed out in the teacher's field notes, the participants revisited their local beliefs and ways of living in order to understand the meaning of the texts. This implies the collaboration of locality in reading practices as it is applied and presented and internal sources for the students to conceptualize their understanding and co-construct the ideas in the meaning-making process.

3. Local living systems

The qualitative analysis leads to the final point related to the participants' social structures on the basis of job opportunities. The participants' discussion was related to the main ideas from the reading text, entitled "Boys or girls: Why even have to prefer?," where the author presented males as the dominant gender in social contexts. The evidence from a reflective journal seemed to reassure the norm that influences various local societies. The norm judges men as money makers, whereas women are believed to be daughters and wives whose role is to handle household chores rather than making an income to support the household. As stated in the extract below, Student 20 articulated the maltreatment related to the adherence to social rules she experienced since she had a part time job to sustain her daily living.

Extract 4

Reading the text about gender preference was relevant to me, as I recalled when I first started to work outside my study schedule. At that time, my family did not allow me to do that because they thought I would not make much money. They said I could never study and work at the same time, unlike boys in my neighborhood, who could do what they want, even work on weekends and late nights and earn a lot of money. It took about three months for my parents to believe that I could work and study, and my grades are still satisfactory (Student 20 [Pseudonym], 2024).

The excerpt from Student 20's reflective journal illustrates how locality influences cognitive processes in reading activities. The participant reflected on the hegemonic power structures within her local community, noting how deeply ingrained norms shape societal expectations—particularly the belief that sons are responsible for generating household income, whereas daughters are often perceived as financial burdens (Kaithong and Sawangdee, 2018).

As the reading text explored gender preferences within a specific cultural context—where boys are valued as future inheritors of family legacies, while girls are expected to fulfill domestic caregiving roles—the participant connected these ideas to her own local background in the Northeastern region. These data were then supported by our field notes, which indicated that the participants frequently drew on their locality when engaging with critical issues related to their personal histories and experiences.

During the discussion sessions fostered by teachers' critical dialogue, the participants' localized perspective could be expanded as they moved beyond their immediate contexts to interpret the texts' meaning through the integration of personal anecdotes and shared narratives from peers. The relationship between the participants' reading practices and their local living systems explains how their identity is negotiated and shaped by their societal norms and expectations (Norton, 2013).

In addition, Student 20's critical engagement with traditional gender roles in employment reveals how local social structures shape the participants' perspectives. This finding is consistent with Norton's (2000) concept of investment in language learning, which suggests that students could negotiate their identities within existing power dynamics. In the context of this study, reading texts about gender roles provided an opportunity for the participants to critically reflect on and challenge the societal expectations embedded in their lived experiences.

Similarly, Student 03's realization of the struggles of LGBTQ individuals demonstrates the role of critical literacy in fostering social awareness. This aligns with Freire's (2002) concept of reading the world through the word, where engagement with texts leads to critical consciousness about social injustices. The discussions in the classroom provided a space for students to challenge dominant discourses and reconsider their perspectives. As we can see, critical dialogue and locality could be the agency to present the potential of engaging local experiences to construe the meaning of texts, as presented in the extract below.

Extract 5

Before I came to this class, I barely thought that English reading texts would be able to relate into my local experiences. The discussion opened the space for me to hear my classmates' anecdotes, which they took from their local backgrounds. I just realized how hard it is for LGBT people to live in this society with all pressures they face, since I think they are amazing and I never thought of all the difficulties they face (Student 03 [Pseudonym], 2024).

The extract from Student 03 indicates that the connection of local experiences and ideas presented in texts serves as a mediator to unveil previously unnoticed facets to the participant. The dialogue lent critical perspectives to the participant to see the overlooked circumstances occurring in others' living situations due to the expectations and pressure within their families and communal environments.

The findings indicate that the participants actively negotiate their identities through their locality in reading practices by drawing on their linguistic, religious, and sociocultural experiences. We found that the participants used their native language (L1) to facilitate comprehension in EFL reading and engage more deeply with texts, particularly when they encountered complex concepts (Pan and Pan, 2010). Their religious practices also played a significant role in data interpretation, as the participants used their faith as a lens for meaning-making (Jun-Min, 2014). It is evident that the participants' local customs and sociocultural dynamics shaped their understanding, as they contextualized ideas through their lived experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). The interaction between reading and the participants' sociocultural backgrounds consequently highlights the essential role of their locality in shaping identity negotiation within reading practices.

Furthermore, our study highlights the dynamic relationship between the participants' locality and identity in EFL reading practices. In class, we used critical dialogue as a platform for the participants to share perspectives and experiences, and this method helped us to understand two aspects of this interplay. First, an examination of locality in the participants' reading processes revealed the interconnection between cultural, linguistic, and social factors. Their L1 use also emerged as a cognitive tool that supported reading comprehension and the breakdown of complex ideas. This then fostered their deeper textual engagement (Bhooth et al., 2014). Second, we found that the participants' religious beliefs influenced

their textual interpretation, and reflected broader cultural dynamics within their local communities. While working on tasks, they often recalled local rituals and traditions to interpret texts with similar themes, particularly in relation to gender hierarchy.

All in all, the extent to which the participants' locality influenced their text interpretation indicates that integrating students' reality into reading instruction can bridge language learning with self-awareness (Islam and Khan, 2017). Students' local living systems—including gender roles and employment opportunities—were also reflected in the analysis. Through our on-going analyses, we learned that they initially tried to understand reading texts through their local lens and grounded their interpretations in their social contexts before applying their perspectives to broader themes (Agustina and Kencana, 2023).

RQ2: How do EFL students in a culturally diverse reading classroom negotiate their local identities through engagement with reading practices and social issues?

While our analysis has foregrounded two central components—identity presentation and identity affirmation—the findings reveal that these are not isolated acts but rather interlocking stages of a broader process we term "identity negotiation." In the context of EFL reading classrooms, identity negotiation involves a continuous, reflective interplay between the ways in which students express their self-conceptions and the subsequent feedback they receive from language, texts, and social interactions. As students engage with reading materials that incorporate pressing social issues, they are compelled to reconcile their personal and cultural experiences with the demands and norms of both the classroom and the wider community. This dynamic process is marked by an initial display of identity (presentation), followed by iterative moments of validation, challenge, and reconfiguration (affirmation), which together enable students to actively co-construct and refine their local identities. By navigating these intertwined processes, learners not only articulate and affirm their positions within their cultural contexts, but also engage in an ongoing negotiation that transforms both their self-perception and their understanding of social roles in a diverse learning environment.

1. **Identity presentation**

The trajectories of reading practices in this study have reflected the participants' identities in a great effect on textual engagements. As reported in the field notes, the participants seemed to express their identities in distinctive ways and the expressions were concerned with time and space. The participants seemed to be more comfortable with identity presentation when they realized that their class members held similar cultural experiences and were from similar cultural contexts. The field notes also captured the circumstances when the participants shared their ideas about the reading texts with a less constrained range of identities.

The data captured identity positioning in textual interpretation of the text, "The necklace," a story about a woman whose ambition to be accepted by high-ranking people led to losing of her identity as a middle-class woman and becoming one who resided in poverty.

Extract 6

After reading the text "The necklace," I flashbacked to the first day I came to the university. I was awkward introducing myself to the class because I was not sure how my classmates would react to my background story, my English accent, or my opinion. I ended up telling only my name and

my student number. Details like my hometown, interests, things I like were completely skipped. Maybe that's how Mathilde felt about herself (Student 06 [Pseudonym], 2024).

Extract 7

I felt totally awkward during the very first discussion. I read the text slowly and saw some points I did not agree with. After the sixth week, I felt more confident to voice my perspectives. The questions opened up conflicts and we could finally work them out (Student 24 [Pseudonym], 2024).

Students' initial hesitation in fully presenting their identities aligns with Norton's (2000) concept of investment in language learning, which posits that identity is shaped by power relations and the perceived risks and rewards of participation. In Extract 6, the participant's reluctance to share personal details reflects concerns about social positioning within the classroom. This experience parallels the struggles of Mathilde in "The necklace," as the student draws a connection between her self-consciousness and the character's sense of inadequacy.

Student 06 related the concept of conformity to others' values to her own experiences, and thus gained a deeper understanding of her social positioning. In EFL classrooms, as students became more comfortable engaging with their peers, they were more willing to share their perspectives, even in cases of disagreement. Here, identity presentation emerged as students reflected on their personal experiences within broader social contexts. This shift was evident in their transition from initial discomfort to growing confidence in expressing their identities.

In Extract 7, Student 24 describes a gradual shift from feeling "awkward" in discussions to gaining confidence in voicing their perspectives. This indicates that identity is continuously shaped through interaction and negotiation of meaning. Through this negotiation, students construct their identities by challenging and refining their perspectives in a social learning environment.

Drawing on their personal and cultural backgrounds, students navigated points of compatibility and tension within the reading texts. Their reflections on social norms highlighted how locality and cultural dynamics shape identity presentation, emphasizing the role of critical self-awareness in fostering self-expression within both individual and social identities.

2. Identity affirming

The final section presents the sense of identity acceptance and maintenance that the participants reflected in their journals, combined with descriptive explanations from observation field notes. The finding reveals identity affirming alongside reading practices. The participants seemed to eventually realize and accept their identities that were constructed and reconstructed. Moreover, their local identities remained in critical discussion when they shared their locally cultural experiences. The evidence taken from a reflective journal assures identity affirmation that internally and initially occurred in recognizing oppressive circumstances and shifted beyond to rejecting unjust situations.

Extract 8

For quite a while now, I have found myself with more confident vibes in expressing my ideas and thoughts in other classes and also in my daily activities with my friends. I was so worried before about how people judge one another. Now, I can see that sometimes it happens, but sometimes I was the one who thought too much about it. Even so, when I know that it is fine to share our ideas and identity, I feel more comfortable and relaxed (Student 25 [Pseudonym], 2024).

The data showed that the participants developed a stronger sense of self as they engaged in classroom discourse. Extract 8 highlights a transformation in self-perception, where the student moves from being overly concerned with judgment to feeling more comfortable in expressing their ideas. This aligns with Gee's (2000) concept of identity as a discursive construct, emphasizing that identity is not fixed, but emerges through interactions and participation in different social settings.

In Excerpt 4, Student 01 identifies with Pat from "Pat and Paulette" and expresses self-acceptance despite societal resistance. The student's response illustrates Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) relational approach to identity, which argues that identity is constructed through alignment or disalignment with social norms. By stating, "if I were in the same shoes, I just have to be patient," the student demonstrates agency in identity formation, reinforcing the view that identity is both socially negotiated and self-asserted.

Excerpt 4

Researcher: From the text ("Pat and Paulette"), how would you position yourself in such a situation?

Student 01: I agreed with Pat to stand for her love, even if her family would exclude her from the house.

Researcher: Why is that?

Student 01: (Laugh) I do not think we are going to be happy for the long term if we are not ourselves. Pat could be accepted by her society if she pretended to be straight. But I do not think that is going to last long.

Researcher: If you were Pat, would you do the same?

Student 01: Certainly, I actually saw a similar situation in my local community. People may be against you at first, but they will finally get used to it. So, if I were in the same shoes, I would have to be patient at first (laugh) (Student 01 [Pseudonym], 2024).

The data suggest that students negotiate, present, and affirm their identities through reading practices by engaging in reflective discourse, drawing connections between texts and lived experiences, and developing confidence in self-expression. Their evolving sense of identity aligns with sociocultural theories of identity construction, particularly regarding language, power, and participation in learning communities.

One significant area where students negotiate identity is in relation to gender and sexual identity, particularly within the sociocultural constraints of their local communities. Regarding homosexuality in the Northeastern context, local communities often perceive gender diversity as atypical, reinforcing the notion of oddity in relation to gay and lesbian identities (Capaldi, 2020). This perception is further rooted in the belief that gender diversity is unnatural and even a form of divine punishment (Meethaisong, 2021). However, an interview with Student 01 highlighted the process of identity affirmation, demonstrating a negotiation between dominant social norms and individual identity. The student's reflection aligns with Norton's (2010) concept of resistance, which views identity formation as an ongoing process of investment in target norms while simultaneously challenging and redefining them.

The identity construction in this study reveals an intricate relationship between the participants' locality and their identity, as both elements are deeply intertwined within their cultural dynamics.

The participants, who were EFL students from diverse sociocultural backgrounds, engaged in identity presentation by drawing on their personal experiences and sociocultural contexts to interpret reading texts. Given their different lived realities, many participants found that those characters' social experiences and living environments described in the texts were remarkably different from their own. As Buitrago (2017) suggests, students' prior knowledge and personal experiences play a crucial role in their meaning-making process, and thus allow them to negotiate textual interpretations within their own cultural frameworks.

Closely associated with the participants' identity presentation is their identity affirmation. Our finding indicated that the participants revisited and reinforced their sense of self amidst social pressures and restrictive norms. They did not conform entirely to dominant ideologies. Instead, they actively engaged in a negotiation process that balanced societal expectations with the preservation of their personal identity. This process underscores the dynamic nature of identity, and challenges the notion of fixed, static identities. As Teng (2019) argues, students' identities could be fluid based on their social roles and contextual factors. As a result, their identities could be constructed or reconstructed by an interplay of sociocultural influences and individual agency. The data of this study strongly support this view.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the dynamic process of participants' identity negotiation could be influenced by their language use, lived experiences, and classroom discourse. The participants' reflections clearly reveal how they negotiate, present, and affirm their identities through reading practices, all of which are drawn from personal experiences, emotions, and evolving self-perceptions. Our analysis demonstrates that identity negotiation is an ongoing, adaptive process that allows students to integrate their cultural and personal narratives into learning contexts, thereby continually redefining who they are as readers and learners. These processes could be fostered by the teacher's use of critical dialogue to promote students' reading practices and their critical perspectives on locality and identity (Lewison et al., 2015). By incorporating reflective discussions that bridge students' personal contexts with academic content, teachers empower learners to actively engage in constructing and revising their identities in meaningful ways. As Moll et al. (1992) emphasize, critical dialogue fosters students in analyzing texts through the lens of their local experiences and funds of knowledge, which reinforces the role of their background knowledge, lived experiences, and metacognitive skills in their meaning-making process. To make reading instruction more responsive to students' identities, teachers could use critical dialogue to foster students' sense of connection (Freire, 1970) and provide a space for students to sustain their cultural identities through diverse perspectives, local experiences, and critical views (McLaughlin and DeVoogd, 2004). Through a classroom environment that supports negotiation and shared inquiry, teachers could encourage students to assert their unique backgrounds in their learning process, ultimately enriching classroom engagement and dynamics (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

This study further reinforces the locality and identity of students in EFL classroom practices. Our findings suggest that critical dialogue is a valuable tool for fostering critical perspectives in EFL reading as it nurtures students' funds of knowledge and local capitals throughout the reading process (Lewison et al., 2015). The classroom, as a microcosm of broader society, enables students to see the relevance of their local identities in academic settings, cultivating a sense of ownership over their educational journey. Our findings are also consistent with Norton's (2013) concept of investment, which

views identity as socially and historically constructed, where students' inquiries and interests connect their local identities and perceptions with mainstream knowledge. This process facilitates the construction and co-construction of meaning beyond individual cognition. Moreover, our study highlights the need for critical dialogue classrooms to serve as democratic spaces (Freire, 2002), where students feel comfortable raising questions, sharing personal experiences, and engaging with diverse perspectives. This exposure encourages students to critically reflect on their realities and move beyond passive absorption of one-sided information.

Despite the insights from this study, there are some limitations. The study's duration was limited to one semester, and future research could benefit from a longer timeframe to explore identity fluidity more deeply. Additionally, some of the reading texts used in this study were limited in scope, so future studies should include a wider range of texts and contexts. Also, the small sample size restricted the findings to the Northeastern region, suggesting that future research should consider larger participant groups and varied cultural contexts. Moreover, future studies should examine the interplay between locality, identity, and other language skills such as writing, listening, and speaking, as well as in specialized English courses. Recognizing these constraints is vital, as it highlights the inherent complexity of capturing identity negotiation in diverse settings and offers clear pathways for future investigations to build on our findings.

This study underscores the significance of students' local identities in shaping their reading practices. The findings reinforce the established notion that locality and identity are integral aspects of learning processes (Vygotsky, 1978). By foregrounding local cultural narratives and personal experiences, this study illuminates how identity and locality serve as critical levers for enhancing both reading engagement and comprehension. In doing so, the study contributes valuable insights to EFL classroom practices by encouraging educators to develop reading instruction that acknowledges and leverages students' diverse backgrounds. Our research findings can inform the development of future projects that aim to refine instructional practices within the EFL domain, in due course benefiting the wider educational community. Ultimately, embracing students' local identities within academic practice opens up innovative approaches for teaching, learning, and community engagement—setting a promising agenda for the future of EFL instruction.

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