A Systematic Literature Review on the Influence of Social and Cultural Identity on EFL Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

This systematic literature review examines the impact of social and cultural identity on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reading comprehension. The review synthesizes findings from ten peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2025, selected through a structured search process and analyzed using inductive content analysis. The results indicate that learners' cultural identity has a significant impact on their reading comprehension, particularly when reading materials align with their own cultural backgrounds. Culturally familiar texts enhance motivation, engagement, and comprehension by activating prior knowledge and validating learners' experiences. Conversely, texts that are culturally unfamiliar or misaligned may hinder understanding and reduce motivation. The review also emphasizes the importance of social identity and self-perception, such as self-esteem and a sense of belonging, in shaping learners' reading development. This study highlights the need for culturally responsive teaching approaches that recognize the diverse identities of EFL learners, promoting both language proficiency and intercultural awareness.

Keywords: cultural identity, EFL, motivation, reading comprehension, social identity

Introduction

In an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, reading comprehension is far more than just decoding words on a page. It is a process that weaves together language ability, cultural understanding, and a learner's sense of self. Recent research has shown that learners' self-perceptions, especially in terms of their social and cultural identities, significantly affect how they engage with texts and how well they comprehend what they read.

Self-identity is a broad and complex concept that encompasses personal beliefs, social roles, and cultural background, all of which influence how a learner approaches reading in a second language. According to Jia (2019), identity is not fixed; it evolves through interaction and experience. For EFL learners, this means they are constantly shaping and reshaping their identity in the language learning process, and this ongoing negotiation influences their motivation, self-confidence, and ultimately their reading performance.

Cultural identity, as part of self-identity, also plays a key role in how students relate to reading materials. Jia (2019) suggests that when EFL instruction emphasizes the target language culture while overlooking learners' own cultural backgrounds, students may face identity conflict. This can reduce

their connection to the text and hinder comprehension. Likewise, social identity—how learners see themselves in relation to their communities—has a notable influence. Mohammadi and Izadpanah (2019) found that a strong sense of social belonging among Iranian EFL students correlated with higher language proficiency, including reading.

Internal factors tied to self-perception, such as self-esteem, interest, and anxiety, also play a role. It has been identified that students who experience difficulties in reading comprehension often experience this because of internal challenges related to self-identity, including low motivation and anxiety. In line with this, Hall (2016) argue that a learner's reader identity, or how they see themselves as readers, directly affects how they process and engage with texts. Those who identify as confident readers generally show better comprehension skills.

In the Indonesian context, Satriani (2017) found that students with higher self-esteem tend to have better reading comprehension, highlighting the universal nature of self-identity in language learning. Cultural familiarity also contributes significantly to reading outcomes. Miftakh (2019) reported that students performed better when reading texts that reflected their own culture, suggesting that culturally relevant materials can make reading more accessible and meaningful.

Furthermore, a learner's identity does not develop in isolation—it is deeply influenced by their surrounding social and cultural environment. The interaction between individual experiences and broader societal forces plays a central role in shaping how students see themselves and what they believe they can achieve. Studies have emphasized that when educators acknowledge and affirm students' cultural identities in the classroom, it can create a stronger sense of belonging and self-worth. This, in turn, has a positive effect on students' motivation and active participation in reading tasks. A learning environment that embraces cultural diversity can thus contribute significantly to the overall growth and confidence of EFL learners (Peng, 2023).

In addition, fostering intercultural competence has become increasingly important in enhancing reading comprehension in EFL settings. Learners who develop an awareness of cultural differences and can engage in cross-cultural communication are often more successful in interpreting texts that come from unfamiliar contexts. Intercultural understanding allows students not only to grasp the literal meaning of a text but also to appreciate the cultural values and assumptions embedded within it. To support this, educators are encouraged to integrate intercultural learning into their teaching practices, preparing students to interact with a broad spectrum of texts in a more thoughtful and informed way (Ma, 2023).

Previous research has highlighted that Iranian EFL learners with strong sociocultural identity often face challenges in achieving English language proficiency due to the interplay of deeply ingrained cultural, religious, and political factors. The researchers examined the correlation between sociocultural identity and EFL proficiency among Iranian learners by employing a descriptive correlational study. The study utilized the Oxford Quick Placement Test to assess EFL proficiency and a questionnaire to measure sociocultural identity levels. Results indicated that stronger sociocultural identity profiles were associated with lower proficiency in English learning. Results indicated that stronger sociocultural identity profiles were associated with lower proficiency in English learning. This negative correlation underscores how deeply ingrained cultural, religious, and political factors within Iranian society contribute to resistance or reduced motivation toward

mastering English as a foreign language (Mohammadi & Izadpanah, 2019). Previous research also shows that cultural context plays a significant role in reading comprehension (Antonio et al., 2024). demonstrated that students better comprehend texts that are culturally familiar to them, as these texts align with their prior knowledge and experiences. In their study, 120 students from Barranquilla were tested using texts with varying cultural contexts, including informal, informational, and literary readings. The results revealed that students showed higher comprehension accuracy with culturally familiar texts, while unfamiliar contexts posed greater challenges. This finding underscores the importance of integrating students' cultural backgrounds into educational approaches to enhance motivation and comprehension outcomes.

Although previous studies have explored individual elements of learner identity, such as self-esteem, cultural background, and social belonging, there is a limited understanding of how these interconnected factors collectively influence reading comprehension in EFL contexts. Many studies focus on these aspects in isolation, but few have investigated how social and cultural identity shapes students' ability to engage with and comprehend English texts. This study aims to conduct a systematic review of literature on the influence of social and cultural identity on EFL reading comprehension, highlighting key factors like cultural familiarity, reader confidence, and a sense of belonging that affect students' reading development. Understanding these dynamics is crucial, as identity is not static but evolves through language use, social interactions, and cultural engagement. By exploring the intersection of identity and reading comprehension, this research will provide insights for more inclusive teaching strategies that reflect the diverse backgrounds of EFL students. To address the existing research gap, this study will conduct a systematic literature review focusing on how social and cultural identity influences reading comprehension in English as a foreign language (EFL). This review will collect and analyze previous empirical studies from leading academic databases published between 2015 and 2025. By summarizing these findings, this study aims to provide a clear picture of how learners' identities affect their reading comprehension and offer.

Method

This research was conducted using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design to synthesize research findings related to the influence of social and cultural identity on EFL reading comprehension. The review process adhered to the PRISMA Flow Diagram (Moher et al., 2010), which consists of four key stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. The main variables in this study were social and cultural identity (independent variables) and English reading comprehension in EFL contexts (dependent variables). The research population consisted of studies related to English reading comprehension as a foreign language and identity, while the sample included 10 peer-reviewed journal articles that fulfilled the inclusion criteria. This framework was applied to ensure the transparency, rigor, and systematicity of the literature selection process.

During the identification stage, a comprehensive and structured search was carried out across several databases, including Google Scholar, the Publish or Perish application, and Google. The search strategy involved the use of multiple keywords such as "identity," "reading," "reading comprehension," "EFL," "cultural background," and "social identity" to retrieve relevant literature. In

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this study, the researcher also applied the CIMO Logic Framework, which consists of four components—Context, Intervention, Mechanism, and Outcome (Denyer et al., 2008), to help capture and organize important information from each article in a clear and structured way.

The next step in the process was screening, where duplicate articles and those that did not meet the publication year criteria were removed. Only studies published between 2015 and 2025 were included. This time range was chosen to ensure the research remains relevant to current EFL learning conditions. Any articles older than 10 years were excluded.

After that, the eligibility stage was carried out to further narrow down the articles by checking whether they truly aligned with the research focus. The researcher used specific inclusion criteria—such as relevance to social and cultural identity, cultural background, reading comprehension, and learners of English as a Foreign Language. This helped ensure that only studies directly related to the topic were brought into the review, keeping the findings focused and meaningful. The final step was inclusion, where a final collection of articles was compiled. These were the studies that passed all previous steps and would be used for deeper analysis.

To explore and understand the findings from the selected articles, the researcher used inductive content analysis. This method involved three key phases. First, during the preparation phase, the researcher decided what part of the articles would be analyzed—specifically, the sentences found in the results and discussion sections. Next, in the organization phase, the researcher went through a process of open coding, grouping similar ideas, creating categories, and abstracting the main themes. This helped to bring out the patterns and insights across the different studies, forming a strong foundation for the synthesis. The third phase is the reporting phase (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

In the preparation stage, the researchers selected 10 relevant peer-reviewed journal articles that explored the influence of social and cultural identity on reading comprehension in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts. From each article, specific sentences or segments from the results and discussion sections were extracted as units of analysis. These excerpts were carefully examined to ensure their relevance to the research focus. In the organizing stage, the researchers conducted open coding by assigning labels to text segments that reflected recurring ideas or concepts. For example, the statement: "Students tend to comprehend texts more effectively when the cultural background of the reading material aligns with their own cultural identity." These codes were then recorded in a coding sheet and grouped based on conceptual similarity, particularly in terms of cultural representation in reading materials and its effect on comprehension. In the categorization stage, the researchers interpreted each group of codes to identify emerging patterns and core themes. Codes such as "cultural identity" formed the central theme of "The Role of Cultural Identity in EFL Reading Comprehension." This was followed by the abstraction process, in which the category was refined and synthesized into a broader understanding of how cultural identity supports EFL students' comprehension of English texts. Finally, in the reporting stage, the final findings were systematically described, supported by direct quotes and synthesized insights from the ten selected articles. The findings emphasized how the connection between students' cultural identity and reading content plays a significant role in enhancing reading comprehension in foreign language learning contexts.

Results and Discussion

The results from the ten selected peer-reviewed articles revealed a consistent and significant influence of cultural identity on EFL reading comprehension. Most of the studies indicated that when reading materials reflected learners' cultural backgrounds, students demonstrated improved understanding, higher motivation, and deeper engagement with texts. Cultural familiarity enabled learners to activate prior knowledge, which in turn supported better meaning-making. For example, one study found that learners were more likely to comprehend texts that incorporated elements of their own cultural experiences, as these references allowed them to connect personally with the material (Erten & Razı, 2009). This connection helped bridge the gap between linguistic decoding and conceptual understanding.

Moreover, the representation of students' cultural identity within the reading materials appeared to contribute positively to their emotional and motivational responses. Learners reported feeling more confident and interested when they saw their own culture acknowledged in the classroom. Such validation fostered a sense of belonging and encouraged active participation, which are essential for developing reading proficiency in a foreign language. The inclusion of culturally relevant content not only made texts more relatable but also positioned students' identities as assets in the learning process rather than obstacles. Bahrami (2018) highlighted that learners from minority cultural groups demonstrated greater engagement with materials that validated their identity, reinforcing the motivational benefits of culturally inclusive texts.

Conversely, the studies also highlighted that when reading materials were culturally unfamiliar or misaligned with learners' lived experiences, comprehension became more difficult. In such cases, students encountered challenges in interpreting the text, especially when cultural norms, values, or references differed significantly from their own. This misalignment often led to confusion, disengagement, or even resistance to the reading activity. One article pointed out that texts embedded with unfamiliar cultural norms posed significant challenges for learners, particularly when those norms contradicted their own lived experiences (Karimi & Nafissi, 2017). The absence of cultural resonance made it harder for learners to construct meaning, indicating that language comprehension is closely tied to cultural understanding.

These findings underline the critical role of cultural identity in the context of EFL reading comprehension. They suggest that language learning is not only a cognitive process but also a cultural one, where understanding is shaped by the learner's background, values, and experiences. This aligns with Bahram (2018) and Karimi and Nafissi (2017), who emphasized that cultural relevance in reading materials improves engagement and comprehension. Similarly, Erten and Razı (2009) noted that students' prior cultural knowledge facilitates deeper meaning formation. Integrating culturally responsive texts in EFL instruction can thus enhance not only linguistic skills but also learners' sense of identity and agency. At the same time, the review emphasizes the need for a balanced approach— while affirming learners' cultural identities, educators should also gradually introduce diverse cultural perspectives to develop global literacy and intercultural competence. Ultimately, fostering a culturally inclusive reading environment can lead to richer, more meaningful learning experiences for EFL students.

Conclusion

This systematic review concludes that social and cultural identity play a crucial role in shaping EFL students' reading comprehension. When students interact with texts that reflect their own cultural background, they become more motivated, emotionally connected, and able to activate relevant prior knowledge, which ultimately leads to deeper understanding. Social identity also influences comprehension by fostering a sense of belonging, self-confidence, and engagement in the learning community.

Based on the research objectives, this review confirms that effective reading comprehension in EFL contexts is not only a cognitive process but also a cultural process. Therefore, educators are motivated to adopt culturally responsive teaching practices that respect learners' identities and integrate various cultural perspectives. Thus, reading instruction can become more meaningful, inclusive, and supportive of linguistic and intercultural competency development.

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