THE CONSTRUCTION AND NEGOTIATION OF AGENTIVE IDENTITY: A CASE STUDY OF A MALAYSIAN STUDENT

*Nadia Tun & Zurina Khairuddin

Centre of English Language Studies, Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Gong Badak Campus, 21300 Kuala Nerus, Terengganu, Malaysia.

*Corresponding author: zkurina@unisza.edu.my

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ABSTRACT

Background and Purpose: The success of the government’s aspiration into developing holistic Malaysian students not only lies in what has been going in today’s classroom but also outside classroom in which the fundamental process of seeking for knowledge, skills and competencies. Holistic identity is not a construct that is inherited, nor does it remain constant but is developed and evolves from different academic encounters faced by the students. Thus, the present study investigated the construction and negotiation of a student’s identity from her interaction within academic settings in Malaysian Higher Education Institution (MHEI).

Methodology: The study employed qualitative research and linguistic ethnography approaches utilising case study as the research design. One (1) Malaysian student from a MHEI was chosen using purposive sampling technique. The data for the study were collected from classroom observations, interview and focus group discussion. The data were analysed using thematic analysis and identity in interaction framework analysis.

Findings: The participant of this study constructed and negotiated an agentive identity during the process of making conscious decisions in her academic experiences. Agentive identity could be seen emerged from her interactions and indexed from her behaviour and opinion during her academic encounters (inside and outside the classroom). The participant’s engagement behaviour portrayed could be interpreted as being agentive from the lens of the two principles in identity framework analysis namely; the emergence principle and the indexicality principle.
Contributions: Experiencing different educational contexts could help to shape Malaysian students to be balanced, academically and morally, as aspired by the Malaysia National Education Philosophy. Malaysian students are seen as the catalysts who would lead the country in the future. The findings of this study could also be used as a reference on how educational practices reflect on the production of individuals as manifested in the NEP. Examining how students construct and negotiate their identities in a new or/and familiarised academic convention could enlighten the stakeholders such as the students themselves, lecturers, tutors, parents, and ministry to be more flexible, allowing students to be empowered within appropriate contexts.

Keywords: Malaysian students, students’ identity, higher education, student agency, agentive identity


1.0 INTRODUCTION

The idea of Malaysian identity usually revolves around the identity itself and its differences across ethnicity. Malaysia is well known for its unique diversity of religions and cultural practices, and beliefs. Identity is one’s representation of who they are to themselves and to others (Benwell & Stokoe, 2011). Claude (1995) offers a similar viewpoint of identity which he states that identity is how we see ourselves and how we think others see us. The revolution of identity in Malaysia is greatly influenced by its present notion of what constitutes a nation, series of present and historical social and political events and daily-living experiences in Malaysia (Claude, 1995). Hence, ways of being recognised and labelled in Malaysia across nations is complicated and negotiated (Claude, 1995). This is because the recognition and labelling of Malaysians are multiple, shifting and contradictory as it requires them to negotiate with these labels in their everyday life (Claude, 1995). Referring to Malaysian educational context, the government has been committed in the effort to produce students who are “balanced, resilient, inquisitive, principled, informed, caring, patriotic as well as an effective thinker, communicator and team player” through its education system (MOE Malaysia, 2013). Despite Malaysia’s ongoing effort in developing students with mentioned identities, Malaysian students were found not possessing some of the attributes highlighted in its education policy. For example, in terms of effective thinkers, students were found at the satisfactory level of performance in the international assessment, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Studies (TIMSS) and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in which these
tests examine students’ thinking skills. In the aspect of communication, Malaysian graduates were also reported to lack English language proficiency and skills by the industries (MOE Malaysia, 2013).

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

As students’ identities are constructed and negotiated through socialisation, it is important to discuss and acknowledge the process and elements involved in students’ identity construction and negotiation in an academic setting. According to Vygotsky (1978), Sociocultural theory (SCT) is initially an idea of the development of the mind. From the lens of SCT, one’s mind and consciousness are socially constructed in nature, and it is believed to be the significant result of one’s social internalisation. The theory also regards learning as a social phenomenon which is contextualised within culture, history, and institutions. SCT highlights the notion that the development of one’s thinking and ability to perform certain skills, behaviours, feelings or beliefs are the results of his/her social interactions with others. According to Vygotsky (1978), this social interaction is then internalised and becomes assimilated with others (in terms of the behaviours, feelings, beliefs, etc). In relation to the present study, SCT is seen as social discursive practices that implicates identity construction and negotiation.

Social structure and cultural interpretations of some linguistics forms, practices and ideologies within SCT could be best comprehended by looking at the practical engagement of novices with others (Duranti, Ochs, & Schieffelin, 2012). The practical engagements in this study refer to how students engage and interact with others in an academic setting. These practical engagements could also be seen and analysed by utilising the concept of Academic Discourse Socialisation (ADS). Duff (2007) illustrates ADS as the members’ capability to socialise and interact by blending into a new academic discourse community. This ability may develop when the members participate in the practical academic engagements between expert and/or novice members within the community and go through the cognitive experiences among them. In short, it is crucial for the novices or newcomers to develop such ability if they would want to be recognised or accepted into the targeted community. ADS occurs in co-constructed interactions in academic settings involving a dynamic process where it is socially positioned and contextualised (that are multimodal, in different diverse languages and rich in various kinds of texts) (Morita, 2004; Duff, 2010). Successful socialisation in the academic setting would eventually lead the members to enjoy and embrace increased and improved participation, to be capable to take different roles and could develop and enhance the adaptability skills and establish the membership in a community (Morita & Kobayashi, 2008). As a novice member
in the community, successful socialisation could be accomplished by engaging in various language mediated activities (Duff, 2002). In the context of the present study, the Malaysian students’ learning experience in Malaysian Higher Education Institution (MHEI) is a part of the socialisation process occurring within the academic context. ADS is also premised on the involvement of the negotiation of power and identity (Duff, 2010). The students experience the journey within the academic community serving academic purposes would eventually lead them to develop their identity and own voice.

Community of Practice (CoP) by Wenger (1998) is another theoretical framework that is utilised in the present study. Wenger (1998) argues that learning is not an activity that can be de-contextualised from other situations or life experiences. She suggested a model called ‘social theory of learning’ which incorporates four components: meaning (learning as experience), practice (learning as doing), community (learning as belonging) and identity (learning as becoming). This theory is not meant to replace other learning theory models, but it is an effort in providing better understanding of how learning functions and accommodates within social structure. CoP begins with the premise that humans are socially constructed, and interaction with the world is a meaningful goal in learning. Wenger asserts that the four components mentioned are essentials to “characterise social participation as a process of learning and knowing” (Wenger, 1998, pp. 4-5). CoP is described as participants’ mutual engagement, negotiation of a shared enterprise and development of various shared resources for meaning creation. In other words, as participants engage with others, they are linked by their negotiation of their pursuits which are connected to the social structure of the academic community they are in. Participants in the CoP share and re-construct cultural and historical resources in defining their identities upon their relationship to the academic community.

2.1 Identity and Interaction
Identity is socially constructed which involves interaction between one person with another. “Agreeing, arguing, comparing, negotiating and cooperating” are crucial components in identity construction hence perceived as social identities (Hyland, 2010, p. 3). Identity is continually shifting, ongoing and constructed through interactions with others (Cameron, 2001; Hyland, 2010). To reiterate, identity is a part of a social construct. Cooley (1902) explores that identity is produced through socialisation with others and it is produced and reproduced as people interact with others. Identity is not perceived as one’s belonging to themselves but between individuals and within social relations in which they are socially and historically constituted (Vygotsky, 1978). Hence, the notion of identity tandems with the constructivism
approach where meaning, or reality is seen to be constructed via social interactions (Park, 2007). Social constructivism views knowledge as “neither fixed, autonomous, and free-floating nor contained only as propositional objects in individual minds” (Wells, 1999, p. 140). Social constructivists are advocates to these elements when it comes to learning process; “1) it is important to have prior experience when reinforcing new learning, 2) during the learning process the learner must participate actively, 3) it is important to negotiate within the learning environment, 4) a social interaction element is required for the construction of an individual’s knowledge, and 5) learning arises most effectively in a sociocultural environment.” (Amin & Rajadurai, 2018, p. 499). Hence, knowledge is “constructed and reconstructed between participants in specific situated activities, using the cultural artefacts at their disposal, as they work towards the collaborative achievement of a goal” (Wells, 1999, p. 140).

From the lens of constructivism, in the development of learning, individuals like students are considered as unique and complex in the way they create meaning in their interactions with not only their physical, historical and sociocultural background but also with others’ in academic settings (Rajadurai, 2010). Rajadurai (2010) adds that during the interactions, students could also position themselves and construct new identities. He suggests that students construct and negotiate their identity in association with others in their interaction in the academic setting, including their interaction with lecturers and peers. This interaction is very much an emergent and ongoing process (Giroir, 2014; Winchester, 2013; Rajadurai, 2010). In this context, the negotiation of students’ identity emerges as they assert, define, modify, challenge and/or support their reflection of themselves and of others (Ting-Toomey, 1999). This could be seen when students are engaged in the dialogic process of socialisation into the expectations of the Community of Practice (CoP) they are in (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Norton & Toohey, 2001). Regardless of their cultural, professional or academic goals, the “ways of doing things, ways of thinking, ways of talking, beliefs, values and power relations” emerge from a mutual engagement and the pursuit of common goals with others in CoP that they are in (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992, p. 464; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

In the context of the present study, this mutual engagement and the pursuit of common goals is accomplished by students in Malaysian Higher Education Institution (MEHI). Students may construct their identities in relation to membership in the Community of Practice (CoP) through their attempts to claim academic group membership within the academic context. Hence, this is where the academic identity of a group or individual is negotiated, reinforced and challenged through daily communication or interaction practices. In other words, identity is a dynamic and negotiated occurrence embedded in the context of social connections and
overlapping memberships. The present study aims to investigate the construction and negotiation of a Malaysian student’s identity in a Malaysian Higher Education Institution (MHEI). As mentioned, and explained in the previous sections, this study will utilise the theory of Sociocultural Theory (SCT), Academic Discourse Socialisation (ADS) and Community of Practice (CoP) when looking into a student’s identity and his/her interactions in a MHEI.

2.2 Agency

Duranti et al. (2012) proposes that agency is a trait possessed by individuals and they perform agency when they use the language. Within the context of this study, the participant’s engagement and/or disengagement behaviour could be interpreted as agentive (Houen et al., 2016; Klemencic, 2017; James & James, 2012; Ewald & Wallace, 1994). These researchers assert that agency in students means ‘having the ability to decide on tasks, choosing topics for discussion and making decisions regarding what contributions get counted as knowledge’ and students’ quality of self-reflectiveness and their conscious action and communication with their surroundings. Agentive identity is defined as discursively positioning oneself of being ‘active, responsible, authoritative and in control’ (Lan, 2020, p. 3). Hence, agency could be understood as “socioculturally mediated capacity to act purposefully and reflectively on [one's] world” (Rogers & Wetzel, 2013, p. 63). The notion is also in accordance with Van’s (2008) statement that agency is one’s ability to act or make consensus in a socially constructed experience (Van, 2008). Jaaskela et al. (2020, p. 3) defines student agency as “individuals’ capability to engage in intentional, self-defined, meaningful, and autonomous action in circumstances constrained by power relations and structural, contextual factors”. Klemencic’s (2015) work is heavily influenced by Bandura’s socio-cognitive and sociological viewpoint (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) thus identifies student agency as:

‘a process of student actions and interactions during studentship, which encompasses variable notions of agentic orientation (‘will’), the way students relate to past, present and future in making choices of action and interaction, and of agentic possibility (‘power’), that is their perceived power to achieve intended outcomes in a particular context of action and interaction, but also to self-engagement of a critical reflexive kind (Klemencic, 2015, p. 16).

To reiterate, agency is manifested via discussions of perceived social power and of agentic will, which consists of internal dynamics and reactions (including “students’ preconceptions and internalised routines”) (Stenalt, 2020, p. 3). Student agency is based on two main notions
The first one refers to the agentic possibilities available to students, which encompass their actual opportunities and positive freedoms to pursue their desired goals and aspirations within the higher education setting. These possibilities are external to the individual, originating from factors outside of their control. The enabling factor for this idea is students' autonomy, which refers to their freedom to act, think, and exist as they choose. When students have autonomy, their actions are willingly carried out. This notion aligns with MacFarlane's concept of student academic freedom, which encompasses the right to express oneself fully and freely and serves as a means for learners to engage in a truly "higher" education that fosters critical thinking (Macfarlane, 2012).

The alternative proposition refers to the agentic orientations of students, denoting their predispositions and volitional inclinations towards the enactment of agency. These orientations are internally constructed, originating from internal responses to external circumstances. They encompass internalized elements such as "routines, dispositions, preconceptions, competences, schemas, patterns, typifications, and traditions" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 973). This premise is facilitated by two enabling conditions. The first condition is students' efficacy, which pertains to their assessment and belief in their capacity to exert control over their own functioning as students and the higher education environments that influence their educational experiences (Bandura, 2001). The second condition is students' self-regulation, which encompasses the process through which students consciously make decisions regarding their own learning trajectory. This process includes various functions such as task analysis, self-control, and self-evaluation (Zimmerman, 2008). This echoes the concept of identity construction where it is “constantly shifting both as interaction unfolds and across discourse contexts” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 606). This study views agency of a student as a complicated and tense phenomenon that may be influenced by other players, institutional frameworks, morality, and power dynamics (Gurdal & Sorbring, 2018; Hohti & Karlsson, 2012) hence, indicating the significance of conducting the study.

3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

This section discusses qualitative research and linguistic ethnography as the approaches that were employed, utilising case study as the research design. Linguistic ethnography study was chosen as the research approach of the study. This approach was utilised to study “local and immediate actions” of the participants where the study investigated and represented the participant's view of the world from his/her lenses (Shaw, Copland, & Snell, 2015; Thomas, 1923). Hitchcock and Hughes (1989) and Wieser and Ortega (2020) suggest that the
ethnographic approach of a study allows researchers to describe a wide range of practices or activities from the viewpoints of the participants within various situations including social interactions. Hence, linguistic ethnography research practises a holistic approach which describes and interprets the whole phenomena of a research (Lecompte, Millroy, & Preissle, 1992; Denscombe, 2014).

Case study is a qualitative research study that focuses on analysing individuals' feelings, experiences, and thoughts (Fahriye et al., 2019). One of the most significant aspects of a case study is the in-depth investigation of one or more situations. That is to say, factors in a case (individuals, events, the environment, processes, etc) are evaluated holistically and focused on how they affect the linked issue or how they are affected. Hence, a case study's goal is to improve our understanding of a phenomenon, process, individual, or group, not to experiment with and generalise to other populations in the manner of larger-scale survey research (Paltridge & Phakiti, 2015) and in the context of this study, one (1) participant was chosen (Naemah).

The participant of the study was one (1) Malaysian student, Naemah (pseudonym), from a Malaysian Higher Education Institution (MHEI). The purposive sampling technique was utilised in recruiting the participant of this study. She was chosen based on two criteria: should be Malaysian students registered in Malaysian universities and had been in the university for at least 6 months. The data for the study were collected from classroom observations, interview and focus group discussion. The data collected consisted of observation field notes and video recordings of classroom observation, the interview and FGD which were transcribed. These four sets of data were then analysed.

In analysing the data of this study, two analytical approaches namely thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and identity analysis framework (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) were employed. After examining the sets of data of this study, a list of codes and themes were identified utilising thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse classroom observation field notes and interview and focus group transcripts. This method is best suited in this study as its nature emphasises on the social, cultural, and structural contexts that reflect and influence one’s experiences. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that this type of analysis would enable the knowledge development which is constructed through engagement or interactions among the participants, uncovering the underlying socially constructed meanings. In short, thematic analysis is an appropriate method when one is seeking to understand a series of experiences, thoughts or behaviours in a research data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These codes and themes were then analysed and interpreted by employing the identity in interaction.
framework by Bucholtz and Hall (2005), as shown in the table below. However, this study would only utilise 2 out of 5 principles of the framework namely: emergence and indexicality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emergence</td>
<td>“Identity is best viewed as the emergent product rather than the pre-existing source of linguistics and other semiotic practices and therefore as fundamentally a social and cultural phenomenon” (p. 588)”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positionality</td>
<td>“Identities encompass (a) macrolevel demographic categories; (b) local, ethno-graphically specific cultural positions; and (c) temporary and interactionally specific stances and participant roles” (p. 592)”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indexicality</td>
<td>“Identity relations emerge in interaction through several related indexical processes, including: (a) overt mention of identity categories and labels; (b) implicatures and presuppositions regarding one’s own or others’ identity position; (c) displayed evaluative and epistemic orientations to ongoing talk, as well as interactional footings and participant roles; and (d) the use of linguistic structures and systems that are ideologically associated with specific personas and groups” (p. 594)”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationality</td>
<td>“Identities are intersubjectively constructed through several, often overlapping, complementary relations, including similarity/difference, genuineness/artifice, and authority/delegitimacy” (p. 598)”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partialness</td>
<td>“Any given construction of identity may be in part deliberate and intentional, in part habitual and hence often less than fully conscious, in part an outcome of interactional negotiation and contestation, in part an outcome of others’ perceptions and representations, and in part an effect of larger ideological processes and material structures that may become relevant to interaction. It is therefore constantly shifting both as interaction unfolds and across discourse contexts” (p. 606)”</td>
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### 4.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to investigate how a student construct and negotiate academic identity from her interactions in a Malaysian higher education institution setting (MHEI). The study focused on a student, Naemah, in the Malaysian Higher Education Institution (MHEI) where she was observed in class, interviewed and participated in a focus group discussion. The data gathered from this research demonstrated that the Malaysian student was academically engaged inside and outside the classroom where she may be perceived to construct and negotiate one of the academic identities: agentive. This academic identity was constructed by the student in MHEI and was identified from her interactional behaviours during classroom observation and from her academic experiences throughout the semester via interview and Focus Group Discussion (FGD). The academic identity and interactional behaviour patterns portray a wide range of
speech events and reflect that the Malaysian student, Naemah, constructed and negotiated agentive identity inside and outside the classroom.

AGENTIVE IDENTITY: ASKING AND ANSWERING QUESTIONS
Based on the excerpts below, the student’s engagement behaviour portrayed during classroom interaction, interview and focus group discussion (FGD) could be interpreted as being agentive from the lens of the two principles of identity framework analysis namely; the emergence principle where identity is viewed as an emerging product from the interaction and the indexicality principle which regards identity as the way we use the language that positions ourselves and/or others as a certain group of people (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). In this study, the participant of this study, Naemah, constructed an agentive identity during the process of making conscious decisions in her learning. The student’s agentive decisions affected her engagement behaviour with the subject matter and other members of the community.

EXCERPT 1

Dr. Emilia: Okay, if there’s no question, okay, I’m going to ask you another question. So, as you say, literature is a portrayal of a society, basically, right? A portrayal of your society. So how it is with your society today? What do you think is your society today? If someone were to... if you’re an author and someone were to review about your work, how would they portray the society of your day? Anybody?

Naemah: If someone reviews our work, it also depends on what we are writing about, aren’t they? So, like, about love, they can’t say something that, “Oh, this is because during her time, police are corrupted. Politicians are corrupted.”, right?
In the excerpts above, Naemah was seen engaging with the content of the discussion by responding to the lecturer’s question and/or answer. In excerpt 1 during online discussion via Google Meet video, the lecturer, Dr. Emilia was explaining about what literature is and how one views it from different aspects of life. Then she verbally asked a question to the whole class on how they would portray their current society to others’. In this instance, Naemah was observed quickly unmuting her microphone and responding to the lecturer’s question. Her response was rather lengthy not only in this session but also in others. In her response, she did not only try to answer the question, but she also attempted to look for the confirmation of her
answer from the lecturer by asking if she was giving the right one. Naemah, then, gave her opinion on her lecturer’s explanation regarding the subject matter by agreeing to what the lecturer said. Naemah’s opinion was followed by a lengthy explanation on the subject matter discussed.

Similar situation was also recorded during online class where Naemah asked questions to the lecturer via Google Meet chat. As shown in excerpt 2, Naemah asked the lecturer regarding one of their assignments in the Google Meet chat box. In this instance, Naemah was not the only one who asked the question to the lecturer. A few of her classmates had also done the same. Naemah was seen not only asking questions to her lecturer, but she also commented on her lecturer’s explanation regarding the question. The questions that were asked on the Google Meet chat box were responded and/or answered by the lecturer verbally during the online class.

Both excerpts above portray Naemah’s act of agency as she was interacting with the lecturer by voluntarily answering and asking questions to the lecturer. Throughout the classroom observation, Naemah was seen actively participating in class by asking questions and responding to questions verbally and non-verbally, via chat box provided in Google Meet platform. She was also asking questions to the lecturer to get confirmation and responded to the lecturer’s response. Naemah’s act of voluntary in answering and asking the questions is in line with one of the notions of agency; agentic possibilities (Klemencic, 2015). Agentic possibilities refer to the possibilities and freedom the students have, to pursue their preferred objectives and aspirations within the academic setting. Students’ autonomy, which refers to their freedom to act, think, and live as they like, is a key aspect in making this concept possible.

In this study, Naemah exercised her freedom and autonomy when she voluntarily answering the question from the lecturer and asking question to the lecturer in getting confirmation on the assignments. Her agentic behaviour is also consistent with MacFarlane's idea of academic freedom for students, which includes the ability to express oneself fully and without restraint and enables students to pursue a higher education that encourages critical thinking (Macfarlane, 2012).

When it comes to asking question and responding to questions during online class, Naemah indicated during FGD that she would prefer utilising both verbal and non-verbal (via Google Meet chat box) platform. Below is the excerpt taken from Naemah’s FGD session regarding online learning platform preference.
EXCERPT 3

Aina: Thank you for sharing, Naemah and also Bella. So let’s move on to the next one. I prefer asking questions in chat box rather than asking it verbally during ODL. For my... As for myself, I rather ask verbally because you know, you need... you need time to type your questions and then probably the discussion already ended by that time. So... but you guys might have different point of view on this.

Bella: Okay so as for me, I prefer asking questions in chat box rather than verbally. Because I feel like... I feel more safe asking in the chat box rather than asking it verbally. Because I don’t really ask questions... I don’t really... I don’t really talk a lot in an online classroom. So, I feel that it is... it is the safest for me to only type the question in the chat box.

Naemah: [inaudible] I will do both. [inaudible] Sometimes I will type first in chat box and then I will question it verbally [inaudible] some people don’t really understand my question [inaudible] further explain what I mean by my question.

When prompted whether she preferred asking questions verbally or in the chat box, Naemah responded she would do both. She further explained that at times, she would type the question in the chat box in the first place and would verbally explain the question as some people would not understand her question in the chat box. Naemah’s agentive behaviour as seen in the classroom and during FGD was coherent to the data from the interview, when asked if she ever responded to questions and if she ever asked questions inside the classroom on a scale of 1 (hardly at all) to 5 (often), she rated them 5. The interview excerpts below (Excerpt 4 and Excerpt 5) suggest that she indexed the agentive behaviour.

EXCERPT 4

Researcher: Have you ever responded to questions during lectures, tutorials, group discussion inside classroom? How-how often, on a scale 1-5?

Naemah: 5.

Researcher: Okay why?

Naemah: I guess because... I have a lot of thoughts in my head? And in a way, I read a lot? So like sometimes I just want to make sure like okay am I... are the things I read about... relates to what my lecturers are trying to tell us. And sometimes I’m just being noisy to make the class fun. Sometimes... online classes are boring. So yeah. Sorry... to my lecturers.
Naemah mentioned during the interview session that she often responded to questions and asked questions in the classroom. Her reasoning for responding to questions in the class was because she had plenty of thoughts inside her head and she read a lot and wanted to make sure that her readings made sense to what the lecturer had told her. She added that at times she responded to questions just to make the class fun when the classes were boring. She also stated the reason she asked questions in class was because whenever she was thinking of something, out of curiosity, she would create scenarios that could happen from different angles. Hence in this case, the questions were asked out of her curiosity.

Naemah’s behaviour of volunteering to respond and asking questions is aligned with the definition of agency outlined by Kumpulainen et al. (2010) and Van (2008). In defining agency, Kumpulainen et al. (2010) asserts that agency frequently entails initiating action, such as challenging, disobeying, and acting differently. Agency is defined by Van (2008) in respect to volition. Volunteering to answer a tutor’s question, volunteering to help other students, and volunteering to engage in a dispute with other students in class are all examples of volitional behaviour. He then further described his participants as participative, autonomous, and dedicated. Being agentive requires students to portray additional initiatives, as shown by Naemah’s initiative to respond to questions and ask questions, which Gao (2010) and Klemencic (2015) described as “agentic orientation” and the sense of will respectively. Showing such trait requires strong sense of autonomy (Van, 2008). Naemah’s interactional behaviour of responding and asking questions to the lecturer in class echoes with Ewald and Wallace’s (1994) understanding of agency where they assert that agentive student would be able to establish meaning guiding their behaviours or actions in classroom, as classroom agents. Boud and Molloy (2013) linked the idea of agency with students’ identity development, arguing that students may not be receptive to the helpful information about their work, nor will they be able to use it, unless they see themselves as agents of their own change and develop an identity
as a productive learner who can drive their own learning. Possessing the agency traits allow Naemah to have the power in guiding and managing her learning process and experience in an academic setting (Klemencic, 2015; Elder, 1994).

On the other hand, when Naemah was asked to rate the frequency of responding to questions and asking questions outside the classroom, she rated 3 and 4 respectively in the excerpt below.

**EXCERPT 6**

**Naemah:** In group discussion... for me, how of-how much I respond would be around 3 actually.

**Researcher:** Oh... interesting.

**Naemah:** Unless someone’s wants like... if they want me to explain something then I would explain it, but most of the time I would just like guide the conversations on which aspects to look at.

**Researcher:** Why, I mean why’s the difference between, I mean when you are like inside classroom you rated 5, but 3 for outside classroom?

**Naemah:** I feel like in classroom, that is where I study, so that’s where like my brain is trying to process everything. But then in group discussion, most of the time is like sometimes my friends will... if is-it is requested of me, like hi Naemah, could you maybe explain a term or a concept or subject to us, then I would do it? But in terms of like group assignment, et cetera, most of the time, I just like set the tone on when the-give suggestions on where they want to take the topic but also like hey, what do you guys think on this? What do you guys think on that? Like... try-try to know what they are thinking because most of the time because I am so communicative, they would know what I am thinking, but as I said like I speak a lot, so at the same time, I want to know what my other friends- my other friends are thinking about as well. So most of the times, just try to set the tone and then let you guys say a conversation.

**Researcher:** So um... so you don’t like-you don’t respond to question but you guide them?

**Naemah:** In a way, yes. Unless they ask me like what do I what do I think? Then I would... give my answer, I guess.

**Researcher:** Ah, why do you set the tone?

**Naemah:** Because sometimes if I don’t set the tone, then... there are... meet-meetings where... we will be in a Google Meet but because nobody really makes like a point to like okay, we will discuss ABC. Because nobody said we will discuss ABC, and what direction we want to look at, we will just be in Google Meet and be like... so what are we doing? And I just don’t-l-most of the time, I don’t like that because my schedule is very packed... so I-when I’m on Google Meet and I’m spending my time with you guys, I don’t want to waste my time. So that’s why I kind of like okay, first and foremost, we will-let’s talk about A, A1, A2. And then we go on to B, and that kind of stuff. Yeah. Because then we know the direction to look at.

Naemah rated 3 on responding to questions outside the classroom during group discussion. She added that she would explain about things if her peers asked her to but during the group discussion, she would prefer to guide the discussion on the aspects to look at. When asked why she rated 3 for responding to questions outside the classroom and rated 5 for responding
questions inside the classroom, she further explained that she would prefer to give suggestions to others on the direction of the discussion. Naemah mentioned that when it comes to group work, she often sets such a ‘tone’ and asks the others their opinion on the topics discussed. She consciously made such a decision because she wanted to know what the others were thinking about. She highlighted that at times, during group discussion, nobody wanted to take the lead for the discussion and that she did not want to waste her time waiting for any of them to take the initiative to start the discussion.

EXCERPT 7

| Researcher: | What about outside classroom when you know, during group discussion, or you know, peer discussion? 1-5, on a scale 1-5. How often-how often do you ask questions? |
| Researcher: | Why is it important for you to know what they think? |
| Naemah:     | Because... most of the time in group work, like for example, 5 people, I’m one. I only have my brain alone, but what about the 4 other brains? I’m sure they studied as well...they...they think so the stu-yeah, like their voice matters. |
| Researcher: | So you want to know or you want to hear their voice because... because- |
| Naemah:     | Collectively it’s better than one. |
| Researcher: | Mmm, not that you think, you know, it’s unfair, it’s just me, you know, giving my ideas, you know, things like that, but you don’t say anything, you know? |
| Naemah:     | Yeah, in a way also. |

Excerpt 7 above portrays Naemah’s response on the frequency of asking questions outside the classroom which she rated 4. This is because she was curious and wanted to know her peers’ thoughts on things. When asked why it mattered to her, she responded it was better to have a collective discussion and that other people’s voice matters. She also added that it would be unfair for others to not have their voices heard. In regards with the principle of indexicality (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), Naemah’s responses during the interview session could be interpreted as agentive. The analysis reveals that Naemah utilised her agency to change how she would normally react or behave in the classroom. During classroom observations, Naemah was seen to always respond to and ask questions inside the classroom. In this instance, however, she was not always responding to and asking questions outside the classroom with her peers. Her change of behaviour is in line with the definition of agency by Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) where they suggest that being agentive may allow individuals to experience some changes and
could transform their behaviours which consequently change their learning experiences. This suggests that Naemah was exercising her agency when she decided to modify her habitual action in class, from being very active in class to being less active outside the class on *asking* and *responding to questions*.

Naemah’s conscious decision in *responding to* and *asking questions* outside the classroom among her friends also suggests that she took control of her learning so she could have the kind of learning outcome she desired. Her decision corresponds with Klemencic’s (2015) notion of agency where it allows students in determining their educational experiences and experiencing it the way they want it to be. To reiterate, Klemencic (2015) proposes that student agency would enable them to control their own learning process and experience. Naemah’s behaviour, as portrayed in the extracts above and her perceptions as shared during the interview and focus group discussion could be interpreted along the spectrums of a notion of agency by Charteris, Smardon, and Nelson (2017) where it encapsulates the self-directed learner’s imagination, capable of self-selecting and self-initiating learning tasks appropriate to reaching the intended educational objectives required for academic success. This is also in line with a study conducted by Ewald and Wallace (1994, p. 347) where they highlight that agency allows students to exercise their “ability to decide on tasks, choosing topics for discussion and making decisions regarding what contributions get counted as knowledge”. They further explained that agency would allow students to comprehend and interpret events thus influence themselves and the peers in particular classroom events. This echoes Naemah’s conditions and behaviours where she determined the reactions she would have, the situations and experiences she could have, the amount of time she would like to invest for her attempts or efforts and the choices she would make from the occurring events in class, which as a result, determines her academic experiences.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This study aims to investigate how a student negotiates and constructs academic identity from her interactions in a Malaysia higher education institution setting (MHEI). One Malaysian student was involved in the data collection procedure, which included classroom observation, interviews and focus group discussion, and analysed utilising thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and identity in interaction analysis framework (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). The study discovered that the Malaysian student constructed an agentive identity from various interactions she encountered in the MHEI setting, inside and also outside the classroom. The
student’s interactions were varied and for different purposes but the result from her interactions were interpreted as him/her being an agentive student in a Malaysian academic convention. Malaysian students generally have been said to not contribute to classroom discussion and were interpreted as silent and passive. Nonetheless, the Malaysian student in this study was observed to ask questions and respond to questions in classroom discussions. She also shared that her behaviours during classroom discussions were made consciously with several reasons such as wanting to share her ideas and opinions and rectifying her understanding of the lesson. Her interactions with friends outside of the classroom were also made with a purpose to allow others to share their thoughts and not be dominant during small-group discussions. Her behaviours in the classroom and outside of the classroom and her perceptions of her interactions could be interpreted as progressing towards the construction and negotiation of an agentive student who made conscious decisions with regard to her academic experience.

The study then suggests that the stakeholders, such as parents, academics, students and policy makers are highly encouraged to further explore the factors, contexts affecting student agency to ensure that the aspiration of Malaysia National Education Philosophy is implemented. Malaysian academic convention is also encouraged to allow for individual Malaysian students to construct and negotiate multiple and flexible identities as they may come from different backgrounds: family, education, social, economy and economy.

The scope of the present study is however limited to the context of a case study of one Malaysian student as the participant. The findings of the study are also limited to the data obtained from one Malaysian Higher Education Institution (MHEI) as the Malaysian academic setting. As a result, it could not be generalised to other Malaysian students in other MHEI. The study is also limited to the three data collection methods: classroom observation, interview and focus group discussion with four sets of data obtained: classroom observation field notes, and the recordings of classroom observation, interview and focus group discussion. Hence the study recommends for future research to focus on the identity construction and negotiation of more Malaysian students from different MHEI utilising other methods such as student’s diary entry or surveys.

REFERENCES


