Chinese students' multilingual identity constructions after studying abroad: A multi-theoretical perspective

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A B S T R A C T

Given the recent development of globalization, the focus of research on identity in the field of applied linguistics has shifted to investigating multilingual identity among students studying abroad. Studying abroad can be regarded as an authentic setting of English as a lingua franca (ELF) that has an impact on students' multilingual identity construction because they experience ELF communication with people from different lingua-cultures. Thus, this study aimed to map Chinese university students' multilingual identity constructions in relation to their overseas experiences before, during, and after studying abroad to explore multilingual identity construction from an ELF perspective. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight university students to report their learning and use of English before, during, and after their study abroad experiences to determine if their experiences, evaluations, and emotions had an impact on how multilingual identity is constructed. The findings suggest that there are meaningful differences in constructing multilingual identities before, during, and after the participants' study abroad sojourn, and revealed the opportunities ELF communication provides to develop multilingual identity negotiation and construction. Thus, this paper calls for the need to incorporate an ELF-informed and multilingual pedagogy into language education.

1. Introduction

The complex concept of identity has been broadly defined as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (Norton, 2013, p. 45). Identity can be constructed within a process of interaction, negotiation, and communication with other people in a social network (Block, 2006; Fought, 2006; Norton, 2013). Against the backdrop of globalization, individuals may have more opportunities to participate in intercultural communication, which leads to "the opening up of new spaces and resources for identity construction" (Baker, 2015, p. 131). In response to the increasing trend of multilingual identity in linguistic globalization, a growing body of research on identity has shifted its focus to an associated yet distinct concept of multilingual identity as an umbrella term encompassing linguistic identity. Multilingual identity refers to the explicit awareness and application that multilingual learners may have regarding their linguistic repertoires (Haukås et al., 2021; Rutgers et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). This understanding reflects the positive and powerful factors affecting language learners' learning trajectories (Henry & Thorsen, 2018). However, before exploring how learners can possibly gain such an understanding, it is crucial to first identify how their multilingual identities are constructed and shaped

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(Fisher et al., 2020; Storto, 2022).

From a sociolinguistic perspective, multilingual identity construction has been regarded as the result of the communication and interaction between individuals in a society (Fisher et al., 2020; Rutgers et al., 2021) within the globalization trajectories (Fielding, 2021; Miller & Kubota, 2013; Rokita-Jaśkow, 2021). The development of globalization has facilitated the spread and use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) for intercultural communication. Given the critical role of English in that context, universities around the world have been effectively implementing various courses in English as the medium of instruction (Boonsuk & Fang, 2023; Sung, 2020). Since these educational settings play a key role in constructing individuals' multilingual identities (Forbes & Rutgers, 2021), and because both multilingual identity and ELF have been proven to be complementary and interrelated (Kramsch, 2016), it is worth exploring university students' multilingual identity construction in an ELF context to extend the understanding of how standard English ideology may affect students' language learning trajectory and language use from an ELF perspective.

Within the field of applied linguistics, research on the concept of identity has thrived since Norton's (1995, 2000) seminal work, which was among the preliminary attempts to address this topic (Forbes & Rutgers, 2021). From a theoretical perspective, identity researchers in the field of second language (L2) education have used a broad range of psychological, sociocultural, and post-structural theoretical approaches. The psychological or common psychosocial perspective is that one's core identity develops over time through several stages of a long-term process (Berzonsky, 2011; Marcia, 2007). Sociocultural perspectives on identity, on the other hand, view it as a socially constructed concept that is highly mediated, relational, and situated in social, cultural, and historical contexts. In other words, such theories consider the important role of individuals' environments in shaping their identity (Norton & Toohey, 2011; Preece, 2020). Finally, a poststructural perspective highlights that identity is not a fixed concept but rather should be regarded as shifting, dynamic, and multifaceted (Baker, 2015; Cai et al., 2022; Schreiber, 2015).

Nevertheless, it has been recommended that researchers should transcend the boundaries between these theoretical perspectives and not merely rely upon one of them (Block, 2006); furthermore, "integrating differing perspectives is more likely to create a richer understanding of the self in the long run" (Kostoulas & Mercer, 2016, p. 130). Considering that drawing upon a single methodological standpoint will restrict researchers from exploring a concept as complex as multilingual identity, it has been highly recommended that the concept be viewed from a multidisciplinary and multitheoretical approach that connects the key overlapping areas among the three theories mentioned above (Fisher et al., 2020). These areas include the psychological/intramental (psychosocial), social/relational (sociocultural), and historical/contextual (poststructural) dimensions of the development of multilingual identity. We therefore operationalized multilingual identity based on the Three-E model, bringing these key areas of development together (Fisher et al., 2022). According to this model, multilingual identity comprises three dimensions (experiences, evaluations, and emotions) and can also be shaped by them. Focusing on the three Es, we mapped Chinese students' multilingual identity construction before, during, and after their study abroad experience in an ELF context. Viewing the concept through this lens allowed us to consider the three shared domains of identity development together and explore in-depth the issue of multilingual identity construction.

2. Literature review

2.1. Standard English ideology and English as a lingua franca

Standard language ideology is characterized as a preference for an idealized, homogenous spoken language that is enforced and preserved by dominant institutions (Lippi-Green, 2012). This ideology is pervasive in language education, with its most prominent assumptions being correctness and superiority. According to standard language ideology, there is a uniform, standardized language that everyone should strive for (Lippi-Green, 2012). This perspective deems the pursuit of this idealized version of language as desirable and achievable. Although English is used as a lingua franca, traditional standard English ideology cannot meet people's needs in intercultural communication because it discourages linguistic diversity by promoting monolithic monolingualism, which is not reflective of real-life communication. Despite this, standard English ideology is still deeply rooted in educational policy as a means of empowerment. For instance, De Costa (2010) conducted a critical ethnographic study in Singapore, which exposed how Jenny, a young learner from China, grappled with the ideologies entrenched in the standard English language educational policy. De Costa (2010) critiques that "a top-down and deterministic reading of the language learning enterprise" (p. 235) can only water down the agency and resourcefulness of language learners. The study showed that an individual's endorsement of a pro-standard language variety stance may be significantly influenced by the state's standard English agenda, as evidenced by Jenny's environment in Singapore and her background in China.

From an ELF perspective, the ideology of standardization has also been challenged because it is, by its very nature, ill-defined and can lead to an overly simplistic understanding of the nature of language (Lippi-Green, 2012; Milroy & Milroy, 2012). Conceptually, ELF is generally defined as "any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option" (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 7). Therefore, English has an important role as a lingua franca among people around the world, and it has become their common language of interaction. As previously noted, in a world in which an increasing number of multilingual individuals are traveling around the globe, people have various linguistic and cultural resources in their repertoire that are available for use (Fang & Liu, 2020; Jenkins, 2015; Li, 2018). The prominent role of English as a global language highlights the significant role of English as a key language of education used inside and outside of universities (Jenkins, 2014; Kalocsai, 2014). By recognizing the interplay of various linguistic and multimodal resources (i.e., other possible ways of meaning-making, such as visual, audio, and gestural modes) in communication, it can be argued that ELF can be viewed from the multilingual perspective as a Multilingua Franca (EMF) in which "English is available as a contact language of choice, but is not necessarily chosen" (Jenkins, 2015, p. 73) for multilingual communication.

Furthermore, Matsumoto (2018) argued that ELF is not only used for communication but also, in an increasingly globalized and multilingual world, it is integrally involved in identity construction. In going beyond the traditional EFL framework, ELF communities could provide new opportunities for language learners to reconstruct their identities as competent language users when exposed to a new context and environment, for example in their experiences of study abroad (Cai et al., 2022; Fang & Baker, 2018). It has also been suggested that studying abroad, as an authentic setting for ELF communication, can be a key platform upon which bi/multilingual individuals could (re)construct their identity through various discourses (Baker & Fang, 2021; Diao, 2017; Lee et al., 2023). Since multilingual identities can be generally constructed and emerge among the speakers in an ELF context (Park, 2022), it is worth exploring how multilingual identities are being developed and (re)constructed from an ELF perspective. Although the need to explore linguistic identity in ELF communication has already been considered in several studies (Baker, 2015; Baker & Fang, 2021; Jenkins, 2007), few studies have explored the connections between multilingual identity and ELF, even though these have been proven to be related (Kramsch, 2016).

2.2. ELF and linguistic identity research

Research on linguistic identity aims at understanding the relationship between languages and individual users (Xu, 2021), which has become important from an ELF perspective. Previous studies have drawn attention to the connection between identity and ELF communication and have explored the process of identity construction from an ELF perspective (Baker, 2015; Sung, 2022; Virkkula & Nikula, 2010). In a study involving a group of Finnish engineering students participating in an internship in Germany, Virkkula and Nikula (2010) found that, compared to communicating with native English speakers (NESs), most of the participants had more confidence and gained better competence when they communicated with non-native English speakers of English. This resulted in transforming the participants into foreign language users, which puts emphasis that individuals are treated as language users from an ELF perspective. Drawing on post-structuralist theory, Virkkula and Nikula (2010) confirmed that identity construction is a fluid complex process related to language use in ELF communication. Cai et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of ELF communities in influencing university students' identity reconstruction. They concluded that participants' identity construction was influenced by "changing learner agencies, language attitudes towards English accents and the construction of the awareness of addressing inter-cultural conflicts and related experiences" (Cai et al., 2022, p. 9) when they were studying in an ELF context.

Identity construction is a significant concept regarding multilingual speakers from an ELF perspective because, in addition to individuals' reactions to other languages, it may influence their attitudes towards and evaluations of members of their social group (Jenkins, 2007; Norton, 2013; Sung, 2021, 2022). For instance, Gu et al. (2014) investigated how ELF-aware activities influenced the participants' identity construction; they reported that such activities created positive attitudinal changes in terms of the participants' own English but did not change their attitude towards how they perceived the language used by NESs to be superior. In a more recent study, Park (2022) investigated university students' linguistic identity construction in South Korea and demonstrated that "the multilingual students negotiate and build one's linguistic identity by evaluating different ways of speaking English which in turn influence their linguistic use" (p. 1). Confirming the previous findings in the literature (Baker, 2015; Jenkins, 2007; Sweeney & Zhu, 2010), Park (2022) also noted that ELF speakers displayed more orientation to Standard English language ideologies in their interactions. For example, although the participants could effectively communicate with each other, they judged each other's way of speaking, including their accents, and the pragmatic strategies they used to communicate with each other. In line with the evidence mentioned above, it can be thus implied that learners' identity construction may occur in an authentic setting of ELF as they experience communication with people from different lingua-cultural backgrounds (Norton, 2013).

2.3. Multilingual identity

The holistic concept of multilingual identity differs from the concept of linguistic identity, which involves "the way one identifies (or is identified by others) in each of the languages in one's linguistic repertoire" (Fisher et al., 2020, p. 449). Multilingual identity not only highlights the explicit understanding and awareness that individuals may have towards themselves as using more than one language (Fisher et al., 2020; Henry, 2017), but it also focuses on all the factors resulting from either learning or using different languages. In other words, in regarding multilingual identity construction as a process that occurs between individuals and the community around them, any possible linguistic and nonlinguistic factors, such as attitudes and beliefs (Haukås et al., 2021; Rutgers et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021), can be involved in this process, resulting from the context in which language learning and using occurs (Fielding, 2015; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Sung, 2021, 2022). In a recent study, Sung (2022) also revealed both "the complex and multidimensional nature of linguistic identities in ELF communication" (p. 15) with an argument to further unpack the "nuanced conceptualizations of the nature of identity in ELF communication" (p. 15). In the literature, several definitions of multilingual identity have a broad consensus in referring to the concept as an umbrella identity that entails more than just language-specific aspects (Fielding, 2021). The present study, therefore, operationalized multilingual identity as consisting of three dimensions: experience, evaluation, and emotion (Fisher et al., 2022), relating to language learning and use.

Concerning different social, contextual, and historical factors (Block, 2009; Norton Peirce, 1995), language experience refers to any experience individuals have while learning languages in various settings, such as schools or universities. Evaluation focuses on individuals' evaluations of themselves as language learners, and in particular their attitudes, beliefs, and motivations. Given the soci-ocultural/relational dimension of multilingual identity, individuals' perceptions and evaluations are inclined to be affected by those around them (Fisher et al., 2022). Emotion, a significant factor in psychological and intramental identity development research (Fisher et al., 2022), incorporates individuals' feelings about languages and the process of learning. We thus applied the concept of

multilingual identity as it encompasses the "historical/contextual, the social/relational and psycho-logical/intramental dimensions of identity development" (Fisher et al., 2022, p. 5). Through the Three-E (experience, evaluation, emotion) dimensions of multilingual identity, we were able to explore how the complexity of identity might be shaped before, during, and after studying abroad.

As mentioned earlier, diverse methodological or theoretical approaches, among which psychological, sociocultural, and post-structural theories are the most common, have been applied to capturing and understanding the complexity of multilingual identity negotiation and construction (Forbes & Rutgers, 2021). Informed by these approaches, Fisher et al. (2020) proposed the multi-theoretical approach to offer a richer understanding of such an all-encompassing complex identity. Nevertheless, research on multilingual identity is still in a relatively early stage of development (Fisher et al., 2020). Although some studies have explored multilingual identities in study abroad settings (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2017; Cai et al., 2022; Fang & Baker, 2018; Lee et al., 2023; Mitchell et al., 2020), to the best of our knowledge, no studies have explored the connections between multilingual identity and studying abroad through a multi-theoretical perspective, which has been proven to be an advantageous and beneficial perspective from which to analyze this umbrella identity.

2.4. The current study

The current study can further enrich the body of research on multilingual identity construction in an ELF setting for the three following reasons. First, although previous studies on multilingual identity have mostly focused on sojourners after studying abroad (Barkhuizen, 2017; Lee et al., 2023; Mitchell et al., 2020), the present study explores participants' multilingual identity construction, before, during, and after studying abroad, which can more fully capture the impact of experiencing an ELF context in constructing students' multilingual identity. Second, as mentioned earlier, no studies have addressed multilingual identity construction in an ELF context from a multitheoretical approach. Although some of the previous studies investigating multilingual identity construction have adopted the multitheoretical approach, none have focused on ELF context experiences. Thus, lastly, the present study operationalizes the complex concept of multilingual identity based on the multitheoretical approach (Fisher et al., 2020). Furthermore, since language ideologies matter in identity construction (Vasilyeva, 2019), we also aimed to explore the extent to which participants' multilingual identity construction is affected by the standard English language ideology. Language ideologies relate to "any set of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use" (Silverstein, 1979, p. 193). Keeping the above considerations in mind, the current study adopted a multitheoretical perspective to unpack the process of participants' multilingual identity construction and negotiation before, during, and after studying abroad and to explore the extent to which this process is affected by standard English language ideology. Drawing on qualitative data collected in interviews, the study attempted to answer two research questions.

1. How do students construct their multilingual identities before, during, and after studying and living abroad?
2. To what extent is the students' multilingual identity construction affected by the Standard English language ideology?

3. Methodology

Operationalizing multilingual identity based on the Three-E model (Fisher et al., 2020), this study adopted a multi-theoretical approach to map Chinese students' multilingual identity construction. It sought to determine if their experiences, evaluations, and emotions of language learning and use impacted how their multilingual identities were constructed before during, and after studying abroad.

3.1. Setting and participants

This study focused on eight Chinese undergraduate students (six females and two males) who had an overseas studying and living experience. The participants' levels of language proficiency were determined by the international standard of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) test, which is shown in Table 1. The Chinese university in which they were studying is located in southeastern China, where English is promoted and international cooperation activities are enhanced for both teachers and

Table 1
Information about participants and interviews.

Interviewee	Gender	Grade	CEFR Level	Major	Project's location	Duration of the overseas experience	Duration of the interview
Ben	Male	Year 4	C1	Law	Australia	4 months	51:39
Celine	Female	Year 4	B2	Business Management	Malaysia	3 months	59:24
Anna	Female	Year 4	B2	Chinese	US	3 months	34:45
Elliot	Male	Year 4	C1	English	UK	4 months	37:45
Rebecca	Female	Year 4	C1	English	Ireland	4 months	47:32
Niki	Female	Year 4	B2	Law	Australia	3 months	53:15
Lynn	Female	Year 4	C1	English	Germany	3 months	42:05
Cassie	Female	Year 3	C1	Chinese	US	4 months	51:32

students. The university offered the students professional programs at various international universities, and international voluntary activities were organized to promote their academic and social journeys. The students were from the College of Law, the Business School, and the College of Liberal Arts, and they participated in an exchange program project established by the focal university. They spent 3–5 months studying in the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US), Australia, Ireland, Malaysia, and Germany from August to December of 2019. The students lived in a homestay arrangement and studied with international students from different countries as well as local students; thus, they had intercultural communication experiences both inside and outside the classroom.

Intercultural communication, while the participants were studying abroad, mostly involved communicating with their teammates in volunteer projects, communicating with peers/teachers in academic settings, and interacting in daily contexts (e.g., with their hosts at a homestay, going shopping, and participating in university student clubs). Being as exchange students living in homestay families, these experiences offered them enough opportunities to be involved in real-world ELF interactions in which the diversity of the interlocutors' cultural and linguistic backgrounds was clearly present as students were able to be exposed to various English accents in both academic and social settings (Cai et al., 2022; Jenkins & Mauranen, 2019; Sung, 2016). Therefore, this provided them with an opportunity to construct their multilingual identities among different people and in different societies through multilingual scenarios. Information about the participants' experiences and interviews is presented in Table 1. All the names are pseudonyms for the participants to protect their identities.

This study adopted purposive sampling method (Dörnyei, 2007) to recruit participants. Because an exchange program was offered to third- and fourth-year students, we were able to email the target students who participated in the exchange program and explain the purpose of the study to see if they wanted to participate. Thus, ethical consent and considerations were addressed, and to guarantee the ethical standard of the data collection, all the participants were told, in the beginning, that their participation was voluntary and that all the data collected would remain anonymous and confidential. The following criteria were used to select the study participants: 1) they must participate in an exchange program to have a study abroad experience and 2) they must be high-intermediate learners of English with an IELTS score higher than 6.5 to enable them to have enough intercultural communication experiences abroad. This study employed semi-structured interviews to ensure flexibility in order to understand the participants' ELF experiences and their reactions (Richards, 2003) because an interview can offer an in-depth way to understand the participants' mindsets by investigating their experiences, perspectives, and beliefs (Kvale, 2008).

3.2. Data collection

The study participants were interviewed within two months of their return to China (see Appendix 1 for the Interview Protocol). The interview questions were designed to explore the students' experiences, evaluations, and emotions related to their own and others' English learning and use before, during, and after their studying abroad experience (Barkhuizen, 2017; Cai et al., 2022; Fang & Baker, 2018; Jackson, 2012). Each interview lasted approximately 30–60 min and was audio-recorded. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin to enable the participants to respond in more depth (Mann, 2011).

3.3. Data analysis

After conducting the interviews, we listened to the audio recordings and transcribed the data verbatim. The data were then input into the NVivo software to facilitate the coding process. To enhance credibility, the transcripts were returned to the participants for proofreading and peer checking. The process of data analysis began with reading and coding the transcript. To that end, qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was adopted to "explore the deeper meanings so as to add interpretive depth and breadth to the analysis" (Jenkins, 2014, p. 128). In data analysis, we recognize the importance of "identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). First, top-down themes based on the research questions, including students' experiences, evaluations, and emotions before, during, and after studying abroad, were coded by the researchers together. Furthermore, bottom-up emergent themes from the participants, such as their struggle with intercultural encounters and (re)construction of their multilingual identity were categorized and analyzed. As Braun and Clarke (2006) pointed out, thematic analysis also aims to delve into what researchers want to know in order to recognize and acknowledge their decisions, so we also allows flexibility of interpretation in data analysis following the research questions. The themes based on the research questions, namely, identity construction and standard language ideology, were then compared and checked by all the participants to ensure reliability (see Appendix 2 for the coding scheme). The key themes that were identified included "language experience before, during, and after overseas' experience," "attitudes towards English," "perceptions of own English competence," "the influence of other people," and "self-perceived identity". We then arranged the themes to match the three Es (experience, evaluation, and emotion) before, during, and after the study abroad for analysis. The data were then translated into English for this paper. A colleague who specializes in English translation was invited to check the original data against the translated version to ensure the accuracy of the translation process.

3.4. Trustworthiness and limitations

We realize that the findings of this study cannot be generalized, given the small sample size, the research plan and time constraints, and the methodological limitations that arose because only one round of retrospective interviews was conducted after the participants returned home from studying abroad. These limitations were managed through in-depth interviews with enriched data to explore the participants' construction of and negotiation with various ELF encounters. It is hoped that the participants' intercultural learning experience and reflections on their study abroad experiences will be transferrable to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We also

fully understand the degree of subjectivity involved in the data collection and interpretation processes. This has been carefully managed by building rapport with the participants and being cognizant of the researcher's role so as to limit researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to establish rapport with the participants, the researchers adopted both emic and etic strategies in order to foster close relationships while maintaining the distinct roles of researchers and participants. The participants were recruited in a voluntary manner, with a flexible time schedule for the interviews based on their own preferences. They were told and explained the research purposes in detail before taking part in the study.

4. Findings

Given that multilingual identity construction can be shaped by its Three-E dimensions (Fisher et al., 2022) and connected to the participants' experiences, evaluations, and emotions related to their language learning and using process (Forbes et al., 2021), the students were asked about each of these factors in relation to their study abroad experiences. Therefore, the sub-headings in this section correspond to the participants' experiences, evaluations, and emotions regarding their language learning and use, respectively, before, during, and after studying abroad. Furthermore, considering that language ideology can be deemed a significant factor in identity construction (Vasilyeva, 2019), we also explored the impact of participants' standard language ideologies on their multi-lingual identity construction before, during, and after studying abroad.

4.1. Before studying abroad

To capture the participants' multilingual identity construction, we first focused on their experiences, evaluations, and emotions of their language learning and use before their study abroad experiences. Given that experience refers to the learners' interaction with and exposure to the language throughout their lifetime, we asked the participants about their individual and social experiences of learning and using English before studying abroad. Seven of the participants (i.e., Ben, Anna, Cassie, Rebecca, Lynn, Celine, and Niki) referred to their limitations in being exposed to and consequently using the language. They stated that since English is regarded as a foreign language in China and is used mostly in the classroom and rarely in their daily life, they had little opportunity to engage in real-world English communication with others. Consequently, the participants emphasized that, before studying abroad, they primarily focused on passing the exams. Thus, they paid more attention to accuracy and the linguistic parts of the language, such as grammar. For example, Niki mentioned:

Extract 1:

> Before going abroad, I thought that learning English was simply to pass exams. I didn't care about other purposes of learning English because we didn't have enough opportunities to communicate in English (Niki).

The participants seemed to pay less attention to the importance of effective communication. For example, Rebecca mentioned that "before studying abroad, since I didn't have enough opportunities to communicate in English. I seldom had a chance to use it." She added:

Extract 2

> It then had a great impact on my English learning and use at that time and I mostly paid a lot of attention to just passing the exams and did not put any effort into learning English for real-world communication purposes. The main reason was the lack of a chance to use the language outside of the classroom context (Rebecca).

Regarding the participants' evaluations before studying abroad, that is, the beliefs, attitudes, and goals they had for themselves and others as language learners/users, five of them differentiated themselves from NESs and perceived the use of Standard English as superior. Most of the participants reported that they even tended to think about correcting the interlocutor's English. Furthermore, they were most likely to be concerned about being accurate in their usage (Celine, Elliot, and Rebecca) and were judgmental of their abilities to use the language and express the meaning and the ability of others as well (Niki and Anna). For instance, Elliot mentioned:

Extract 3

> I think my English was not native-like at that time. My speaking was not good enough because I always thought that my use of the right vocabulary is never as enough good as native ones to express the meaning. I couldn't speak like those in American or British TV shows (Elliot).

In terms of the emotions, the participants felt about the language learning and using process before studying abroad, negative emotions such as anxiety, disappointment, and sadness emerged from the interview data. Anxiety was the most prominent negative emotion. It was found that, because the participants viewed native speaker norms as the standards, they were nervous about their use of English before going abroad. They regarded their English skills as being deficient, which mostly led them to feel sad, anxious, and disappointed when communicating in English. This supports the idea that learners' evaluations and emotions are closely linked. For example:

Extract 4

> When communicating with other people, I paid a lot of attention to speaking more authentically and aspired to use Standard English in my talks. But, as I couldn't, this truly made me feel nervous and disappointed in myself (Ben).

Extract 5

I always felt anxious about my grammar and pronunciation when having English classes because I was afraid that I could not express myself well. My teacher also corrected my pronunciation and I was told that my English was not native-like enough. I started to feel not that willing to express myself in front of my peers (Nikki).

4.2. During the study abroad experience

In general, the findings showed that there was a difference in the way the participants expressed the experiences, evaluations, and emotions they had during their study abroad sojourn and before they went abroad. Regarding their overseas experiences, all the participants highlighted the importance of effective communication and keeping the conversation clear and intelligible. Unlike their experiences before studying abroad, meaning-making was emphasized more than grammatical accuracy when communicating with people from other lingua-cultures during their overseas stay. The participants notably asserted that it was a significant experience in their language learning process that let them more quickly and successfully improve their English skills, especially speaking and listening.

Extract 6

I paid a lot of attention to whether the message could be successfully passed on when expressing what I wanted to say. As long as the interlocutor understood the meaning, my sentences were valid. So, I mostly focused on intelligibility instead of accuracy and those fancy English words we learned at language school. That experience also let me enhance my English more quickly. For example, I became more fluent in English speaking because I rarely hesitate to talk, and just by seeing diverse Englishes around me I became more confident (Anna).

Extract 7

It is important whether the other person understands your meaning. It matters to me that I convey the meaning of my message precisely. I believe that this is the most important aspect (Rebecca).

Extract 8

I certainly put my focus on other people's use of English because I didn't care about what I said at that time. I didn't notice what I was saying. In fact, I just hoped that the communication would go on successfully (Cassie).

Regarding the participants' evaluations of their language learning and use during their study abroad encounters, they all seemed to hold the opposite view of what they believed before studying abroad. That is, as the participants interacted with people with different lingua-cultures, they began to be more tolerant or even more willing to accept the diversity of English and be less judgmental. This demonstrates that they regarded themselves as more than just English learners. Some of the participants (Ben, Celine, Anna, Cassie, Rebecca, Niki, and Lynn) shared their positive attitudes in connection with the concept of ELF when communicating with others. For instance, they developed a more comprehensive understanding of English accents by encountering people from different linguacultural backgrounds (Sung, 2016). While showing some interest in being exposed to other English accents, they appeared to be less obsessed with Standard English and were able to accept accent diversity during the conversations.

Extract 9

After my study abroad experience, I thought that different people can have different accents and even make mistakes as long as they can be understood. After studying abroad, I was no longer going to pursue the so-called perfect English. Being exposed to diverse Englishes, instead, I believe that every country has its characteristic accent, which is very interesting (Lynn).

Extract 10

In fact, I had heard other accents in English, such as accents from European countries during my stay abroad. When I encountered different accents during the experience, I had a high degree of acceptance of those accents (Celine).

It seems that the majority of the participants developed a high degree of acceptance of various accents during their experiences abroad. Most of them did not pursue the unattainable NES accent during their ELF communication experiences – except for Elliot, who still judged the correctness of accents.

Extract 11

Before going abroad, I paid attention to others' accents because I had a strong tendency to criticize other people's English accents. During the experience, I didn't change much in that regard because I am still critical of other people's use of English. I still want to correct other people's pronunciation if I feel they don't sound native-like (Elliot).

In terms of the participants' emotions during their study abroad experience, the data demonstrated that they felt some positive emotions, such as enjoyment and happiness. As growing interest in the diversity of English and the students' openness to the variations of English challenged their traditional view of Standard English, it can be argued that their negative emotions before their study abroad experiences became positive during their time abroad. All the participants stressed that they were happy and enjoyed their language-using process during their study abroad experience. This is exemplified in Celine's comments:

Extract 12

I didn't like speaking English before the study abroad experience. I just didn't want to speak it, and I felt that I would be laughed at by others because I didn't speak it as an American. But in those days abroad, I met so many people who spoke differently but had the courage to speak. Feeling that there is nothing scary when using English, I just happily expressed myself and enjoyed talking with others (Celine).

Lynn stated that she was more confident in expressing herself in speaking English, which impacted the construction of her user identity.

Extract 13

I think that students from different countries are confident in speaking English. Maybe because we all chose to go abroad because we were all non-native speakers of English. So, no matter how good or bad your speaking was, others wouldn't mind it. Maybe I was influenced by them, and I became braver about speaking (Lynn).

4.3. After studying abroad

As indicated above, the participants' positions in terms of their experiences, evaluations, and emotions pointed towards contradictory changes before studying abroad and during the time they spent abroad. After studying abroad, their understanding of themselves as learners and users of the language changed, and their evaluations (i.e., their beliefs and attitudes) and emotions improved. Accepting the diversity of the English language and considering it to be flexible instead of fixed, they began to highlight the goal of learning English to achieve successful intercultural communication in the future, not just to pass the exams (Fang & Baker, 2018). The findings indicate that the participants no longer adhered to Standard English language ideology; their beliefs of and attitudes towards English improved as they considered the language to be a means of communication not simply a subject for high scores on exams. For instance, Cassie stated:

Extract 14

I didn't think that my attitudes towards English and my own English use would ever change after my overseas experiences. I thought that people regarded me as a perennially imperfect language learner. I feel more confident in using English in both academic and social settings. So, after I came back from abroad, I didn't consider myself an imperfect English speaker; rather, I feel that communication is most important. It means that the function of English is to communicate, which is more than studying it as a subject to pass exams (Cassie).

Anna added:

Extract 15

I believe that English is used for communication. If you cannot communicate with that language, what is the meaning of using the language (Anna)?

In terms of the emotions the participants had after studying abroad, it should be noted that none of them shared any negative emotions, as was the case before their study abroad experience. The findings indicated the students felt positive emotions, such as enjoyment and happiness, which resulted in their increased willingness to communicate. For instance, Ben explained:

Extract 16

After I came back from Australia, I felt interested in communicating in English, and whenever I did, I was happy and enjoyed the communication. So, I voluntarily took part in any English conversation we had in class which was not the case before going abroad. In the end, I am now so proud of myself and enjoy using English wherever I need to (Ben).

One of the students participated in a sharing session where she lamented the restricted focus on native Standard English and Anglophone cultures in her previous English learning experiences that were divorced from real-life intercultural encounters.

Extract 17

I was invited to share my overseas experiences with university students who were prepared to apply for this exchange program. I encouraged my junior fellows to be exposed to various English accents and versions in order to equip them with future intercultural communication abroad (Rebecca).

To summarize, the participants changed their need to uphold Standard English language ideology after they engaged in ELF communications abroad. Due to that experience, they switched their focus from learning English as perennial learners to being competent language users (Boonsuk & Fang, 2022); they cared more about communicating effectively than correctly applying the linguistic features. That is, a growing awareness of the function of English as a communication tool was the most evident finding in the analysis, and the participants seemed to have a positive attitude towards the flexibility of English in today's globalized world, which enhanced their ELF awareness and impact their multilingual identities.

5. Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to capture Chinese students' multilingual identity constructions before, during, and after their studying/living abroad experience from an ELF perspective viewed through a multi-theoretical lens. Modeled by Fisher et al. (2020),

this approach acknowledges some of the main features overlapping the key areas of the three theoretical perspectives (i.e., psycho-social, sociocultural, and post-structural). Thus, multilingual identity construction is not a fixed phenomenon; it is both an individual process and a social process that may involve changes over time (Fisher et al., 2020). As shown in the analysis, in general, the findings can be explained by the main features of the multi-theoretical approach. In reference to Fisher et al.'s (2020) conceptualization, the present study's findings confirmed that multilingual identity construction is a changeable participative process in which the role of individuals, the social factors, and the contextual dimensions are significant. Thus, the findings suggest that the participants' multilingual identity construction was significantly affected by changes in their experiences, evaluations, and emotions before, during, and after their studying/living abroad experiences. Given that individuals' experiences, evaluations, and emotions would have a significant impact on their multilingual identity constructions, it should be considered that their beliefs, attitudes, goals, and emotions about language learning and use were, to a large extent, different before going abroad than during and after their overseas experience.

In terms of their experiences, since Chinese English education is grounded in NES norms (Fang, 2020; Wen, 2012), some of the participants mentioned Standard English and were concerned about the correctness of their English usage before going abroad. The study's findings demonstrate that the process of the participants' multilingual identity constructions before studying abroad was affected by the limitations related to Chinese English education. However, as shown in the analysis, the participants' English language ideology changed after experiencing ELF communication with people from different lingua-cultures. This experience influenced the participants' language ideologies and increased their awareness of the concept of ELF (Fang, 2020; Fang & Baker, 2018; Martin-Rubió & Cots, 2018). Thus, it can be implied that the participants' experience of learning and using English before, during, and after studying/living abroad played a fundamental role in their multilingual identity formation. This can broadly corroborate previous studies in which education has been shown to have a significant impact on identity construction (Lamb, 2011; Nasir & Cooks, 2009; Schachter & Rich, 2011).

In terms of the participants' evaluations, when they returned to their home countries, they began to highlight the goal of learning English to achieve successful intercultural communication in the future (McCandless et al., 2020), and not merely to focus on passing exams. It is important to note that the opportunity to participate in intercultural communications offered from an ELF perspective provided the participants with new resources and space to construct their multilingual identity (Baker, 2015). That is, the participants' experiences contributed to their enhanced and explicit evaluation and understanding of their ultimate goal of language learning and their perceptions of themselves as language users. They no longer limited themselves to being English learners; they started to focus on using English for successful communication from an ELF perspective. This challenges the neoliberal ideology as the students were not merely "submissive to institutional authority" (Tajima, 2020, p. 9) when perceiving and using English after their overseas experiences. Furthermore, this echoes the finding that ELF users "are focused on the interactional and transactional purpose of the talk and on their interlocutors as people rather than on the linguistic code itself" (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 98). Supporting the idea that learners' evaluations and emotions are closely linked (Forbes et al., 2021), the study's results indicate that these new language ideologies and learning evaluations, which resulted from the participants' ELF experiences, also influenced the way they feel about themselves and their language learning process. The findings show that the participants' emotions shifted from being negative (before going abroad) to being positive (after returning from abroad).

In summary, in line with Jenkins (2007) and Sung (2019), this study revealed the complexity of multilingual identity construction from an ELF perspective. As such, it underscores "the importance of a holistic understanding of individuals' L2 experiences both inside and beyond the classroom in order to arrive at a nuanced picture of their L2 development and identity negotiation" (Sung, 2019, p. 201). Furthermore, confirming that multilingual identity construction may have a social and relational dimension, the study's findings show that an external social influence shaped the participants' multilingual identity construction. In line with the concept that explains multilingual identity construction as fluctuating over time (i.e., historical and contextual dimension), this also demonstrated that the students' process of multilingual identification was not fixed; it varied and changed based on their study abroad experiences. Indeed, the students' multilingual identity was shaped by their experiences, evaluations, and emotions, individually and socially and within the historical and contextual settings before, during, and after studying abroad. Thus, the three Es were found to fluctuate across the three timespans: before, during, and after studying abroad.

6. Implications

The findings of this study have some awareness-raising pedagogical implications for education stakeholders, including language teachers, material designers/developers, policymakers, and English language practitioners. Given that multilingual identity has been shown to be shaped by the settings in which the learning takes place (Fisher et al., 2020; Haukås, 2016; Henry & Thorsen, 2018), teachers may play a key role in constructing and developing students' multilingual identities. As such, our findings suggest that language educators should care more about increasing their knowledge of multilingualism and ELF, and provide activities and opportunities that enrich their students' linguistic repertoire and multilingual identities. This research will help students who have the opportunity to study abroad in an exchange program or pursue further study to develop an awareness of language diversity in intercultural communication before the study abroad experience. For example, in class settings, teachers can include discussions of and debate about the global spread of English, so students can increase their awareness of the dynamic and multifaceted use of English across the globe. To this end, teacher training, as an important step in developing teachers' language awareness (Chen et al., 2021; Matsuda, 2017), should involve some activities or courses that introduce the concept of ELF and "cultural awareness and communication skills concerning ELF" (Luo, 2017, p. 9).

The role of policymakers is also significant. By promoting comprehensive educational and societal insights about multilingual identity and multilingualism, they can provide learners with better resources in schools. Based on the findings, using ELF-informed

practices in English language education might encourage students to apply their communicative skills, be tolerant, and accept the variable use of English across the globe in a multilingual and flexible manner. Moreover, ELF-informed and multilingual pedagogy can involve practices related to the diversity of English, communication problems, or interlocutors with different levels of English proficiency, for example, through the adoption of translanguaging (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; Fang & Liu, 2020; Fang et al., 2022; Li, 2018). Because the native speaker model has been proven to not enhance global intelligibility for ELF communication (Deterding, 2013; Lippi-Green, 2012), and given that the participants transformed their identities from perennial language learners to competent language users during and after their study abroad experiences, English language education should no longer adhere to the fixed standard native model if English is no longer simply viewed as a subject of learning to achieve high scores on exams. It is therefore recommended that authentic communication from study abroad experiences be incorporated into language curricula in order to prepare students for a short academic visit or global exchange learning program.

7. Conclusion

This study attempted to capture Chinese students' multilingual identity constructions by mapping their experiences, evaluations, and emotions of the language learning/using process before, during, and after studying abroad. Casting light on multilingual identity construction among students with study abroad experiences from a multi-theoretical perspective, the findings reveal that their multilingual identity construction varied before, during, and after that experience. The findings suggest that the students' intercultural communication experience had a positive effect on their multilingual identity constructions as legitimate ELF speakers. Thus, an ELF experience would help students improve their awareness of how English is used around the world and (re)construct their multilingual identity.

This study had some limitations that should be addressed. Due to scheduling requirements, it was only possible to conduct one interview after the participants completed their overseas experiences, in which they were able to report on their identity negotiation and construction processes. Multilingual identity construction is a long and changing process that requires frequent observations throughout the experience to fully understand the participants' experiences, evaluations, and emotions in real time. Thus, the data collected may not present a holistic picture of the students' multilingual identity construction before, during, and after their overseas experiences. Moreover, the number of participants in the present study was relatively small. Consequently, it was not possible to capture the larger picture of students' multilingual identity constructions in ELF settings. Therefore, further research could recruit more students from different linguacultural backgrounds. It is hoped that future studies could also collect longitudinal data for students during and after their study abroad experience to further delve into the individual differences in their intercultural encounters. Future studies could also include data from other intercultural encounters, for example, students' working experiences in social settings and their supervision experiences in academic settings, thus providing a more comprehensive picture regarding the issue of language use and multilingual identity construction from an ELF perspective.

Author statement

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2023.103053.

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