



“I Better Not to Speak”: Micro-Culture and Identity Conflict of Female Muslim Students in Language Learning Classroom

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Abstract

Despite many studies that have shown the advantages of implementing in-class debate and critical thinking in language learning, there are issues related to identity discomfort experienced by the students that hinder learning outcomes. This study investigates the identity conflict experiences of four female Muslim students involved in persuasive speech activities of a persuasive speech activity as part of Public Speaking course. The research aims to explore the micro-culture phenomena within the classroom, i.e. identity conflicts faced by the participants, strategies for identity negotiation, and the role of strategic investment in language learning. Case study approach was employed using purposive sampling based on classroom reflections at the end of the academic term to determine the participants. In-depth interviews were conducted with the selected participants in a confidential one-on-one setting. The findings contribute to understanding the relationships of micro-culture, identity conflicts and negotiation, and strategic investment in the context of language learning. The research highlights reflective process in relation to the experiences of female Muslim students and provides implications for creating inclusive and safe space for learning environments.

Keywords: *micro culture, identity conflict, identity negotiation, inclusive language learning*

1. Introduction

This research investigates the learning experiences of four female Muslim students participating in the persuasive speech activities in the form of in-class debate, which requires critical thinking skills and classroom engagement. The activities are part of the Public Speaking course that encourage students both monologue and dialogue speeches in front of audience or a forum. In the context of language learning, critical thinking is believed to activate students to learn beyond simple memorization to substantive language competence (Shirkhani & Fahim, 2011; Jantrasakul, 2012); the students are enabled to engage in higher-order thinking activities and cognitive processes that involve reasoning, problem-solving, and decision-making, which in turn positively improves language competence.

The utilization of critical thinking in the context of language competence is believed to enhance language proficiency by enabling learners to analyze and understand complex linguistic structures, including discourse analysis ability, leading to effective communication in different contexts and. With this ability, learners are able to think creatively, fostering linguistic flexibility, allowing learners to adapt their language use to different situations, audiences, and purposes. In addition, critical thinking in language

learning strengthens cognitive skills which enable learners to comprehend and interpret texts, evaluating information as well as their own language learning progress.

As a language practice, debating activity is believed to give some essential benefits to support learner's communicative competence. Debate is an interactive and structured form of discourse that requires learners to critically analyze and argue different viewpoints on a given topic. Debating practice serves as a powerful language activity that cultivates critical thinking skills in language learners, leading to communicative competence. It is not only to address the issue in language production, debating requires learners to critically analyze arguments presented by their peers/counterparts and evaluate their validity, reliability, and persuasiveness.

Another benefit of debating practice in language learning is to encourage the learners' engagement. Such engagement in the communication sharpens their collaborative ability from pre-debate activities to identify logical fallacies during the debate, and construct well-supported arguments in the form of counterarguments (Aclan & Aziz, 2015; Marsh, 2020). Debating is also believed to enhance learners' communication skills by encouraging them to articulate their thoughts clearly and organize their ideas coherently in the form of persuasion or opinions. It requires learners to engage in active listening and construct critical responses and foster effective interpersonal communication. For the complex and critical communication, debaters are sometimes required to conduct thorough research on their topic in order to gain evidence from reliable sources. This activity promotes information literacy skills, i.e. evaluating sources for credibility, synthesizing information, and presenting and defending well-informed arguments (Alén, Domínguez, & Carlos, 2015). In terms of collaborative learning, debating practice in the classroom encourages collaboration among students by engaging in dialogue and constructing responses and counterarguments. It nurtures critical engagement with diverse viewpoints, promoting open-mindedness, tolerance, and the ability to consider multiple perspectives. The benefits of the collaborative and engaged learning activities through debating are even bigger as the roles of the teachers to prepare and promote collaborative dialogues (Webb, 2009), one of which is in-class debating practice.

In short, the role of in-class debate and critical thinking become essential component of language learning which is believed to develop language proficiency, creativity, and cognitive skills of the learners (Schuster, 2021). Debate serves as a language practice that requires critical thinking and provides learners with opportunities to analyze arguments, engage in research and information literacy (Berland & Hammer, 2012; Cavagnetto, 2010; Elmborg, 2006), and foster collaboration and critical engagement. Critical thinking is a pedagogical innovation that triggers reflective processes and impact learners by increasing their motivation towards language learning and raising awareness of their cognitive and language development (Quintero, 2012).

Despite numerous benefits and significance of debating practice and critical thinking and language learning, several studies have asserted some backlashes or drawbacks associated with critical discussion and debate, namely bringing sensitive issues, in language classroom discussions. While addressing sensitive topics can be valuable for promoting critical thinking and cultural awareness, it is important to pay attention to the potential challenges and negative consequences that may arise in such discussions, such as emotional discomfort, polarization, emotional instability, and loss of focus of language learning objectives (Lowe, 2015; Rodriguez & Puyal, 2012; Thomas, 2009). Bringing sensitive issues in the form of a debate motion into classroom may trigger strong emotions

among learners which may lead the students to discomfort and disruption. As the results, students may feel overwhelmed and discouraged, hindering constructive dialogue and inhibiting the learning process (Dewaele & Li, 2020; Da Costa & Norton, 2017; Do & Schallert, 2004). In addition, debating may cause heated discussions that can inadvertently marginalize or exclude certain students, particularly those from underrepresented community. As the consequence, such discussions may perpetuate stereotypes and silence the voices of the marginalized individuals (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021).

In this regards, the role of the teacher is essential in relation to their preparedness to address debate practice, especially in facilitating difficult conversations among students (Pinel & Albert, 2018); otherwise, the activity may result in miscommunication, inadequate support for students, or unintentional reinforcement of harmful stereotypes, ultimately hindering the educational value of such discussions. Another aspect is the psychological and emotional well-being of the students that unpreparedness in engaging in sensitive discussions can have a negative impact on students' psychological and emotional well-being which may trigger trauma, anxiety, or emotional distress, particularly for individuals with personal experiences related to the topic under discussion (Gutierrez & Gutierrez, 2019; Danby & Hamilton, 2016). Educators should be aware of potential emotional challenges and provide appropriate support mechanisms. The failure of addressing the appropriate facilitation distracts the primary language learning objectives. The excessive emphasis on controversial topics may overshadow the intended language practice, limiting opportunities for linguistic development and mastery. In conclusion, incorporating sensitive issues into language classroom discussions requires appropriate consideration apart from its benefits such as fostering critical thinking, cultural awareness, and empathy. Educators should navigate the potential challenges by promoting inclusivity, providing adequate support, creating safe spaces for dialogue, and ensuring a balance between addressing sensitive topics and maintaining focus on language learning objectives.

This study intends to investigate the experiences of students enrolled in a speaking course, with a specific focus on the persuasive speech section –that one of the activities require students engage in critical discussion and persuasion upon a sensitive or controversial topic. In more specific, the study aims to explore the micro-culture within the classroom that may affect student's behaviors, identity conflicts faced by the students, their strategies for identity negotiation, and the role of strategic investment in language learning for the language instructors.

2. Methods

This is a phenomenological study which intends to investigate the experiences of students enrolled in Public Speaking course, with a specific focus on the persuasive speech section. The implementation of phenomenology to EFL issues will help language practitioners to broaden their understanding of pedagogical issues through learning from the experiences of both teachers and students in order to re-evaluate their presuppositions on numerous educational issues (Bonyadi, 2023; Campbell, 2012). In more specific, the study aims to explore the micro-culture within the classroom, identity conflicts faced by the

participants, their strategies for identity negotiation, and the role of strategic investment in language learning. This research utilized a case study approach to a specific phenomenon—students' ideology conflict experience in a classroom, employing purposive sampling to select participants based on classroom reflections at the end of the academic term. Case selection participants for this study was through purposive sampling based on the classroom reflections provided by students at the end of the academic term to identify individuals who have expressed experiences related to micro-culture, identity conflict, identity negotiation, and strategic investment in language learning. The final sample size consisted of four female Muslim students who met the selection criteria of the case. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the selected participants in a one-on-one setting to create a comfortable and confidential environment for participants to share their experiences openly.

The collected data were securely stored and only accessible to the researcher. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms are assigned to participants in any publications or presentations related to the study. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing participants to discuss their perspectives, emotions, and reflections related to micro-culture, identity conflict, identity negotiation, and strategic investment in language learning. Data analysis was conducted using a social theory framework, drawing on relevant theoretical perspectives related to micro-culture, identity conflict, identity negotiation, and strategic investment in language learning. The data from the interviews were coded and analyzed thematically by identifying the recurring patterns, themes, and sub-themes within the data, linking them to the research objectives. The analysis involved examining the relationships between micro-culture, identity conflict, identity negotiation, and strategic investment in language learning among the participants.

3. Results

As the purpose to explore the phenomenon experienced by the four Muslim students, this section presents the micro-culture factors within the classroom, identity conflicts faced by the participants which leads to inactive participation, the identity negotiation to establish a safe space for classroom discussion, and the role of strategic investment in language learning.

3.1. Micro-cultures affecting students' participation in the classroom

This analysis explores the extent to which micro-cultures, specifically religion and culture, influence the students' engagement as part of their identity construction in the context of in-class debate in the language learning. Micro-cultures are important elements of the individuals encompass the beliefs, values, practices, and social norms that shape individuals' identities within smaller cultural or religious groups (Sugai, O'Keeffe, & Fallon, 2012). The following inquiry reflects on what they experienced in the classroom in relation to their identities and values:

In terms of linguistic expression and communicative style, students are likely to express normatively to neutral with unclear discourse. Students from different religious or cultural backgrounds may have distinct language preferences, communication styles, or linguistic conventions. It gives insight into the nature of particular groups to be inclusive or exclusive on the basis of speech diversity components (Davis, 2006; Tombs & Hill, 2014).

"I don't have to show my disagreement or agreement. I'd rather say "maybe" or "I don't know" than firm stance." (S3)

Micro-cultures can significantly impact students' language production and participation in language learning (Sueb et al, 2020). Some indication during the in-class debate was students were likely to avoid such expressional words or phrases that indicate their firm stance, namely "I believe", "I'm confident", "It's clear that", etc. By producing such expressions can indicate their hesitation to engage in classroom discussions because they do not provide a space for dialogic activities. Moreover, the changes on the linguistic expression by the students may lead to specific social expectations regarding communication patterns, assertiveness, and gender roles. These expectations can affect students' participation levels, with some students feeling more comfortable speaking up and actively participating while others may prefer more passive roles due to cultural or religious norms.

"I don't have to be part of the debate. Let others do. Not me. No matter how good the analysis, the conclusion, and look sophisticated; it is good. But my belief suggests the opposite. So, I better not to speak." (S2)

Besides changes on the linguistic patterns, micro-cultures are believed to shape individuals' confidence levels and their perceived sense of belonging within the language learning environment –in this case is the classroom. Students whose micro-cultural identities are affirmed and valued are likely to feel more confident and empowered to participate actively in classroom activities; Targeted efforts to improve classroom climate will benefit students who might feel marginalized in peer-learning environments (Henning et al, 2019). On the other hand, those whose identities are not adequately recognized or matched may hesitate to engage fully in classroom activities.

"[...] anytime I followed their conclusion, that makes sense. For a moment, and yes I agreed with that. But I have my religion. While when arguing such issue, some friends said we cannot include religious views; why? Me, my religion, doesn't belong to this class?" (S2)

Micro-cultures, including religion and culture, play a significant role in shaping individuals' self-perception and sense of belonging. Language learning experiences can either reinforce or challenge students' existing micro-cultural identities, influencing their engagement and identity construction. Students may draw on their micro-cultural backgrounds to re-construct their linguistic and cultural identities in the language learning process. Based on their inquiry, it was not surprising that the perception of the students towards debating practices is not good because their beliefs are alienated in the learning engagement process.

Language learning involves negotiating and adapting one's identity to fit the target language and culture. Students from micro-cultural backgrounds may navigate the tension between maintaining their original identity and assimilating into the target language community. This negotiation process impacts students' language use, communication styles, and their participation in discussions related to sensitive or culturally significant topics.

Micro-cultures can introduce identity conflicts for students in language learning settings. Conflicts may arise when students' micro-cultural values, beliefs, or norms clash with those of the target language community or the dominant culture in the classroom. These conflicts can affect students' willingness to participate and their ability to construct a cohesive identity in the language learning process. In this case, social norm like family values hold the participation of the students as it is believed to be the ideal role model to

deal with any issues in specific context instead of bringing the issues into public sphere.

“I’m not comfortable when discussing sensitive issues. Sometimes topics are private and not for public. My family sometimes rarely discussed issues like sexual orientation, conflicts, and others.” (S1)

Micro-cultures, such as religion and culture, significantly influence students’ participation and identity construction in language learning (Eaude, 2022; Eaude, 2019). The impact of micro-cultures can be observed through students’ linguistic expression, sociocultural expectations, confidence levels, self-perception, sense of belonging, negotiation of identity, and resolution of identity conflicts. Based on the inquiries, it was clear how the students negotiated their existence and participation by manipulating their language expression, hedging their participation, and feeling insecure due to the classroom activities. Educators should recognize and value students’ micro-cultural identities, create inclusive learning environments that embrace diversity, and provide opportunities for students to explore and integrate their micro-cultural backgrounds into their language learning experiences (Hyde & Rouse, 2022; Kim & Uysal, 2021; Messitidis, 2018). By fostering an environment that supports students’ participation and identity construction, educators can promote a more inclusive and enriching language learning journey.

3.2. Factors that affect student’s inactive participation in classroom discussion on authentic and critical issues

In order to understand the dynamics of the classroom engagement and students’ comfort during the learning process, teachers should understand possible factors that may affect their participation in relation to their identity. This section presents the data findings derived from the participants that aimed to explore the factors influencing students’ inactive participation in classroom discussions on authentic and critical issues. The study focused on three factors such as identity, micro culture, religion, and belief that potentially affect students’ engagement in these discussions.

Students’ identity is mainly related to self-perception (internal construction) and cultural identity (external construction). Several participants expressed a lack of confidence in their ability to contribute meaningfully to the classroom discussions due to their initial perception that they are not part of debating. They attributed this to a perceived mismatch between their personal identities and the dominant discourse in the classroom where the other students engaged freely. Students who hedged themselves in the discussion can be identified as introverted or reserved were more likely to feel uncomfortable speaking up, fearing judgment or rejection from others. In addition, students from minority or marginalized (family) backgrounds reported feeling marginalized during discussions on certain topics. They felt their cultural perspectives were undermined or dismissed, leading to reduced motivation to actively participate. Minority students choose not to participate in an effort to maintain their sense of personal and cultural identity. (White, 2011).

“I’m sure I’m not alone feeling insecure (in the classroom debating activities). Maybe they neglected the feeling and go ahead (with the classroom). Maybe they keep it and being silent just like me.” (S1)

The other factor is micro culture that includes pressure from their friends and

classroom norms. Participants identified the influence of micro cultures within the classroom, such as cliques or social groups, as a significant factor in their inactive participation. They reported feeling pressured to conform to the opinions of their peers, leading to self-censorship or avoidance of controversial topics. Students pointed out that the prevailing classroom norms and dynamics heavily influenced their willingness to participate. When the classroom environment lacked inclusivity, tolerance, and respectful dialogue, students felt discouraged from expressing their viewpoints.

The last aspect is religion and belief. As the participants identified themselves as devoted Moslem, it is clear they hold the religious teaching in their action. Religious aspect covers cultural sensitivity and fear of stereotyping. Some participants highlighted that discussions on sensitive religious or belief-related topics created discomfort due to the potential for offense or misunderstanding. Students expressed a desire for a more inclusive and supportive environment that acknowledged and respected diverse religious and belief systems. Students who adhered to religious or cultural practices that were distinct from the majority felt apprehensive about being stereotyped or misunderstood. This fear often limited their active participation, as they sought to avoid potentially contentious situations.

“(When I’m quiet) Maybe they’ll look at my veil. Even my long *hijab*. But yes, my religion cannot accept prostitution no matter the justification. I don’t understand. [...] then I should avoid the sensitive topic.

The data findings demonstrate the importance of considering factors such as identity, micro culture, religion, and belief when addressing students’ inactive participation in classroom discussions on authentic and critical issues. That includes both self-perception and social construct among the students. Teachers need to critically assess their relationships with their students and their understanding of students’ cultures (Montgomery, 2001). By cultivating an inclusive and supportive classroom climate, promoting cultural sensitivity, and building students’ self-confidence, educators can create a safe space for classroom discussion.

3.3. The needs for a safe space for classroom discussion as part of strategic investment in language learning

This analysis explores the benefits of creating a safe space for classroom discussion in language learning. A safe space refers to an environment where learners feel comfortable, respected, and free to express their thoughts, ideas, and opinions without fear of judgment or negative consequences (Callan, 2020). Establishing such a space is crucial for fostering effective language learning experiences and promoting learner engagement and growth (Wang, 2022). The strategy that can be carried to establish a safe space for the students is by promoting psychological safety, encouraging inclusivity, and implementing collaborative learning.

Promoting psychological safety starts from encouraging students to take a risk. A safe space encourages learners to take risks in their language learning journey. Learners feel more comfortable experimenting with new vocabulary, grammar structures, and communicative strategies, which leads to increased confidence and proficiency (Rabab’ah, 2016). In addition, language instructors should reduce the level of classroom tension and anxiety. Language learners often experience anxiety and fear of making mistakes, which

can hinder their participation and progress. A safe space alleviates these concerns by creating an atmosphere of understanding and acceptance, enabling learners to embrace their learning process and learn from their errors (Conteh & Brock, 2011). The next consideration is to support language production. Learners are more likely to engage in active language production when they feel safe to express themselves. A safe space empowers learners to share their thoughts, ideas, and experiences, leading to meaningful and authentic language use.

Another strategic investment that can be carried out by language teachers is encouraging diversity and inclusivity, including accommodating cultural values, cross-cultural understanding, and supporting marginalized voices. Improving the implementation of in-class debate is by the establishment of a safe space that promotes the appreciation of cultural and linguistic diversity among learners. It recognizes and respects different backgrounds, perspectives, and communication styles, fostering an inclusive environment where learners feel acknowledged and valued. In addition, a conducive learning environment should facilitate cross-cultural understanding by providing opportunities for the students to explore diverse cultural perspectives. By engaging in respectful dialogue and intercultural competence, broaden their worldview, and enhance their communication skills across cultures (Chao, 2013; Rodriguez & Puyal, 2012; Sinicrope, Norris, & Watanabe, 2007). A perspective that is not limited by one's own cultural and linguistic experiences may facilitate one's ability to learn a new language (Fieldin Burns & Rico Garcia, 2021; Citron, 1995). The last aspect in promoting inclusivity in language learning is to empower marginalized voices. Learners from marginalized groups have the opportunity to share their unique experiences and perspectives. Their voices are validated and included, allowing for a more equitable and inclusive language learning environment. the following statement proves that even though the participants are from Muslim community (majority), they feel marginalized when they could not bring religious views in classroom discussion.

"I wish I could bring my religious perspective (into the debate). Debating doesn't mean being non-religious. We are civil society (Indonesia: *madani*), but can't talk about religion in classroom discussion?" (S2)

Teachers may enhance collaborative learning which allows the promotion of active participation and building trust among peers. Learners are more likely to actively participate in classroom discussions when they feel safe. Through collaborative activities, learners engage in meaningful interactions, exchanging ideas and providing feedback, which strengthens their language skills and fosters a sense of belonging. Creating a safe space cultivates trust and rapport among learners and between learners and educators. Trust among classroom members encourages open communication, constructive feedback, and responsibility for learning; teachers and students value a supportive and caring relationship between them (da Luz, 2015). Teachers can promote collaboration during the activities and reflective feedback as post-classroom activities; it allows classroom members build trust and relate the activities with their real life.

In relation to classroom reflective feedback, it allows classroom members to address their diverse perspectives, micro-cultures, and expectation. Through reflection, that are relevant and respectful to different cultural, religious, and belief systems, educators can establish a safe and inclusive environment that values and includes students' identities. In addition, inquiry from students may include common ground such as preferred topics to be addressed in the classroom. Careful topic selection is believed to reduce identity conflicts

by avoiding sensitive or controversial issues that may marginalize or exclude certain groups (Beck, 2020; Groves, Chen & Verenikina, 2020). Educators should be aware of potential sparks and strive to foster a supportive atmosphere where students feel welcomed in expressing their opinions without being afraid of social judgement. The appropriate selection of topics in debating exercises becomes important factor in engaging students and promoting meaningful discussions, which in turn addresses potential identity conflicts among the students (Healey, 2012).

Understanding the importance of topic selection can help create inclusive learning environments that encourage students to participate in classroom activities and promote critical thinking. Selecting debate topics that reflect with students' experiences and micro-cultures can enrich engagement and active participation. When students connect with the topic personally, they are more likely to involve themselves in the dialogue and discussion (Gibson, 2011).

"I couldn't relate the topics we discussed with the learning objectives (English education). Sometimes I wonder whether our debate should be always about complicated topics? [...] I don't find the relevance. I think not all students have preference (to the topics)." (S1)

At the end, mutual learning should become the essence of bringing debating activities in the classroom. Topic selection should emphasize the importance of mutual learning and understanding among students from diverse micro-cultural backgrounds. Educators should encourage students to share different perspectives and views through constructive dialogue which allows ideas, cultural appreciation, and broadened perspectives arise in the learning process (Ball, 2000).

4. Conclusion

This study has explored into the experiences of the four female Muslim students participating in the persuasive speech activities, in particular on identity conflicts. The research aimed to explore the micro-culture dynamics present in the classroom, including the participants' encounters with identity conflicts, their strategies for identity negotiation, and the role of strategic investment by the teachers in language learning. The findings of this study contribute to a better understanding of the relationships among micro-culture, identity conflicts, and strategies in the context of language learning. The research sheds light on the reflective processes that occur within the experiences of female Muslim students, highlighting the challenges they face, as well as the appropriate mechanisms and strategies that they addressed. One key implication of this research is the importance of creating inclusive and safe learning environments.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the significance of strategic investment in language learning, especially the establishment of a safe space in in-class debate in language learning. The participants' experiences demonstrate that investing in language learning requires more than just linguistic skills, but also an understanding of one's own identity, as well as the ability to navigate and negotiate cultural and social contexts. Language instructors should consider incorporating strategic investment practices into language learning curricula to support students in their language development and identity construction, namely topic selection and inclusive education to the marginalized voices.

This study also emphasizes the importance of reflective processes in the language learning journey so the students can gain insights into their own experiences, identify areas of growth, and develop a stronger sense of self. Reflective practice is believed to contribute to the construction and negotiation of identities, allowing students to integrate their linguistic and cultural backgrounds and contextualize the learning experience to the learning outcomes.

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