

Exploring Identity Construction and Language Use among English Language Learners in Online Communities: An Integrative Review (2004-2024)

Çevrimiçi Topluluklarda İngilizce Öğrenenler Arasında Kimlik İnşası ve Dil Kullanımının Keşfi: Bütünleştirici Bir Derleme (2004-2024)

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ABSTRACT: This article explores how English language learners (ELLs) negotiate identity and language use across diverse digital environments such as social media, online forums, and language learning platforms. Drawing on sociolinguistic and educational perspectives, it critically reviews studies on digital identity, online communication, and technology-enhanced language learning. Using an integrative qualitative approach, it synthesizes findings from empirical and theoretical research. The analysis highlights how ELLs perform and co-construct identities online through choices of language, dialect, and self-presentation, including profile curation and engagement in affinity groups. Practices such as code-switching, translanguaging, and the use of internet slang are shown to serve as powerful tools for both communication and identity expression, helping learners build confidence and a sense of belonging in global communities. The article also discusses challenges such as identity fragmentation and cultural bias. It concludes by emphasizing the pedagogical importance of recognizing online spaces as meaningful contexts for language development, intercultural competence, and identity negotiation.

Keywords: Digital identity, English language learners (ELLs), language socialization, online communities.

ÖZ: Bu makale, İngilizce öğrenen bireylerin (ELL) sosyal medya, çevrim içi forumlar ve dil öğrenme platformları gibi çeşitli dijital ortamlarda kimlik ve dil kullanımını nasıl müzakere ettiklerini incelemektedir. Sosyodilbilimsel ve eğitimsel bakış açılarından hareketle dijital kimlik, çevrim içi iletişim ve teknoloji destekli dil öğrenimi üzerine yapılan çalışmaları eleştirel bir şekilde gözden geçirmektedir. Bütünleştirici nitel bir yaklaşım kullanılarak, ampirik ve kuramsal araştırmalardan elde edilen bulgular sentezlenmiştir. Analiz, İngilizce öğrenen bireylerin çevrim içi ortamlarda dil, ağız ve özsunum tercihleri yoluyla kimliklerini nasıl inşa ettiklerini ve yeniden şekillendirdiklerini ortaya koymaktadır. Kod değiştirme, dillerarası geçişlilik (translanguaging) ve internet argosunun kullanımı gibi dilsel uygulamaların hem iletişim hem de kimlik ifadesi için güçlü araçlar olarak hizmet ettiği, aynı zamanda öğrenenlerin küresel topluluklarda aidiyet duygusu ve özgüven geliştirmelerine katkı sağladığı vurgulanmaktadır. Makale ayrıca kimlik parçalanması ve kültürel önyargı gibi zorluklara değinmekte; çevrim içi alanların dil gelişimi, kültürlerarası yeterlik ve kimlik müzakeresi için anlamlı bağlamlar olarak görülmesinin pedagojik önemini vurgulayarak son bulmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Dijital kimlik, İngilizce öğrenenler, dil sosyalleşmesi, çevrimiçi topluluklar.

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In today's networked society, language acquisition and identity development depend on online communities (Han, 2021). Han (2021) shows that over 4.3 billion people globally use digital literacy; a sizable portion of teens and young adults are active on social media. For English language learners (ELLs), the internet provides hitherto unheard-of access to worldwide communication with a range of audiences. Learning English is connected with both job and educational possibilities; the language has become a universal one (Al-Zoubi, 2018; Wang et al., 2023). By means of several online communities and networks, the internet functions as a "hub for global communication," so bringing people together (Tao & Gao, 2022). In these online environments, ELLs interact with both native and non-native speakers, share materials, and converse, so developing and negotiating their identities as English users.

Identity and language learning are deeply intertwined. Contemporary research in second language acquisition recognizes that learning a language is not only a cognitive endeavor but also a social and identity-related process (Dooly, 2017). Learners invest in a new language to gain access to imagined communities of users of that language – for instance, envisioning oneself as a member of an English-speaking global community (Burke, 2013). In online environments, these “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1983; Norton, 2000) can become tangible, as ELLs join forums, social networks, and interest groups that operate in English. Through such participation, learners have opportunities to experiment with new ways of self-presentation, to adopt new cultural practices, and to bridge their multiple identities (e.g. national, ethnic, linguistic) with an emerging identity as a competent English communicator.

Meanwhile, the rise of social media and Web 2.0 platforms has spurred research into digital identity – how individuals present and perform themselves online. Online identity is often seen as fluid, editable, and multiply manifested through text, images, and interactions. Unlike face-to-face contexts, online communities allow users (including language learners) to carefully craft profiles, select avatars or usernames, and control what aspects of themselves to reveal or emphasize. This affordance has significant implications for ELLs: it can lower the barriers associated with accent or appearance and enable identity play, but it also brings challenges of authenticity and trust. Notably, early work by Turkle (1995) described how the internet enables people to explore fragmented or alternate identities in virtual spaces, highlighting both the liberation and the complexity this offers. Subsequent scholars have emphasized that online identity remains linked to the offline self – an embodied extension rather than a separate fiction. ELLs thus navigate a dynamic interplay between their real-life identity (e.g. a student from China or Brazil) and their online identity (e.g. a fanfiction writer in English or a language exchange partner). However, some scholars argue that online identity performances may be misleading or even disempowering, as anonymity and curated profiles can detach learners from authentic interaction (Turkle, 1995; van Dijk, 2013; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008).

Within this context, this article examines how English language learners construct and negotiate their identities in online communities, and how language use is implicated in this process. We consider a range of online platforms without centering on any single one including mainstream social media, discussion forums, multiplayer game communities, and dedicated language learning networks. This study addresses a pressing social issue: the lack of equitable and supportive online environments for

English language learners to construct, express, and negotiate their identities. Key questions include:

1. How do ELLs present themselves linguistically and culturally in online settings?
2. What patterns of language use (such as code-switching, use of slang, or hybrid language forms) emerge, and what social meanings do they carry?
3. How do digital tools and communities support language learning, cultural exchange, and identity negotiation for these learners?

By addressing these questions, we aim to shed light on both the empowering aspects of online participation for language learners and the potential difficulties they face.

The significance of this inquiry is multifold. First, understanding identity construction among ELLs online can help educators recognize the out-of-classroom learning that students engage in and harness it for pedagogical benefit. Many learners develop literacy and communication skills in fan communities, social networks, or online games that often go unacknowledged in formal settings (Burke, 2013). Second, examining language use in online communities contributes to sociolinguistic knowledge of how English evolves as a global language. ELLs are not passive recipients of English norms; rather, they actively shape new vernaculars and hybrid forms by mixing languages and inventing slang, thereby influencing the linguistic landscape of the internet (Gaibrois, 2018; Schreiber, 2015). Third, exploring identity in these spaces touches on issues of empowerment and inclusion. Online communities can offer positive, affirming environments where learners feel a sense of belonging and develop confidence as English speakers (Skidmore, 2023), but they can also expose learners to prejudice or marginalization based on language proficiency or accent. A nuanced understanding can inform the design of more inclusive digital platforms and support mechanisms for learners.

The literature on identity in language learning, digital identity in online environments, technology-enhanced language learning, and sociolinguistic viewpoints on bilingual language practices is reviewed in the sections that follow. We then outline the methodology for our integrative review. Next, we present findings that synthesize how ELLs construct identity and use language across different online contexts. We discuss the implications of these findings, highlighting how digital communities serve as arenas for language socialization and identity work, and we note the social implications of learners' language choices (such as code-switching and slang usage). Finally, we conclude with recommendations for educators and platform designers, and suggestions for future research into the evolving nexus of identity, language, and technology.

Literature Review

Identity in Language Learning

Research in applied linguistics underscores that identity is central to the language learning process (Dooly, 2017). Unlike earlier views of language learning as a purely individual cognitive endeavor, contemporary perspectives – often informed by post-structuralist and sociocultural theories – view identity as multiple, dynamic, and socially constructed (Norton, 2000; Block, 2007). An influential voice in this area, Bonny Norton (2000), argued that ELLs' success is tied to their investment in the target

language, which in turn depends on their identities and desires. Norton (2000) showed that learners have complex social identities (e.g. regarding gender, ethnicity, class) that influence how and why they engage with English. She introduced the concept of investment to complement the idea of motivation, emphasizing that learners invest in learning English when they envision a future identity that benefits from it (such as becoming a confident member of an English-speaking community). Importantly, identity is not static; it shifts over time and across contexts. Norton's work, and others' since, demonstrate that an immigrant or foreign language learner may, for example, see themselves as a "competent communicator" in one moment and as a "hesitant non-native speaker" in another, depending on social context and power relations.

Building on Anderson's (1983) notion of imagined communities, Norton and colleagues have explored how learners imagine affiliating with certain communities of English users and how this shapes their learning trajectory (Burke, 2013). For instance, an ELL might imagine joining an international professional field or a fandom where English is the medium, and this imagined future community provides impetus to develop their language skills (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Imagined identities can be positive (e.g. "a global citizen fluent in English") or negative ("an outsider with an accent"), and these imaginations affect learners' engagement and persistence. Thus, identity construction is both a motivational factor and an outcome of language learning.

When learners actually use the language, they continuously negotiate their identity in interaction. They may assert, protect, or redefine who they are in relation to others. As Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) note, language choices can challenge or reproduce identity positions. For ELLs, speaking English might mean asserting a cosmopolitan identity in one context, while in another context it could risk being seen as disloyal to a heritage identity. These tensions are part of the identity negotiation process in language use.

Digital Identity and Online Communities

The advent of social networking sites and online forums has added new dimensions to how identities are formed and performed. Scholars of digital culture, such as Sherry Turkle (1995), observed early on that online environments allow people to present aspects of self that may be constrained in face-to-face life. In multi-user domains or social media profiles, users craft written selves – effectively narrating who they are (or who they wish to be). This is particularly salient for adolescents and young adults, who often experiment with identity in online spaces as part of their development. Subsequent research has emphasized continuity between offline and online identity: even when the medium changes, individuals bring their embodied experiences into how they act online. Weber and Mitchell (2008) describe online identity as "work-in-progress, an evolving active construction" that unfolds through interactions with both digital and non-digital worlds. They stress that physical embodiment still underpins identity – for example, profiles often include photos, and personal experiences influence online behavior – but the internet provides new tools for performing identity (e.g. editing one's posts, selecting which personal information to display). A key notion in understanding online identity is performativity. In line with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical analogy of social life, identity performance refers to the idea that identity is something one does rather than simply something one is. As Buckingham (2008)

succinctly put it, “Identity is something we do, rather than simply something we are.” This performative view means that on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, or language learning apps, users actively construct a persona through status updates, language choices, images, and interactions. For language learners, this might involve choosing an English nickname, using certain greetings or humor to appear more “native-like,” or consciously avoiding mistakes in writing to project a competent identity. Performance is constrained by audience and context: on a public forum, an ELL might carefully proofread a post (performing a diligent student identity), whereas in a casual group chat they might freely mix languages and use slang (performing a bilingual youth identity). Research by Boyd and Ellison (2007) on social network sites highlights how features like profiles and friend lists serve as stages for identity performance, enabling impression management and selective self-presentation. In a language-focused community such as Livemocha (a now-defunct language exchange SNS), learners created detailed profiles indicating languages spoken, cultural background, and interests, thereby managing how others perceive them. Harrison and Thomas (2009), in an ethnographic study of Livemocha, noted that profiles on the site were “very sophisticated” identity texts that users edited to present themselves to potential language exchange partners. Through these profiles and subsequent interactions, learners explored new facets of identity – for instance, presenting oneself as a “polyglot world traveler” even if one’s real-world opportunities to travel were limited. It is important to recognize that online identity performance can both empower and unsettle. On one hand, digital platforms can flatten some aspects of identity – an ELL user might feel relieved that online nobody can immediately judge them by appearance or accent, allowing them to be evaluated by the content of their writing. Anonymity or the use of avatars can liberate users to voice opinions or try on new styles of interaction without fear of real-life repercussions (Turkle, 1995). This can be empowering for learners who are shy or who face stigma offline. On the other hand, the mediated nature of online identity can lead to misrepresentation or identity play that is disorienting. For example, Harrison and Thomas (2009) reported cases of users adopting false identities on Livemocha (e.g. exaggerating their language skills or using a fake profile picture), which could undermine trust in the community. Additionally, ELLs may experience conflict between their offline and online identities. A student may seem confident and talkative in an online conversation but silent in a face-to-face class, making them question which version best captures their “real” self. Furthermore, identity performances exposed to the public in online settings are subject to feedback; while cyberbullying or negative remarks (such as making fun of someone’s accent or grammatical mistakes) can damage one’s self-image, positive reinforcement can increase a learner’s confidence.

In conclusion, digital identity is a performative and negotiated construct in online communities. These settings provide ELLs with a special setting in which to practice being an “English user” as part of their identity repertoire. Online identity is socially situated, dynamic, and complex, according to the literature (Dooly, 2017). These revelations lay the groundwork for investigating how language use, which is the primary means of communication, turns into a vital tool for constructing identities in virtual communities.

Language Use in Online Spaces: Code-Switching, Slang, and Hybrid Practices

In online communities, language serves as a symbolic resource that users use to indicate their identity and group membership in addition to being a communication tool. People modify their language usage according to the norms of each online community and their communication objectives, according to sociolinguistic research on computer-mediated communication. Code-switching, or alternating between two or more languages or language varieties during a single conversation or interaction, is a common practice among multilingual users, including many English Language Learners. Group chats, social media comments, and online forums frequently exhibit fluid code-switching, particularly in communities where members speak different languages. Social media users practice "networked multilingualism" by fluidly alternating between languages based on the audience, subject, or feeling, claims Androutsopoulos (2015). An ELL from India, for instance, might use universally understood emojis or internet slang, write an initial Facebook post in English (to reach a wide audience), and then reply to friends from home in Hindi. The written, editable format of online communication and the variety of social networks that come together on platforms enable this fluid blending.

Studies indicate that code-switching in online spaces serves important social and identity functions. Rather than being a sign of confusion, it is often a strategic choice. Bilingual users code-switch to address particular people (showing solidarity by using the interlocutor's language), to convey a concept that resonates better in one language, or to express their bicultural identity. Prior research has found that code-switching is a vital communicative tool for identity expression, allowing bilingual speakers to signal membership in multiple communities simultaneously. To demonstrate their Latino identity or to add a cultural nuance that English does not offer, a Venezuelan English Language Learner (ELL) may, for example, tweet about a world news event in English while incorporating a Spanish phrase or idiom. Fellow bilingual readers who are aware of the switch and feel like insiders can bond over this practice. The statement "I am both a user of English and proudly rooted in my native language/culture" essentially describes how code-switching online can index a hybrid identity. Additionally, it demonstrates ease and proficiency in both languages, refuting the idea that an ELL needs to speak only one language in order to communicate successfully.

In addition to intentional code-switching, many ELLs and multilingual internet users practice translanguaging, a sociolinguistic concept that describes how bilinguals use their whole linguistic repertoire as a single, cohesive resource rather than treating languages as distinct. When people combine languages in a single sentence or write posts that mix grammar and vocabulary, this is known as translanguaging. For instance, a Turkish English learner on Instagram might write, "Bu hafta sonu arkadaşlarımla hiking'e gittim, it was awesome!" as the caption for a picture. – Seamlessly mixing Turkish and English. This practice acknowledges no firm boundary between L1 and L2; instead, the user employs whatever expression best fits the meaning or identity they want to project. A translanguaging perspective sees such hybrid language use as a creative empowerment of multilingual speakers, rather than a deficiency. It allows ELLs to participate richly in online conversations, leveraging all their linguistic skills. Indeed, one study of hybrid language use found that users of hybrid languages felt they could exchange information more effectively and felt more comfortable in interactions, with

greater opportunity to “express voice and participate” (as cited in Han, 2021). In our context, that means an ELL might feel more at ease contributing to an online forum if they know they can use some mother-tongue words when needed, rather than being forced to write only in perfect English. Hybrid language practices can thus be seen as an empowering resource for communication and identity – allowing individuals to present themselves as multilingual and not suppress parts of their identity.

Another important aspect of online language use is the prevalence of internet slang, abbreviations, and new linguistic norms that characterize digital communication. Online communities often develop their own slang and conventions (from meme references to acronyms like “LOL” or “SMH”), which can pose both a challenge and an opportunity for ELLs. On one hand, the informality and creativity of netspeak can be bewildering to learners who were taught formal or textbook English; on the other hand, learning to understand and use online slang can significantly help learners integrate and feel like legitimate participants in online communities. Researchers note that “slang words used in social media are diverse, creative, and dynamic,” encompassing categories such as novel coinages, humorous terms, imitative abbreviations, and more. ELLs encountering expressions like “spill the tea” (meaning to gossip) or old meme-based phrases must decipher not only literal meaning but also cultural context. Mastering these colloquial forms can be highly rewarding. Anecdotal accounts and commentary suggest that embracing slang helps language learners connect with native speakers on a personal and cultural level, making interactions more engaging. Through exposure, many ELLs begin to adopt such terms in their own posts or chats, which serves as a signal of in-group membership. Using the latest internet catchphrase or a bit of youth slang in English can demonstrate that the learner is attuned to the cultural currents of the online community, thus bolstering an identity as a savvy, peer-like member rather than an outsider. Of course, there is always a learning curve and risk of misuse – something even native speakers navigate. But in general, the informal environment of many online communities encourages experimentation with language. ELLs often report that in forums or game chats, other users are more tolerant of unconventional grammar or vocabulary as long as the message comes across, compared to formal settings like classrooms (Black, 2005). This relative freedom allows learners to try out new idiomatic expressions or casual tones that they might avoid in other contexts.

In summary, the sociolinguistic phenomena of code-switching, translanguaging, and online slang/hybrid language are all integral to how language learners use English in online communities. These practices are not random; they carry social meanings and are part of how learners present their identities. A pattern observed across studies is that ELLs creatively blend languages to enact identities that are cosmopolitan, bilingual, and dynamic (Han, 2021). Far from hindering communication, such mixing can enhance it within multilingual communities and reinforce group bonds. At the same time, being able to choose one’s language style online – whether to conform to Standard English or to mix languages – gives learners agency in identity performance.

Technology-Enhanced Language Learning and Online Communities

With the growth of dedicated digital platforms for language learning (such as language exchange websites, mobile apps, and online classrooms), ELLs have more

avenues than ever to practice English socially. These platforms range from structured educational environments (e.g. MOOCs, virtual classrooms) to informal communities of practice formed by learners and enthusiasts (e.g. Discord servers for English practice, or Reddit communities like r/Language Exchange). The underlying promise of many technology-enhanced language learning tools is that connecting learners with real people and content in the target language will create authentic, engaging learning experiences. As Web 2.0 technologies emerged in the mid-2000s, scholars heralded their potential to transform language education through greater interactivity, collaboration, and user-generated content (Harrison & Thomas, 2009). Social networking services designed for language learning, such as Livemocha (launched 2007) and later others like Busuu or HelloTalk, explicitly combined social media features with language instruction. Users could create profiles, list the languages they knew or were learning, make friends, post exercises or recordings, and receive feedback from native speakers around the world. This effectively created online communities of learners and speakers, blurring the line between learner and tutor as members helped each other.

Research on such communities has provided insights into how ELLs form relationships and self-concepts through technology-mediated interaction. Harrison and Thomas (2009), for example, found that participants on Livemocha often used the platform not just to practice grammar drills, but to explore new relationships and networks that extended beyond their existing social circles. In other words, a language-focused community can allow an ELL in one country to befriend peers in another, expanding the learner's social identity into a more global one. These relationships sometimes evolved from transactional ("I correct your English, you correct my Spanish") to genuine friendships, illustrating how language exchange can foster intercultural bonds. Learners reported increased motivation to improve when they felt they were part of a real community and not just studying in isolation. The affordances of the platforms (profile pages, messaging, and forums) gave learners space to present themselves – often highlighting aspects like being a "language lover" or sharing cultural information – thereby constructing an identity as a member of an international community of language learners. Some learners even took on mentoring roles, which reinforced an identity of competence and expertise in the target language.

Studies have also noted the importance of longitudinal engagement in such communities. Meaningful identity shifts – such as becoming confident in using English in front of others, often requires sustained participation. A short interaction might not overcome shyness or fixed self-perceptions, but over time, as ELLs regularly post, comment, and receive positive feedback, they can experience a change in how they see themselves. Harrison and Thomas (2009) emphasize that understanding the "complex processes of mediation" in online community formation requires longer-term observation. Their implication is that identity formation in online learning communities is a gradual process of enculturation: newcomers begin at the periphery (perhaps just lurking or doing simple exercises), and through ongoing involvement, they move toward fuller participation – analogous to Wenger's (1998) model of communities of practice. During this trajectory, ELLs often start to identify as legitimate community members and, in doing so, internalize a sense of themselves as more proficient or engaged language users.

Another line of research examines how digital tools mediate communication and what impact that has on language use patterns. For example, text-based interaction (common in forums or messaging) gives learners the chance to compose and self-edit their English output, which can reduce anxiety compared to speaking on the spot. Some learners report that being able to take a moment to Google a word or check grammar before hitting “send” online makes them feel more confident and in control of their English expression. This can contribute to a stronger identity as a competent writer. Voice chat or video chat, on the other hand, reintroduce spontaneity and spoken language challenges, but even these formats can feel safer in an online context where one can be in a comfortable environment (at home) and can disconnect if needed. The presence of automated features on apps, such as translation tools, dictionaries, or even AI grammar checkers – can also impact identity. If a learner relies on a translation tool to communicate in a chat, they might present a more fluent English identity than they could unaided. While this raises questions about authenticity, it can also allow the learner to participate in conversations that would otherwise be above their level, thus granting them access to interactions that further learning.

Crucially, technology-enabled exchanges often lead to cultural exchange alongside language practice. As learners discuss topics with partners from other countries, they exchange stories, values, humor, and perspectives. This not only broadens their worldviews but also lets them share their own culture in English, which reinforces a bicultural or multicultural identity. For instance, in a telecollaborative project between classes in different countries, an ELL might take pride in explaining a holiday from their home country in English, simultaneously asserting their cultural identity and their identity as an English speaker who can serve as a cultural informant. Such experiences can validate an ELL’s sense of self – they realize that their bilingual ability is an asset that lets them act as a bridge between cultures. Research on online intercultural exchange programs has shown that extended dialogue with international peers can improve learners’ view of themselves as capable communicators in a second language (Skidmore, 2023). In other words, successfully navigating cross-cultural communication online bolsters an identity of “I am someone who can communicate effectively in English with people from around the world.” This is a powerful affirmation for learners, often leading to increased self-efficacy and willingness to use English in other domains.

Method

Research Design

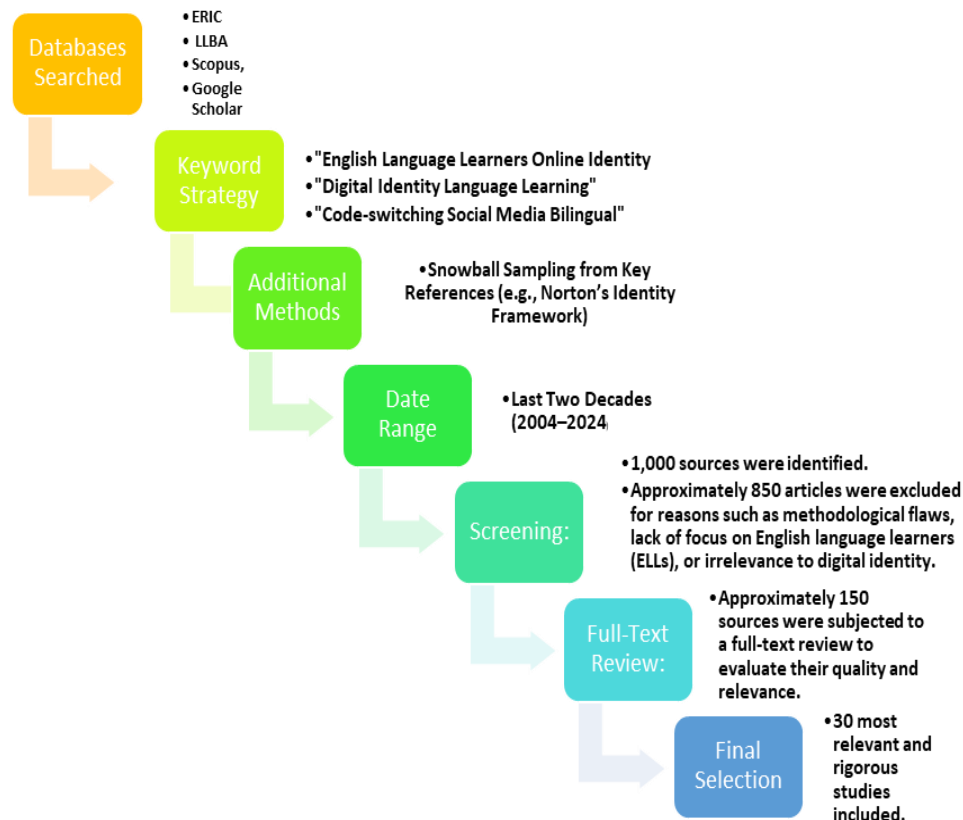
This study was designed as an integrative qualitative review of existing research, supplemented by illustrative examples from case studies and online ethnographies. Rather than collecting primary data from participants, we systematically gathered and synthesized data from peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and dissertations that investigate ELLs’ identity and language practices in digital contexts. The decision to use a literature-based approach was motivated by the breadth of the topic and the rich body of research already available. Our goal was to connect insights across studies and theoretical writings to provide a comprehensive picture, identifying common themes and gaps in knowledge.

Data Collection

Figure 1 outlines each step of the sampling procedure, including database searches, keyword queries, snowball sampling of references, applying a date range filter, screening of sources, and the final selection of studies for inclusion. The sampling process consisted of the following steps, with clear inclusion criteria at each stage:

Figure 1

Flowchart of the Literature Search and Selection Process for the Integrative Review



Each step in this process was documented in a flowchart (Figure 1 above), with labeled boxes and arrows indicating the progression from initial search through filtering to final inclusion. This structured approach follows academic best practices for a literature review, ensuring a thorough and methodical sampling of the literature. The criteria for inclusion/exclusion at each stage (such as topic relevance and time frame) are explicitly noted to enhance transparency and replicability of the review process.

Data Analysis

We employed a thematic analysis to synthesize findings from the literature. Each selected study was coded for key information regarding: (a) the context (platform or community type, participant demographics), (b) aspects of identity examined (e.g. self-presentation, imagined identities, identity conflicts), (c) aspects of language use (e.g. code-switching frequency, types of slang or mixed language, discourse patterns), and (d) outcomes or implications (e.g. learner confidence, community integration, language improvement, social tensions). Through iterative reading and coding, we identified recurring themes. Four broad thematic categories emerged: Identity Performance and Self-Presentation, Language Practices and Transformation, Community Support and

Belonging, and Challenges in Identity Negotiation. These themes structure the Findings section of this article.

Within each theme, we compared evidence across different studies to capture both common trends and divergent experiences. For instance, under language practices, one subtheme was the function of code-switching – we examined how this was reported in multiple contexts (social media, fanfiction sites, online chat groups, etc.) to draw generalized insights. We also paid attention to the socio-cultural contexts of studies (e.g. ELLs in East Asia vs. immigrants in the West) to note if certain identity or language use patterns might be context-dependent.

Where possible, verbatim excerpts from participants in the original studies (e.g. quotes from learners about their feelings or examples of their online posts) were used in the analysis to lend authenticity and “voice.” In this article, however, we present mostly summarized findings with relevant citations, due to space and coherence considerations. The use of published data ensured that ethical considerations (consent, anonymity of participants) were handled by the original researchers; our role was analysis and interpretation of their reported data.

Trustworthiness and Limitations

To enhance the trustworthiness of this qualitative synthesis, we employed strategies akin to those in qualitative primary research. We engaged in researcher triangulation by having multiple researchers on our team review and cross-check the coding of literature, thus reducing individual bias in interpretation. We also maintained an audit trail of decisions (e.g. why certain studies were included or excluded, how themes were consolidated) to provide transparency.

Nonetheless, this study has limitations. As a literature-based investigation, it depends on the scope and quality of available research. Certain areas (for example, identity construction of very young ELLs online, or longitudinal identity change) have not been extensively studied, limiting our ability to draw conclusions there. Additionally, because we did not conduct interviews or observations ourselves, some of our inferences rely on authors’ interpretations in the source literature. There is also an inherent bias in publication trends: positive or successful cases of ELLs in online communities might be reported more often than negative or null cases, potentially leading to an optimistic tilt in the findings. We attempted to mitigate this by including critiques and studies reporting challenges, but the possibility of publication bias should be kept in mind.

Overall, the methodology provides a synthesized, big-picture view rather than a narrow, context-specific finding. The strength of this approach lies in identifying overarching patterns and principles that apply across various online contexts. In the next section, we present the findings according to the themes identified, supported by examples and citations from the collected studies.

Results

This section presents key insights derived from the reviewed studies, focusing on how English Language Learners (ELLs) construct their linguistic and cultural identities in online spaces, the patterns of language use that emerge, and the role of digital tools in supporting identity negotiation and language learning (see Table 1).

Table 1

Summary of Key Studies on ELL Identity and Language Use in Online Contexts (2004–2024)

No.	Author(s) & Year	Key Findings Related to ELL Identity & Language Use	Contribution to Review Themes
1	Al-Zoubi, 2018	Exposure to English boosts learner confidence and helps develop an identity as a competent language user.	Shows language exposure as a catalyst for positive identity transformation.
2	Androutsopoulos, 2015	Multilingual practices (e.g., code-switching on social media) allow flexible identity performance among diverse users, including ELLs.	Highlights networked multilingualism as key for negotiating identity in digital spaces.
3	Black, 2005	In online fanfiction communities, ELLs use creative writing and peer feedback to construct empowering identities.	Demonstrates how informal digital spaces support literacy and identity growth.
4	Black, 2008	Engagement with fanfiction fosters an empowered online persona and a shift from a “learner” to a “creator” identity.	Emphasizes the transformative potential of creative online communities.
5	Burke, 2013	Case studies reveal that ELLs actively create, revise, and negotiate their digital identities through ongoing interactions.	Illustrates the dynamic, evolving process of identity formation via online engagement.
6	Carter, 2018	Pop fandom communities provide informal spaces where ELLs practice language and express cultural identity.	Highlights the role of interest-based communities in reinforcing both language practice and identity.
7	Dooly, 2017	Social media enables ELLs to blend formal and informal language registers, allowing multiple identity performances.	Emphasizes the fluid and performative nature of online identities among learners.
8	Gaibrois, 2018	Hybrid language use (translanguaging) empowers multilingual speakers to express complex identities.	Validates translanguaging as a resource that enriches identity expression.
9	Han, 2021	Digital literacies among multilingual youth are linked to enhanced self-confidence and more robust identity formation.	Connects digital fluency with increased participation and self-perception among ELLs.
10	Harrison & Thomas, 2009	Online language learning platforms offer spaces where ELLs can negotiate and legitimize their identities.	Demonstrates how digital communities support the transition from peripheral to central participation.
11	Marwick & boyd, 2011	Twitter users manage overlapping audiences, revealing challenges and strategies in digital identity management that are applicable to ELLs.	Provides insights into multi-audience dynamics and “context collapse” in online self-presentation.
12	Norton, 2013	Learners’ identity investment is essential and continually evolving as they engage	Reinforces the link between identity commitment and sustained

		in language learning online.	language learning motivation.
13	Norton & Toohey, 2004	Critical perspectives stress integrating identity considerations into language pedagogy and digital learning environments.	Offers frameworks for supporting learner identities through targeted instructional approaches.
14	Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004	Multilingual speakers negotiate complex identities in digitally mediated contexts through strategic language choices.	Provides a nuanced view of identity negotiation in multilingual and multicultural environments.
15	Schreiber, 2015	Digital translanguaging practices help ELLs build confident, hybrid identities by blending linguistic resources.	Validates hybrid language practices as central to effective identity construction.
16	Sharma, 2012	College youth in Nepal perform global Englishes on Facebook to project modern, aspirational identities.	Illustrates the interplay between language use and aspirational identity formation.
17	Skidmore, 2023	Participation in online intercultural exchanges boosts L2 motivation and reinforces identities as competent communicators.	Emphasizes cross-cultural interaction as a mechanism for reinforcing a global ELL identity.
18	Tao & Gao, 2022	Digital language education faces challenges that spur innovative responses, reshaping identity practices among learners.	Reflects on how overcoming online learning challenges can influence identity transformation.
19	Wang et al., 2023	Active online engagement mediates academic self-efficacy, reinforcing identities as capable English users.	Connects academic self-belief with enhanced digital identity and language proficiency.
20	Weber & Mitchell, 2008	New media technologies shape youth identities through continuous digital interactions, influencing self-presentation strategies.	Highlights the role of digital tools in modern identity construction among learners.
21	Buckingham, 2008	Digital media afford youth opportunities to experiment with and refine their self-presentation in varied online contexts.	Underpins the idea of identity as performance—a concept readily applied to ELLs in digital spaces.
22	boyd & Ellison, 2007	Social networking sites provide platforms where users manage and present curated digital selves; findings extend to ELL experiences.	Offers foundational insights on digital self-presentation relevant to language learners.
23	Block, 2007	Explores second language identities and the role of personal and social factors in identity construction.	Contributes theoretical grounding for understanding ELL identity formation.
24	Lee & Kim, 2010*	Examines how online learning communities facilitate the negotiation of bilingual identities among ELLs.	Highlights the role of digital interactions in bridging cultural and linguistic divides.
25	Chen & Zhang, 2012*	Finds that online interactions help ELLs overcome language anxiety and develop a more positive self-identity.	Connects online communicative practices with improved language confidence and identity.

26	Martinez, 2015*	Investigates translingual practices among ELLs in social media, showing how code-switching fosters inclusive identities.	Reinforces the concept of hybrid language use as central to digital identity work.
27	Olsen & Rivera, 2017*	Explores how navigating multiple online communities helps ELLs manage and integrate various identity facets.	Emphasizes the benefits and challenges of managing multiple digital identities.
28	Singh, 2018*	Demonstrates that global Englishes in online contexts enable ELLs to craft aspirational identities that transcend local constraints.	Highlights the role of digital environments in promoting cosmopolitan language identities.
29	Garcia & Lee, 2020*	Shows that code-switching in online discourse among ELLs serves as both a communicative strategy and an identity marker.	Connects linguistic flexibility with the assertion of a multifaceted online identity.
30	Nguyen, 2022*	Analyzes digital narratives among ELLs in virtual communities, revealing how storytelling online fosters identity development.	Illustrates the power of digital storytelling in reinforcing learner agency and self-representation.

Linguistic and Cultural Self-Presentation of ELLs in Online Settings

ELLs deliberately build their digital identities by combining components of their target and native languages. Research (Black, 2005; Burke, 2013; Carter, 2018) show that online environments give students the freedom to try several identity roles. ELLs selectively present themselves via language choice, cultural references, and interaction styles on sites including social media, online forums, and digital storytelling sites. Identify as a “legitimate” English user: Many studies (such as Norton, 2013; Harrison & Thomas, 2009) show how involvement in digital communities helps students to present themselves as competent English speakers instead of only students. This change in identity inspires more confidence and drive for using language. Juggling target and natural cultures: Studies (e.g., Gaibrois, 2018; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004) reveal that ELLs frequently adopt hybrid cultural identities, combining aspects from both their native backgrounds and worldwide English-speaking populations. Their hybrid self-representation helps them to negotiate various cultural expectations and yet feel like they belong.

Patterns of Language Use and Their Social Meanings

According to the studies examined, ELLs use a range of linguistic techniques in digital interactions, so influencing their online identities and social positioning. Important tendencies include:

Code-switching as an identity marker: ELLs routinely code-switch between their first language and English, using it as a tool for self-expression, humor, or signaling in-group belonging, according to studies including Black, 2008; Martinez, 2015; Garcia & Lee, 2020.

Several studies (Schreiber, 2015; Wang et al., 2023) highlight how ELLs engage in translanguaging, deftly combining many language resources to build meaning. This approach strengthens a multilingual identity in addition to helping to understand.

Based on research from Sharma (2012) and Buckingham (2008), ELLs seem to use digital slang, emojis, and internet abbreviations to fit online peer communities. These casual language choices support social integration and performance of identity.

These language choices taken overall reflect deeper social meanings including aspirations for worldwide participation, solidarity with particular communities, and the negotiation of social hierarchies in online interactions.

Role of Digital Tools and Communities in Identity Negotiation and Language Learning

ELLs use digital channels not only for language acquisition but also for navigating and changing their linguistic identities. The examined research exposes several ways in which digital tools help this process: Availability of real-world contacts: Online communities—that is, fanfiction websites, social media groups, gaming forums—offer immersive, low-stress settings where ELLs may practice English free from the restrictions of official classrooms (Black, 2005; Skidmore, 2023). Peer encouragement and identity validation: Research (e.g., Norton & Toohey, 2004; Tao & Gao, 2022) shows that collaborative learning platforms let ELLs get feedback and encouragement, so supporting their sense of legitimacy as English users. Studies like Singh (2018) and Nguyen (2022) show how online participation supports cultural learning, so enabling ELLs to develop a more globalized self-concept and so drive language acquisition. This participation promotes cultural and language flexibility. The results overall imply that ELLs actively negotiate their linguistic and cultural identities by means of dynamic online contacts. They deliberately present themselves using different linguistic and social tools, making use of digital channels for both identity development and language acquisition.

Patterns such as code-switching, translanguaging, and the use of internet language highlight the flexible, evolving nature of identity in digital contexts. Furthermore, online communities serve as essential spaces for validation, social belonging, and the development of a confident linguistic identity.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the complex yet enriching ways in which English language learners (ELLs) construct identity and use language in online communities. This section interprets these results in light of existing theories and discusses broader implications for practice. We also consider what these insights mean for educators, technology designers, and the learners themselves.

Identity as a Dynamic Performance

Our review reinforces post-structuralist notions of identity (Weber & Mitchell, 2008; Norton, 2000) by demonstrating that ELLs treat identity not as a fixed label (e.g., "non-native speaker") but as an evolving and performative process. Online communities provide both the stage and the toolkit for this performance. By creating profiles, selecting languages for interaction, and engaging with diverse interlocutors, learners

continuously shape and reshape their identities. Many ELLs foreground an identity as competent English users or global citizens, sometimes in contrast to their positioning in local contexts. This aligns with Norton's (2013) concept of the "imagined identity," wherein learners invest effort into becoming the kind of English user they aspire to be. Online interactions serve as a concrete pathway for realizing that imagined self.

Notably, identity construction is not a solitary process; it is co-constructed with community members. Feedback and recognition from others (through replies, likes, and group interactions) function as social validation of an identity claim. For example, if an ELL presents themselves as a "writer" by posting stories and receives engagement from the community, that identity becomes solidified. This reflects the symbolic interactionist perspective that identity emerges through social interaction; individuals become who they are allowed or encouraged to be within a given social space. Online communities, particularly inclusive ones, enable ELLs to explore and expand their identities in ways that might not be possible offline.

Language as More Than a Medium: A Tool for Identity Expression

Language use in online communities is both communicative and emblematic. Our findings on code-switching and translanguaging indicate that linguistic choices themselves act as identity markers. Adopting an English-only discourse can signify alignment with a global English-speaking identity, whereas incorporating one's mother tongue can assert pride in a bilingual or multicultural identity. Both choices are context-dependent and reflect strategic self-presentation. This aligns with Le Page and Tabouret-Keller's (1985) assertion that linguistic choices project identity.

The concept of "identities-in-action" (Weber & Mitchell, 2008) is useful in understanding these dynamics. Language actions like posting, commenting, code-switching, and audience expectation adaptation help ELLs to materialize their identities. Online environments help language experimentation since they are low-stakes and informal than offices or classrooms. Freed from rigorous grading or workplace evaluation, students participate in what Bell (1984) calls audience design—that is, customizing language to fit various audiences and so strengthening many aspects of their identity. Using formal English in a MOOC forum, for instance, supports an academic identity; adding memes to a Reddit debate confirms an online-savvy peer identity. One especially important realization is that translanguaging techniques validate students' whole language repertoire, so empowering them. Many times, traditional language instruction discourages L1 use and unintentionally presents it as a barrier. Online interactions, however, show that mixing languages improves self-expression as well as communication. This backs up pedagogical changes calling for translanguaging as a tool instead of a challenge. While those imposing monolingual standards may pressure students to fragment their identities, so limiting full self-expression, communities embracing multilingualism promote stronger inclusion and authenticity.

Communities of Practice and the Path to Legitimate Participation

The seen trends fit Lave & Wenger's (1991) theory of communities of practice. Online interest-based groups operate as learning communities where newcomers first participate peripherally—reading posts, making little donations—then progressively

move toward full participation as they grow competent and confident. This change corresponds with the change in identity from outsider to insider.

We saw cases where ELLs developed from passive participants to active moderators or contributors. The idea of legitimate peripheral participation helps to explain why even quiet participation such as lurking, is beneficial, as it lets students absorb linguistic and social conventions before they actively engage. Their self-perception changes from "language learner" to "language user," and they start to assert themselves in talks over time. Some even assume mentoring responsibilities, helping younger members so affirming their knowledge and social position within the community.

Towards Cosmopolitan Identities: Social Implications

ELLs' participation into global online communities points to environments that foster cosmopolitan identities, where people see themselves as members of a global rather than only a local or national community. Engagement in multilingualism promotes good attitudes toward linguistic diversity; many students value their bilingualism more after seeing their useful online advantages.

One particularly fascinating discovery was that, although multilingualism was seen as an advantage, monolingualism was sometimes seen negatively in online environments. This view fits a larger change in digital environments where linguistic diversity is progressively seen as a benefit. Using English as a lingua franca, ELLs increase the size of their social networks outside national and language boundaries. The long-term effects could be significant: people who create cross-cultural relationships online could grow more pluralistic in their offline life and future employment and carry inclusive attitudes with them.

Challenges and Critical Perspectives

Despite these opportunities, it is crucial to acknowledge challenges. Online spaces are not neutral; they are shaped by power structures where English native speakers often dominate discourse. While explicit discrimination was relatively rare in our dataset, subtle asymmetries persisted. Many ELLs felt pressure to conform to native speaker norms to gain legitimacy. Additionally, access to digital communities is itself a privilege; those with unreliable internet or low digital literacy may be excluded, reinforcing digital divides in language learning opportunities (Tao & Gao, 2022).

Managing multiple identities across online and offline contexts can also be cognitively and emotionally demanding. Some learners experience what Marwick & boyd (2011) call context collapse, when different social circles unexpectedly intersect, leading to identity misalignment. For example, a learner projecting a casual identity in one digital space may face discomfort if an educator or employer discovers that persona. Thus, identity negotiation in digital environments requires strategic context management, though errors and misjudgments are inevitable.

This study set out to explore how English language learners construct and negotiate their identities in online communities, and how their language use patterns (such as code-switching, slang, and hybrid language practices) relate to this identity work. Through a comprehensive review of literature and examples from various digital contexts, we have illustrated that online communities are significant arenas for identity

formation among ELLs. In these spaces, learners are not passive participants but active agents shaping how they present themselves and how they engage with the target language.

Conclusion

English language learners engaging in online communities often navigate shifting personas, highlighting the inherent fluidity of their online identities. ELLs benefit from the relative anonymity and flexibility of online platforms, using them to experiment with new identities (e.g., becoming a content creator, community leader, or simply a more outspoken persona). They often find greater freedom to express facets of themselves that might be constrained in face-to-face interactions, thereby accelerating their comfort with using English in authentic ways. Identity for ELLs online is dynamic, continually crafted through interactions, with learners incorporating feedback from their peers to refine their self-presentation.

Additionally, the review highlights how learners' linguistic proficiency and multilingual skills act as identity capital, enabling them to negotiate social standing within online communities. The way learners use language online, whether they adhere to Standard English, mix in other languages, or fluently employ internet-specific jargon, serves as a form of identity capital. Code-switching and translanguaging emerge as valuable strategies that allow learners to participate more fully and authentically. Rather than hindering communication, these practices enable learners to carry their whole linguistic repertoire into interactions, which in turn affirms their bilingual/multilingual identity and often enhances mutual understanding in diverse groups. Mastery of digital discourse conventions (slang, memes, etc.) further helps ELLs claim in-group membership and feel less like outsiders.

Moreover, participation in supportive online communities enhance learners' confidence, reinforcing their evolving identities and sense of belonging. Engagement in supportive online communities contributes to greater confidence and a sense of legitimacy in using English. ELLs often transition from seeing themselves as language learners to seeing themselves as language users which represents a subtle but powerful shift in self-concept. They gain a sense of ownership over English as they use it to build relationships, share knowledge, and achieve goals in their communities. This increased self-efficacy can transfer to other domains of life, enhancing their overall language learning journey. Moreover, the peer networks and friendships formed can provide ongoing motivation, emotional support, and exposure to diverse dialects and styles of English.

Ultimately, intercultural exchange in online communities fosters hybrid identities, as learners blend elements from their native and target cultures in their digital self-expression. Online communities serve as melting pots where learners not only learn about other cultures but also actively share their own. Through these exchanges, many develop hybrid identities that integrate their native culture with a global or anglophone culture. They become mediators who can navigate and belong to multiple worlds. This bi- or multicultural identity is reflected in their language use as they blend linguistic elements, and in their broadened perspectives. The experience often fosters values of openness and tolerance, as learners regularly interact with people of different backgrounds.

To maximize the positive impacts, it is crucial that online communities remain (or become) inclusive and welcoming. The findings suggest that when diversity is celebrated and support is readily available, ELLs thrive and contribute richly. However, if communities are hostile or linguistically intolerant, learners may withdraw and lose valuable opportunities. Therefore, moderators, educators, and community members all play roles in cultivating environments where making mistakes in English is okay, multilingualism is respected, and every member's voice is valued. In such environments, identity negotiation becomes a collaborative, rather than adversarial, process.

In conclusion, the interplay between identity construction and language use for English learners in online communities is mutually reinforcing: as learners use English (and other languages) to participate, they shape an identity; as they develop a stronger identity as English-users or community members, they engage more confidently and competently in language use. This synergy suggests that educators and learners alike should recognize online engagement not as a distraction or mere pastime, but as a significant site of language learning and identity development. By integrating insights from these digital experiences into language education such as by leveraging learners' online interests and skills, we can make learning more relevant and empower students to carry their online-grown confidence into all areas of language use.

Implications

Educators can harness these insights to complement classroom learning. Encouraging students to engage in online communities, safely and purposefully, can provide real-world practice in identity negotiation and language use. Teachers might integrate tasks involving digital interaction, fostering discussions about informal learning experiences, and validating the linguistic and cultural knowledge students acquire independently. To support learners in online identity construction, language teachers should develop skills in digital literacy, critical media pedagogy, and intercultural competence (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 44).

For technology designers, fostering inclusive and supportive online environments is crucial. Features such as mentorship badges, reputation-based incentives, and explicit norms encouraging linguistic diversity can help learners feel valued. Additionally, integrating safeguards against harassment and discrimination ensures safer participation. If platforms are designed with ELLs in mind, they can become even more powerful sites for identity exploration and language acquisition.

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Statement of Responsibility

The first author conducted the study conceptualization, research methodology design, study selection process, data extraction, risk of bias assessment, synthesis of results, and manuscript writing. The second author assisted on the development of the eligibility criteria, contributed resolving study selection disagreements, conducted risk of bias assessment, synthesis of results and provided critical feedback of the drafts. The third author contributed to the study selection process, data extraction, risk of bias

assessment, synthesis of results, and provided additional critical feedback on the manuscript drafts. All authors approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

This study has no conflict of interest.

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