



Culturally-Oriented Project Work Training of Iranian EFL Learners and Their Social Identity: Examining Impacts and Perceptions

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Abstract

Project work training is a recent teaching approach which focuses on students' learning by actively engaging them in real-world, meaningful projects in the field of language education. The present study investigates the impact of culturally-oriented project work training on the social identity of Iranian EFL learners, integrating the interplay of language learning and identity development. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research combines quantitative pretests and post-tests with qualitative interviews and observations to explore the effects of project-based learning on five dimensions of social identity: social competence, social solidarity, cultural competence, literacy, and extraversion. Forty EFL learners from an institute in Tehran were conveniently chosen as subjects for the present study. They were split into two groups, one experimental and one control. While the experimental group was engaged in a project-based collaborative activity, the control group received instruction as per the institute's curriculum policy. The results of the study indicated that there were significant differences between the two groups concerning social identity and three social identity factors: social solidarity: $F(1, 33) = 5.54$, $p = .02$, literacy: $F(1, 33) = 16.81$, $p = .000$, and cultural competence: $F(1, 33) = 9.18$, $p = .006$. The interviews conducted supported these results by providing detailed feedback regarding learners' positive attitudes towards project work from the motivation, cultural awareness, and collaboration point of view. However, the interviewees also hinted at possible complications related to project-work educational approach such as conflicts of ideas and interests, insufficient teacher guidance, unfair workload in different groups, and language obstacles.

Keywords: culturally-oriented projects, Iranian EFL learners' perceptions, project work-training, social identity,

1 Introduction

In today's globalized world, learning a foreign language is necessary, as it distinguishes that understanding a different language also means understanding a different culture. It is no secret that, due to political, economic, and ideological factors, English has become not only the language to learn but also the language to employ. However, the journey learners must undertake to cover this objective is challenging. Despite the growing use of technology through virtual platforms to learn languages, which

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stores students both time and money, it is still suitable to say that the main place and source of learning remain the classroom (Lin & You, 2021).

The primary focus of the current study is on how students have traditionally been viewed as "language entities," capable of understanding and communicating in a new language after being exposed to varied inputs, relying on their ability to process information for subsequent responses (Krashen, 1981). However, affected by a sociolinguistic movement that acknowledges the complexity of language learners as interactive beings who express their thoughts through continuous interactions with others and their surroundings, there is now a pressing need to consider learners as social beings. This perspective recognizes that their learning process is affected by different factors within various contexts. The challenge lies in moving away from the simplistic view of learners as one-dimensional beings who make language solely due to language stimuli (Berzonsky, 2008).

Everything that occurs within the pedagogical setting, which acts as a microcosm, is closely linked to the daily experiences of individuals: how they interact with others, communicate, and perceive and are perceived by others. This implies that the interactions within this language-learning atmosphere should ideally be made in a manner that makes easy effective learning and teaching. According to Ng (2022), in a language classroom, it is important to make interactions meaningful to promote communication in the target language, utilize the knowledge of learners in their previous experience and new language or culture knowledge, immerse learners in texts and materials which help them learn their language and culture in a contextual manner, expose learners to tasks that accomplish their understanding and experience of the foreign language and culture, and, what is equally important, facilitate students' reflection on the process of language and culture learning and using.

Nevertheless, this ideal situation inevitably changes according to the context, preferences, and demands of the students. At this point, interactions begin to make modifications in accordance with the learning context. It is very important to understand who takes part in these interactions and in what way they are structured in a way that promotes successful language learning. These interactions can be recognized on two levels: the visible layer, where roles of students and teachers are defined by clear rules, and the invisible layer, where secondary factors such as attitudes, but also behaviors and language imply even more about our identities as language learners (Block, 2013).

Project-based learning which is based on the use of groups and real-life tasks serves as a versatile approach for understanding the way this process is carried out in practice. The essence of project-based learning is to shift the focus of the learners from the classroom to the projects being done in relation to the real-world events. It is believed that the implementation of project-based learning can have a positive effect on the motivation, self-efficacy, and social identity of the learners as it does not give them a chance to avoid communication (Kusumawati, 2019).

The belief is that in order to succeed in the implementation of project-based learning, one needs to understand what the learners think about this method of learning. The students' attitude towards culture-oriented project work matters for their motivation and engagement as well as acquisition of a target language. A positive attitude can lead to enthusiasm and eventually fruitful learning, while a negative one might seriously obstruct the process (Ng, 2022).

Another significant aspect of this research is its contribution to the broader discussion on educational innovation. It is becoming more and more necessary for the educational systems to adapt in

order to prepare the students for active engagement in the ever-evolving environment. This research emphasizes the importance of including real-life modern issues in the educational process which makes the learning more interesting for students. By showcasing the merits and flaws of culturally-oriented cooperation projects, this research opens up new opportunities for future experiments and innovations in education.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Background

The main theory underpinning the study likely involves a combination of sociocultural theory and social identity theory. The first theory behind this study is Sociocultural Theory. This theory referred to as sociocultural theory is named after Lev Vygotsky who has been ascribed its founding role. The sociocultural theory has been summarized under the lines that state that the process of cognition development is based on social influences and cultural contexts. In the case of EFL learning, the concept of sociocultural theory would state that acquisition of the language is dependent upon social factors. It posits that learners construct knowledge through social interaction and cultural tools, which in this case encompasses language as a medium of communication and learning. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory also suggests that children internalize and learn from the beliefs and attitudes that they witness around them. He believed that culture plays an important role in shaping cognitive development and therefore that this development varies across cultures. When he came up with this learning theory, he stressed the role played by various people in the process of intellectual development of every individual. According to this theory, one learns through interactions with different people and hence, learning is considered to be a social process. Social learning thus precedes individual development and is unique to the individual. Three fundamental concepts that define sociocultural theory: social interaction plays an important role in learning, language is an essential tool in the learning process, and learning occurs within Zone of Proximal Development which explains the ability of a learner to extend beyond their own innate ability through interaction with others in their environment. It is the difference between what a learner can achieve independently and what they can learn with the guidance and support of what Vygotsky referred to as "more knowledgeable others". The strengths of his theory include its emphasis on social interaction and cultural context, while weaknesses include limited empirical evidence and lack of attention to individual differences.

2.2 Identity

Originally introduced as a facet of human learning, identity has become an important area of research in the field of teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Identity is formed through participation in communities of practice, which encompasses the relationships formed over time between individuals, activities, and their settings (Wenger, 1998). The interconnectedness of identity and community, coupled with the fluidity of communities, renders identity a dynamic, hybrid, multi-layered, fragmented, and often contradictory concept (Teng, 2018). In the context of EFL teaching and learning, classrooms and pedagogical settings are considered as arenas of struggle, where the construction of learners' identities is affected by the demands of language acquisition (Teng & Bui, 2018).

Scholars (e.g., Block, 2007; Teng & Bui, 2018) have argued that individual and social identities are often fluid, interactive, discursive, contradictory, and context-dependent, resulting from the disparity

between imagined and actual communities. Thus, identity should not be simplistically defined as "the self" (Taylor, 1989, p. 5) or "who one is" (Gao et al., 2002, p. 95). In this regard, Norton (2013) posits that identity is a person's understanding of their relationship to the world, the way this relationship is built over time and space, and the potential for future expansions.

In fact, identity among EFL learners can be viewed from different angles and approaches due to its connection to various educational and social experiences of learners. By identity, I mean the perception of oneself and the perception of the learner by others in terms of his or her knowledge of the English language and the ability to integrate into the target culture. Identity in education is not a state or event; it occurs in the course of time as learners interact with each other and with other speakers in different environments (Kim, 2003).

2.3.1 Types of Identity

As it was stated before, identity is a multifaceted concept consisting of various aspects that collectively define an individual's sense of self. These aspects encompass personal, social, cultural, and professional identities, each contributing uniquely to how individuals understand themselves and are perceived by others.

2.3.1.1 Personal Identity. Personal identity refers to the unique characteristics and features that distinguish one individual from another. It includes dimensions like personality, values, beliefs, and personal experiences. Personal identity is shaped by a person's individual history and intrinsic qualities, encompassing their likes, dislikes, aspirations, and personal achievements. This aspect of identity is deeply personal and internal, forming the core of who a person is (Batory, 2010).

2.3.1.2 Social Identity. Social identity originates from an individual's membership in social groups and the roles they play within those groups. It encompasses aspects such as gender, ethnicity, religion, and nationality, as well as professional and social affiliations. Social identity affects how individuals interact with others and how they are perceived within various social contexts. For example, a person might identify as a learner, a teacher, an athlete, or a member of a particular cultural or religious community. These group memberships shape an individual's behavior, attitudes, and self-concept (Wenger, 1998).

2.3.1.3 Cultural Identity. A culture's identity comprises its collective beliefs, traditions, customs, and values. The language, conventions, and legacy inherited from the culture give its followers identity. Cultural identity thus provides with a sense of family and sequence bringing one back to the history. Through learning the foreign language, the students engage in building a new identity (Becker & Tausch, 2014).

2.3.1.4 Professional Identity. Professional identity pertains to an individual's role and status within their professional life. It consists of the skills, expertise, and professional values that define how individuals see themselves and how they are regarded within their work setting. Professional identity is shaped by one's career path, job roles, and professional affiliations. It can affect personal identity, as

many people derive an important part of their self-esteem and social status from their professional achievements and roles (Becker et al. 2012).

2.3.1.5 Intersectional Identity. Intersectional identity states that individuals belong to multiple social classifications simultaneously, and these overlapping identities can interact in complicated ways. For instance, a person may distinguish as a young, male, Asian, middle-class, or queer individual. Each of these classifications contributes to their overall identity and can affect their experiences and how they navigate the world. Intersectionality highlights the significance of considering the interconnected nature of social categorizations and their effect on an individual's life and identity (Becker & Tausch, 2014).

2.3.2 Dynamic Nature of Identity

Identity is not static; it is progressively evolving Identity is not a static concept, but a constantly changing one, influenced by life experiences, developments in personal identity, social interaction and changing life situations in general. For example, moving to a different region, starting a new job or learning a new language, can change the person's identity quite drastically. EFL learners, in particular, face this constant change in their identity in the process of adapting to the new language and culture (Wenger, 1998).

2.3.3 Social Identity Construct and Theory

While learning English as a foreign language, the learners' identities are transformed not only as linguistically proficient individuals but also as members of the community associated with the adopted language. By getting involved in the English-speaking community, the EFL learners are becoming familiar with the cultural norms and the communication styles. For instance, they might begin using idioms, gestures, or social conventions which are typical of the new language and those who speak it. As a result, they experience the change in their identity and the coexistence of the attributes characteristic of both their own culture and the culture of the acquired language (de Vreeze & Matschke, 2019).

Focusing on social identity, this dimension of identity refers to how people perceive themselves concerning the groups they belong to and how others see them. With regards to EFL students, one's social identity is closely determined by interactions in different social environments such as schools, workplaces and communities. Therefore, while EFL learners are experiencing multiple social contexts, their identity is constantly changing. Various elements influence this process, such as the representation of one's native language, cultural background and the degree of immersion into the English-speaking environment (de Vreeze & Matschke, 2019). In educational institutions, they may get the role of hardworking academic students who take an active part in the learning process and their relationships with others. Social identity in this environment is usually associated with educational achievements and participation in class activities (Wenger, 1998).

3 Research Questions

1. Does culturally oriented project work training significantly affect the social identity scores of Iranian EFL learners in the experimental group compared to the control group after the intervention?"
2. What are the Iranian EFL learners' perceptions toward culturally-oriented project work training they received throughout the course?
3. What are the demerits of using project work training to develop Iranian EFL learners?

4 Method

4.1 Design

This research conducts an explanatory sequential mixed-methods inquiry in order to determine the impact of culturally-oriented project work training on the social identity of Iranian EFL learners. The distinguishing feature of this design is the systematic integration of both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis, which takes place in two different stages. This research starts with the quantitative phase which measures baseline and post-intervention changes in social identity of the participants. A reliable social identity questionnaire is implemented to examine social competence, cultural competence, literacy, social solidarity, and extraversion of the participants. The quantitative data received at this stage are analyzed in order to reveal changes, trends, and distinctive differences between experimental and control groups. The interviews were conducted with the selected participants from the experimental group of research study, which helped define the learners' perceptions of the culturally relevant project-based training, along with their motives and the disadvantages faced. The interviews are aimed to show the importance of these experiences in shaping the identity development. The observations made during the intervention provide the researcher with real-time information about the level of engagement and collaboration in the project-related activities by participants. The qualitative stage of research is aimed at explaining and elaborating on the findings achieved via the quantitative approach, thus providing a fuller picture of the intervention's impact. All of the findings achieved through the two stages of research should be integrated during analysis. The quantitative data reveal the general patterns and statistical significance, while qualitative data help efficiently explain the personal experiences, difficulties, and opinions of the interviewers. Observations conducted by the researcher serve as the additional element of triangulation, relating the changes in behavior to the quantitative and qualitative results.

4.2 Participants

The study's participants included a group of Iranian EFL learners with an academic background from an urban context city of Tehran. There were 40 participant learners, equally divided into two groups of experiment and control. All learners were selected from intermediate level English learners enrolled in formal language classes to ensure sufficient knowledge to take part in project-related tasks. Educational tasks of project-related activity were presented to the experimental group while the control group followed class-based education without the project approach. Participants were fully informed on the issue of inquiry prior to the beginning of the research. An effort was made to demonstrate the ethical treatment of the participants by ensuring anonymity and the ability of participants to withdraw from the study.

4.3 Instruments and Materials

The study employed three primary instruments to collect data and measure the effectiveness of culturally-oriented project work training on Iranian EFL learners' social identity and language proficiency. These instruments were carefully selected to ensure comprehensive and reliable data collection.

4.3.1 Instruments

4.3.1.1. Questionnaire. A validated social identity questionnaire by Reza Pishghadam was used as the main quantitative instrument to assess participants' social identity across several dimensions, including social competence, cultural competence, literacy, social solidarity, and extraversion. This questionnaire consisted of Likert-scale 7 items that measured learners' perceptions and behaviors. A pretest and post-test were administered to assess changes in social identity following the intervention. The questionnaire was chosen for its validity and appropriateness in exploring the multi-dimensionality of social identity in language learning contexts. Also, the reliability statistics showed the following values: social solidarity = .8, literacy achieved = .76, cultural competence = .83, extraversion = .74. These results indicated that all subscales have acceptable to good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq .70$), confirming that the questionnaire reliably measures each factor of social identity.

4.3.1.2 Semi-Structured Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather qualitative insights into participants' experiences and perceptions of the culturally-oriented project work training. These interviews provided an in-depth understanding of the learners' thoughts, including their motivations, challenges, and reflections on how the training influenced their social identity. The interview protocol included open-ended questions designed to explore key themes, such as collaboration, communication, and cultural awareness while allowing flexibility for participants to share additional perspectives. The qualitative data from these interviews complemented the quantitative findings by providing richer, contextualized insights. In addition, the detailed analysis of relevance scores using the Content Validity Index (CVI), demonstrated strong overall validity (S-CVI = .90). The experts recommended revising unclear items, addressing identified gaps in coverage, and conducting a pilot test of the revised questions to ensure clarity and appropriateness for the target population.

4.3.1.3 Oxford Placement Test (OPT). The OPT was administered to assess participants' general English language proficiency. This standardized test ensured that all participants had a similar level of proficiency at the start of the study, allowing for fair comparison between the experimental and the control groups. The OPT scores also provided a baseline for understanding the learners' overall language abilities and served as a control variable in analyzing the impact of the project-based approach on social identity development.

4.3.2 Materials

In addition to the instruments, specific materials were developed to facilitate the intervention for the experimental group. These included:

Reading materials and case studies with culturally relevant themes to promote cultural understanding and critical thinking.

Group activities, such as debates, role-plays, and collaborative presentations, to enhance learners' interaction and teamwork.

Reflective writing tasks, where learners documented their experiences and insights related to their social identity and cultural learning.

Multimedia tools, such as videos and digital collaboration platforms, to enrich the learning experience and encourage engagement.

4.4 Data Collection Procedure

The procedure for data collection was designed and implemented in order to collect wide-ranging data relevant to the aims of the study. The procedure was composed of three main stages, pre-intervention, intervention and post-intervention, using three main instruments, social identity questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and the Oxford Placement Test (OPT). Below is an in-depth explanation of our data collection procedures:

4.4.1 Pre-Intervention Phase

The pre-intervention phase aimed to establish a baseline for the participants' general English proficiency and their initial social identity status. Participants were recruited from an urban language institute in Tehran. A total of 40 Iranian EFL learners were selected and randomly assigned to either the experimental group (n=20) or the control group (n=20). The Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered to all participants to ensure they had a similar level of general English proficiency. This step was crucial to ensure homogeneity between the experimental and the control groups before implementing the intervention.

A validated social identity questionnaire was distributed to all participants.

4.4.2 Intervention Phase

The intervention took place over 8-week, during which the two groups studied different material. To increase cultural identity, and improve their English the members of experimental group participated in project-based language learning instruction. The study involved completing various project-based learning activities which aimed at relating language learning to real-life experience. The activities involved discussion, group work, research, role-play and presentations among others. Reading materials, videos, and online activities were used which focused on helping the students to develop social identities through cultural awareness. These activities were held once a week for 90 minutes.

The first project was about students exploring their own cultural backgrounds. By preparing and presenting a project on how learning English would help them build their identities, the students were able to perform research on differences and similarities between Iranian and English cultures. The project involved researching and comparing cultural areas of interest and presenting their findings. This helped the students to acquire presentation skills, cultural knowledge, teamwork and problem-solving skills on topics related to identity.

In the second project, role-plays were performed to demonstrate understanding and respect towards each other's cultures. The students practiced holding conversations, identifying problems which may arise due to cultural differences and ways of solving them. This was achieved by students acting out scenarios and discussing the possible solutions and problems which might arise when conversing with someone from a different culture. This project helped the students to apply what they had learned about each other's cultures. It also helped them to understand real-life application of language learning and socialization.

The third project involved carrying out interviews of family members, teachers or community members on their experiences with learning and using English. The students wrote up their findings in form of either a video, article or podcast, whichever they found most suitable. This project helped improve students' writing skills while enabling them to share their findings on language learning with

others. The students were also able to appreciate the language learning process from different perspectives. It also helped them to develop critical thinking skills on issues related to language learning.

Held individually, the students participated in weekly journal writing on critical thinking and reflection. By responding to prompts such as “How has learning English changed how I see myself?” and “What challenges did I face speaking English in a social setting?”, amongst others. This helped them to develop reflective writing skills, critical thinking on aspects of learning English. The students also assessed each other’s work providing recommendations and comments necessary for improvement. Furthermore, the students worked together to create class magazine or blog or the school magazine. They wrote articles and interviews or travelogues and posted them on the school blogs or magazines to share their stories and news with the rest of the school. This project helped them to hone their writing skills and encourage creativity.

I was able to observe the actions of the students in experimental group as they performed the activities and attempt to record their interactions with each other. Furthermore, I was able to monitor the students’ progress and intervene in case they failed to complete certain tasks on time. On the other hand, the control group received lessons from the teachers in the institute. They used the regular course books and focused on developing reading and writing skills. No project-based learning or more specifically no culturally oriented project-based learning was conducted either weekly or outside class.

4.4.3 Post-Intervention Phase

The post-intervention phase was conducted to evaluate the impact of the culturally-oriented project work training on the experimental group compared to the control group. The social identity questionnaire was re-administered to both groups to measure any changes in their social identity dimensions. The post-test data were collected under the same conditions as the pretest to ensure consistency and reliability.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the selected participants from the experimental group (n=10). Interviewers explored the research participants’ perceptions of the project-based learning experience, demerits encountered, and the influence of the training on social identity and language learning. The interviews lasted 30-45 minutes each and were audio-recorded for transcription and analysis. The observational data gathered from the intervention were evaluated alongside the questionnaire results and interviews. Themes related to interactions, perceptions, collaborations, and observations were developed to provide an empirical background for the quantitative study results. All data were stored in a secure database to guarantee confidentiality. The questionnaire results were uploaded into a coded data file for analysis and processing. The interview recordings were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis to generate meaningful results. Data obtained from observations were documented and incorporated into the final analysis report.

4.5 Data Analysis

The study adopts an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. Quantitative findings provide an overview of the intervention's measurable effects, while qualitative insights explain the "how" and "why" behind these changes.

4.5.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

The quantitative analysis of the data collected for this study was done using the scores from the pretest and post-test, which comprised the validated social identity questionnaire and the Oxford Placement Test (OPT). Below are the steps taken in analyzing this data.

First, the descriptive statistics of the scores for the social identity questionnaire and Oxford Placement Test (OPT) were generated. The statistics were used to describe the study variables, giving the mean values and standard deviations of the scores obtained by the experimental and control groups from the two research instruments during the pretest and post-test stages. The comparison of the results of the two groups based on these statistics helped establish how those in the experimental group interacted with the culturally oriented project work training compared to those in the control group.

Next, there was a data analysis procedure that examined the relationship between the OPT scores and changes in OPT scores and social identity. This involved integrating and analyzing the results of the OPT and the validated social identity questionnaire to establish whether improvements in language proficiency accounted for improvements in five facets of social identity, including social competence, cultural competence, literacy, social solidarity, and extraversion. In addition, this procedure established the association between increases in language proficiency and increases in social identity.

4.5.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative analysis used the data collected from semi-structured interviews. The following steps were implemented:

Transcribing the audio-recorded interviews involved listening to the recordings and writing the verbal content as accurately as possible. Once the interviews were transcribed, the next step was to come up with a coding framework.

Thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative data obtained from the interviews. The analysis process comprised familiarizing oneself with the data, coming up with initial codes, and then identifying emerging patterns. In relation to the research topic, the thematic analysis of project-based learning was performed to examine the perspectives on participants' social identity. Such analysis helped to reveal the ways in which the experience affected the participants' social identity, either promoting or hindering their development.

The process of narrative synthesis consisted in creating narratives about the ways in which project-based learning influenced participants' social identity, either promoting or hindering their development. In this step, the qualitative data from the interviews and observations were combined to come up with a story that could highlight the research question and the participants' multiple perspectives.

5 Results

5.1 Addressing Research Question One

The descriptive statistics for the pretest of social competence, social solidarity, literacy, cultural competence, and extraversion in the experimental and control groups were computed before explaining the results of MANOVA (Table 1). Table 1 indicates that the experimental group's pretest mean scores on almost all factors of social identity are on the same level. For instance, the students of the

experimental group achieved the mean score of 49.55 ($SD = 5.74$) concerning social competence, which is close to the control group with the mean score of 48.20 ($SD = 5.44$).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Different Factors of Social Identity by Group (Pretest)

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	SEM
Social competence	Experimental	20	49.55	5.744	1.284
	Control	20	48.20	5.444	1.217
Social solidarity	Experimental	20	35.00	4.460	.997
	Control	20	34.10	4.103	.917
Literacy	Experimental	20	20.05	3.605	.806
	Control	20	19.25	3.259	.729
Cultural competence	Experimental	20	23.80	2.726	.610
	Control	20	22.95	2.892	.647
Extraversion	Experimental	20	7.95	2.704	.605
	Control	20	7.30	2.793	.624

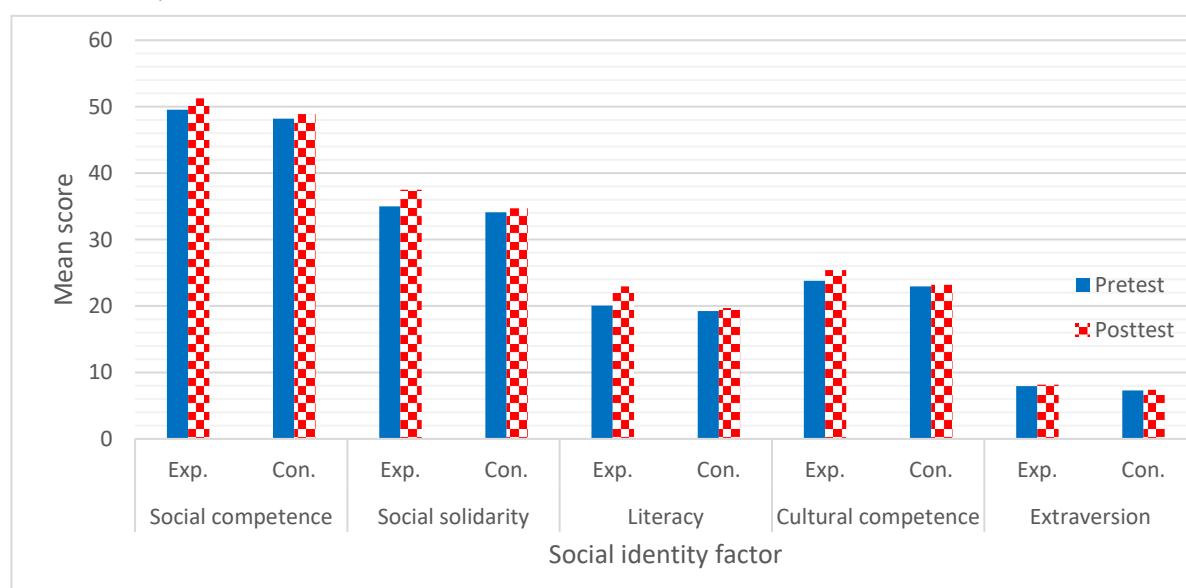
Furthermore, Table 2 below provides the descriptive statistics for the post-test scores. As seen in Table 2, the students of the experimental group achieved a higher mean score in almost all the factors of social identity in comparison with those of the control groups. For example, Table 2 indicates that in terms of literacy factor, the students of the experimental group ($M = 22.95$, $SD = 3.66$) achieved a noticeably greater mean score than those in control group ($M = 19.70$, $SD = 3.01$). Almost the same pattern is observed in the table for the other factors.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Different Factors of Social Identity by Group (Post-test)

Factor	Group	N	Mean	SD	SEM
Social competence	Experimental	20	51.25	6.10	1.365
	Control	20	48.90	4.98	1.114
Social solidarity	Experimental	20	37.50	5.12	1.146
	Control	20	34.70	3.67	.821
Literacy	Experimental	20	22.95	3.66	.819
	Control	20	19.70	3.01	.673
Cultural competence	Experimental	20	25.40	3.08	.690
	Control	20	23.20	2.55	.569
Extraversion	Experimental	20	8.15	2.76	.617
	Control	20	7.40	2.74	.613

To depict the results more obviously, a Bar Graph (Figure 1) was drawn. As shown in the Bar Graph, the increase in mean score from the pretest to the post-test of the experimental group is more paramount in the three out of five social identity factors of Social Solidarity, Literacy, and Cultural competence than the other two factors of Social Competence and Extraversion.

Figure 1*Social Identity Factor*

Testing assumptions: According to Field (2009), four assumptions (interval data, independence of subjects, homogeneity of variances) should be checked before one decides to perform parametric statistical tests. In the present study, the first assumption is not violated as the present data are measured on an interval scale. Additionally, Bachman (2005, p. 236) believes that the assumption of independence of subjects is met when “the performance of any given individual is independent of the performance of other individuals” and in fact it was the case in this research. The third assumption relates to the normality of the data which was examined via the ratios of skewness and kurtosis for pretest and post-test scores. According to Field (2017), the ratios of skewness and kurtosis over their respective standard errors are analogous to standardized scores (z-scores) that can be compared against the critical values of ± 1.96 at .05 levels. Since all ratios for all factors of social identity were within the ranges of ± 1.96 , it was concluded that the assumption of normality was met.

Likewise, the results of normality test showed that all sets of post-test scores have normal distribution as the ratios of skewness and kurtosis over their respective standard errors are not beyond the ranges of ± 1.96 .

Furthermore, the results revealed that the significant value associated with Levene’s test for all of the variables ($p > .05$) was higher than the selected significant level of .05 showing that the homogeneity of variance assumption was not violated for all of them. Also, the assumption of homogeneity of covariance was met (Box’s $M = 28.97$, $F = 1.65$, $p > .05$). Besides, multivariate tests revealed that there was a statistically significant difference (Wilks’ Lambda = .523; $F(5, 29) = 5.28$; $p = .001$, $p < .05$) in the overall knowledge of English conditional structures scores between the two groups on the post-test while controlling the effect of the pretest. The Partial η^2 was .48 expressing a large effect size according to Cohen’s guidelines (1988, pp. 284-7).

However, multivariate tests do not specify the precise place of difference between the two groups in terms of different factors of social identity. Therefore, tests of between-subjects’ effects were

run (Table 3). As represented in Table 3, tests of between-subjects' effects found a statistically significant difference in the three out of five factors of social identity i.e., Social solidarity: $F(1, 33) = 5.54, p = .02, p < .05, \eta^2 = .14$, Literacy: $F(1, 33) = 16.81, p = .000, p < .05, \eta^2 = .34$, and cultural competence: $F(1, 33) = 9.18, p = .006, p < .05, \eta^2 = .22$ between the students in the experimental group who received culturally-oriented project work training and those in the control group who lacked culturally-oriented project work training. However, as seen in Table 3, tests of between-subjects' effects failed to find a statistically significant difference in the two out of five factors of social identity i.e., social competence: $F(1, 33) = .75, p = .39, p > .05, \eta^2 = .02$, and Extraversion: $F(1, 33) = .13, p = .72, p > .05, \eta^2 = .004$ between the two groups.

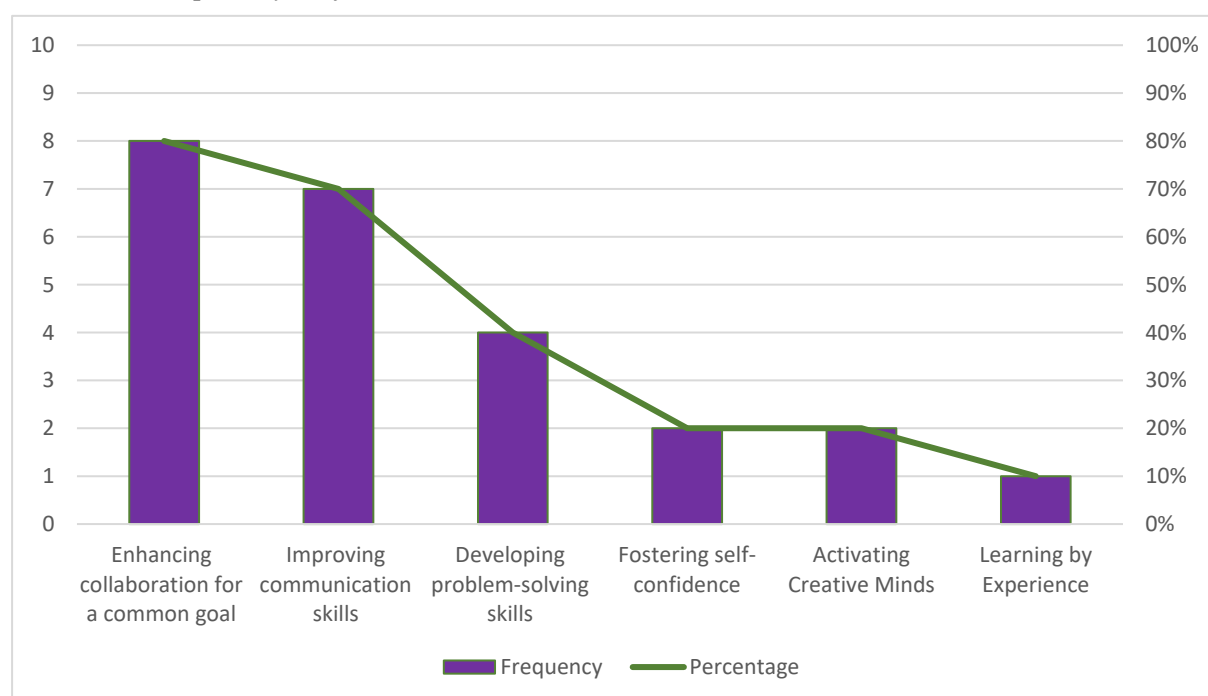
Table 3

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for the Effect of Culturally-Oriented Project Work Training on Social Identity

Source	Dependent Variable	Subscale III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	Post-social competence	858.858	6	143.143	12.57	.000	.696
	Post-social solidarity	621.150	6	103.525	16.08	.000	.745
	Post-literacy	404.153	6	67.359	17.28	.000	.759
	Post-cultural competence	264.710	6	44.118	16.60	.000	.751
	Post-extraversion	858.858	6	143.143	12.57	.000	.696
Group	Post-social competence	8.522	1	8.522	.75	.393	.022
	Post-social solidarity	35.692	1	35.692	5.54	.021	.144
	Post-literacy	65.526	1	65.526	16.81	.000	.338
	Post-cultural competence	24.400	1	24.400	9.18	.006	.218
	Post-extraversion	.234	1	.234	.13	.720	.004
Error	Post-social competence	375.917	33	11.391			
	Post-social solidarity	212.450	33	6.438			
	Post-literacy	128.622	33	3.898			
	Post-cultural competence	87.690	33	2.657			
	Post-extraversion	59.278	33	1.796			
Total	Post-social competence	1234.775	39				
	Post-social solidarity	833.600	39				
	Post-literacy	532.775	39				
	Post-cultural competence	352.400	39				
	Post-extraversion	292.975	39				

5.2 Addressing Research Question Two

In order to answer the second research question investigating the Iranian EFL learners' perceptions toward culturally-oriented project work training they received throughout the course; an interview was run to elicit information. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and edited. Then, using MAXQDA software (version 2022), the data was analyzed thematically and the following major themes were extracted.

Figure 2*Students' Perception of Project Work Activities***Table 4***Major Themes for Project Work Activities*

Themes	Frequency	Percentage
Theme No. 1 Enhancing collaboration for a common goal	8	80%
Theme No. 2 Improving communication skills	7	70%
Theme No. 3 Developing problem-solving skills	4	40%
Theme No. 4 Fostering self-confidence	2	20%
Theme No. 5 Activating creative Minds	2	20%
Theme No. 6 Learning by experience	1	10%

A) Enhancing collaboration for a common goal (80% - Freq.=8)

One major strategy that emerged from the interview data was enhancing collaboration for a common goal. Working with a group requires effective communication to share ideas, delegate tasks, and make collective decisions. This helps develop collaboration and teamwork skills.

For instance, the participant reported:

We had to do a group presentation on a classic novel. The goal was to analyze the themes, characters, and symbolism and present them in a way that engaged the rest of the class. Each group member was responsible for researching a specific aspect of the novel. The presentation went really well! It was cohesive, and everyone contributed confidently. (Participant #4; Age 22)

Similarly, one of the students claimed:

During our English class, we worked on a group project. At first, it was challenging to align our ideas because everyone had a different vision. We started by having a brainstorming session where everyone shared their ideas openly. Then, we voted on the best ones and created a rough outline that incorporated elements from everyone's contributions. (Participant #8; Age 19)

B) Improving Communication skill (70% - Freq.=7)

Improving communication skills is a fundamental aspect of English class, as it empowers students to express their thoughts clearly, connect with others effectively, and navigate diverse social and professional settings. Whether through speaking, listening, reading, or writing, honing these skills fosters confidence and ensures students can convey ideas with precision and empathy. In English class, activities such as group discussions, presentations, and writing exercises provide a practical platform for developing these abilities, enabling students to thrive in collaborative environments. One of the members mentioned:

In one class, we had peer discussion sessions where we analyzed short stories in small groups. Each person had to share their interpretation of the story and respond to others' perspectives. It taught me how to express my ideas clearly and support them with evidence from the text.

(Participant #3; Age 21)

The other one pointed that:

During a unit on dialogue writing, our teacher had us role-play different scenarios, like interviewing a character from a novel or acting out a scene from a play. Role-playing required me to think about tone, body language, and word choice to convey meaning effectively. It also helped me practice responding spontaneously in conversations, which improved my verbal fluency. Working with a partner during the activity also taught me how to adapt my communication style depending on the context and the other person's responses. (Participant #5; Age 19)

C) Developing Problem Solving skills (40% - Freq.= 4)

Developing problem-solving skills in English class is a vital aspect of fostering critical thinking and creativity among students. Through reading, writing, and discussions, students engage with complex texts, analyze diverse perspectives, and practice forming logical arguments, all of which are essential components of problem-solving. English lessons encourage students to approach challenges from multiple angles, whether they are deciphering a poem's meaning, constructing a persuasive essay, or debating a moral dilemma presented in literature. By integrating real-world scenarios and collaborative activities, English class becomes a platform for nurturing adaptability and innovative thinking, preparing students to navigate both academic and everyday challenges effectively.

The interviewee asserted:

In one class, we were divided into groups for a debate on a controversial topic. Each group had to represent a specific viewpoint, even if it wasn't our personal opinion. The challenge was figuring out how to construct strong arguments and anticipate counterarguments. We had to work as a team to research the topic, identify key points, and address weaknesses in our arguments. This required brainstorming, critical thinking, and collaboration. When the opposing team raised points, we hadn't considered, we had to think quickly and adapt our responses on the spot.

(Participant #2; Age 20)

Likewise, the other interviewee mentioned:

We had a peer review session for our essays, where we had to read a classmate's work, identify areas for improvement, and suggest solutions. At first, it was difficult because I didn't want to come across as overly critical, but I also wanted to give constructive feedback. I focused on specific issues, like unclear thesis statements or weak transitions, and tried to offer practical solutions instead of just pointing out problems. For example, if a sentence was confusing, I'd suggest rephrasing it or providing a clearer example.

(Participant #7; Age 18)

D) Fostering Self-confidence (20% - Freq. = 2)

Fostering self-confidence in English class is essential for creating an environment where students feel empowered to express themselves and embrace learning challenges. Confidence in language skills not only improves academic performance but also encourages active participation, creativity, and a willingness to take risks in communication. By providing constructive feedback, celebrating progress, and creating a supportive classroom atmosphere, teachers can help students overcome fears of making mistakes and build the self-assurance needed to develop their reading, writing, and speaking abilities.

A respondent affirmed that:

In one class, we were asked to give a short speech on a topic of our choice. At first, I was really nervous because I'd never spoken in front of an audience before. However, our teacher created a supportive atmosphere by emphasizing that it was a learning experience and not about being perfect. The teacher gave us time to prepare and practice in small groups before presenting to the class. Getting feedback from my classmates in a non-judgmental setting helped me improve. By the time I stood up to give my speech, I felt more prepared and less anxious. I managed to deliver my speech successfully, and the applause from my classmates boosted my confidence. It made me realize that I'm capable of expressing myself clearly in front of others, and now I feel more comfortable participating in discussions and presentations.

(Participant #1; Age 23)

Similarly, the other contributor spoke briefly of the point that:

There was an assignment where we had to write a short story and share it with the class. I was hesitant because I didn't think my writing was good enough, but our teacher encouraged us to focus on creativity rather than perfection. It was nerve-racking at first, but once I started reading, I could see that my classmates were genuinely interested in my story. The positive feedback I received, especially when they pointed out specific parts they liked, gave me a huge confidence boost.

(Participant #6; Age 22)

E) Activating Creative minds (20% - Freq. = 2)

Activating creative minds in English class opens the door to a world of imagination, critical thinking, and self-expression. By encouraging students to explore literature, experiment with writing, and engage in thoughtful discussions, English class becomes a space where creativity thrives. Whether analyzing the symbolism in a classic novel, crafting original stories, or debating themes in poetry, students develop the ability to think outside the box and express unique perspectives. This process not only enhances language skills but also fosters a deeper understanding of the world and their own potential, making English class a hub for nurturing creative and curious minds.

A partaker alluded to the fact that:

In one class, we were asked to create a visual story for a poem we had studied. Instead of just analyzing the poem's meaning, we had to interpret it creatively through illustrations, symbols, and colors. It encouraged me to think beyond words and explore how visuals could convey emotions and themes. For example, I used dark tones to represent the poem's mood and added symbolic elements to highlight key ideas. It was challenging to translate abstract concepts into visuals, but it was rewarding.

(Participant #10; Age 19)

Then as well, the other student said:

We were asked to write an alternative ending for a novel. The challenge was to stay true to the characters and themes of the story while coming up with a completely new conclusion. It pushed me to explore possibilities that the original author hadn't considered. I had to think about the motivations of the characters and imagine how they might react differently to certain events. It required balancing originality with respect for the story's structure and tone. I learned that creativity often involves reimagining existing ideas rather than starting from scratch. The activity helped me develop my narrative skills and taught me how to build on a foundation while still making something unique. It was a great way to engage deeply with the text while expressing my own ideas.

(Participant #2; Age 20)

F) Learning by Experience (10% - Freq. = 1)

Experiential learning in English class is an innovative approach that emphasizes active participation and real-world engagement to deepen students' understanding of language, literature, and communication. Unlike traditional methods that rely heavily on lectures and rote memorization, experiential learning immerses students in hands-on activities, such as role-playing, collaborative projects, storytelling, or analyzing texts through personal experiences. By integrating real-life contexts and interactive techniques, this method helps students not only to enhance their critical thinking and creativity but also to foster a genuine connection with the material.

The participant pointed out that:

In one of our English classes, we were studying Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. Instead of just reading the text, our teacher organized a drama activity where we acted out scenes from the play. Each of us was assigned a character, and we had to interpret their emotions, motivations, and dialogue. It made the story come alive for me. By stepping into the character's shoes, I could really feel their emotions and understand their conflicts on a deeper level. It also helped me grasp the language and the rhythm of Shakespeare's writing because I had to perform it aloud.

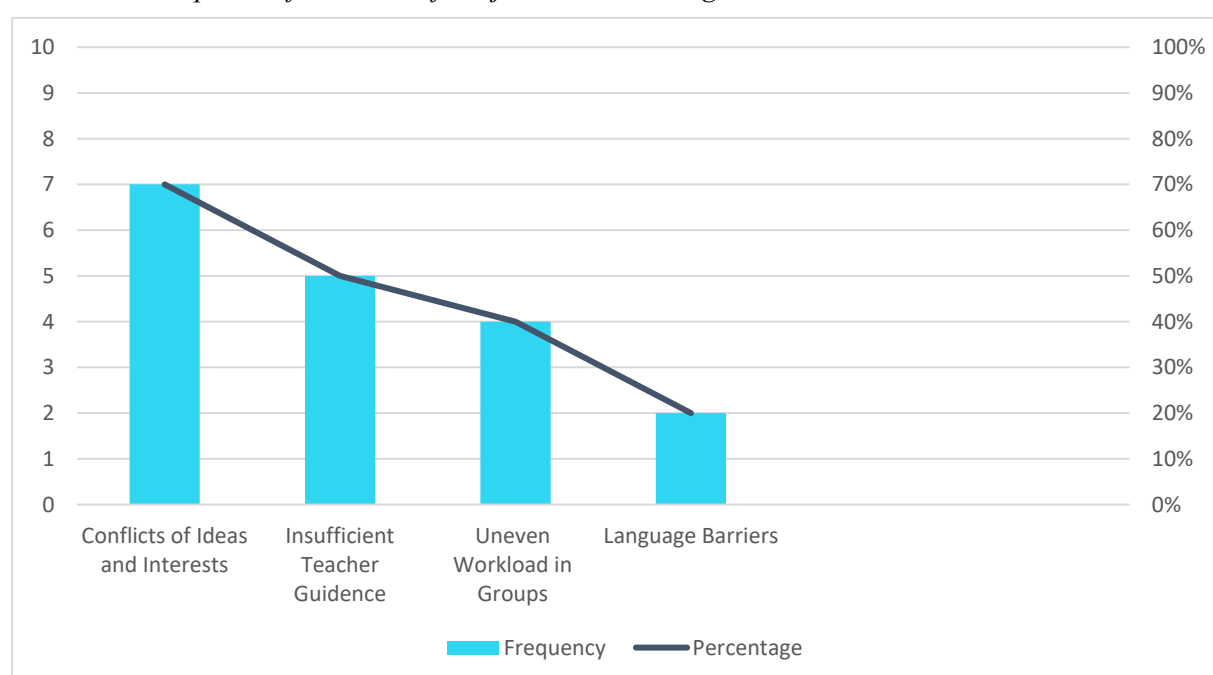
(Participant #9; Age 24)

4.4.3 Addressing Research Question Three

With the aim of answering the third research question investigating the demerits of using project work training to develop Iranian EFL learners' social identity content and thematic analysis were conducted to extract the major themes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and edited. Then, using MAXQDA software (version 2023), the data was analyzed qualitatively and the following major themes were identified as displayed in Table 5.

Table 5*Major Themes for Demerits of Project Work Training*

Themes	Frequency	Percentage
Theme No. 1 Conflicts of Ideas and Interests	7	70%
Theme No. 2 Insufficient Teacher Guidance	5	50%
Theme No. 3 Uneven Workload in Groups	4	40%
Theme No. 4 Language Barriers	2	20%

Figure 3*Students' Perceptions of Demerits of Project Work Training***A. Conflicts of Ideas and Interests (70% - Freq.= 7)**

Conflicts of ideas and interests are an integral part of human interaction, shaping how individuals and societies evolve over time. In an English class, exploring these conflicts allows students to engage deeply with literature, historical events, and contemporary issues. Through characters in novels, opposing viewpoints in essays, or debates about societal values, students learn to analyze how differences in beliefs, goals, or priorities create tension and drive progress. Understanding these conflicts helps develop critical thinking, empathy, and communication skills, as it challenges students to consider multiple perspectives and navigate complex moral and ethical dilemmas.

One of the students mentioned:

Honestly, I think conflicts are inevitable when you're working with a group. For example, during our recent project, we had to decide on a theme for our presentation. Some of us wanted to focus on historical perspectives, while others thought modern issues would be more relatable. At first, it was frustrating because everyone was so passionate about their ideas. But in the end, we combined both approaches, and it actually made our project more dynamic.

(Participant #9; Age 24)

The other participant added:

Definitely. One of the biggest challenges is balancing individual strengths and goals. In one project, I wanted to focus on the creative elements, like designing visuals and storytelling, but another teammate was more interested in analyzing texts and presenting detailed arguments. It was hard at first because we both felt like our priorities were being overlooked. But after discussing it openly, we decided to split tasks based on what each of us was good at, which actually made our project stronger.

(Participant #5; Age 19)

B. Insufficient Teacher Guidance (50% - Freq.= 5)

Insufficient teacher guidance in English class can significantly hinder students' academic growth and engagement. When educators fail to provide clear direction, timely feedback, or personalized support, students may struggle to grasp critical language skills such as reading comprehension, writing, and analytical thinking. This lack of guidance often leaves learners feeling disconnected and unsure of their abilities, resulting in lower motivation and confidence. An interviewee mentioned an interesting idea as reflected in the following extract:

I feel like in English class, we're just given assignments without much explanation about how to approach them. For example, when we were asked to write an essay, the teacher didn't explain how to structure it or what they were looking for. I didn't know if I was doing it right or wrong until I got my grade back, and by then, it was too late to fix anything. It's frustrating because I want to improve, but without clear guidance, it feels like I'm just guessing most of the time.

(Participant #1; Age 23)

Another interview participant referred to the problems students face when there is a lack of guidance from the teacher:

When we read novels in class, the teacher assigns chapters and expects us to analyze them, but we don't discuss how to interpret themes or characters in depth. I sometimes feel lost because I don't know if my thoughts are on the right track. I wish the teacher would spend more time walking us through examples or giving us tools to analyze texts better. It's especially tough when English isn't your strongest subject because you need that extra help to understand things.

(Participant #5; Age 19)

C) Uneven Workload in Groups (40% - Freq.= 4)

The uneven workload in group activities in English class is a common issue that can negatively impact both the learning process and students' overall experience. While group projects are intended to foster collaboration and critical thinking, they often lead to an imbalance in effort, with some students taking on the majority of the work while others contribute minimally. This inequity can cause frustration among hardworking group members, while those who do less miss out on valuable learning opportunities. A contributor stated:

Whenever we do group projects in English class, it feels like the same people end up doing all the work. Last time, I wrote most of the script for our presentation while others barely contributed. It's really unfair because I want a good grade, but I also feel like I'm being taken advantage of. I think the teacher should check in more often to make sure everyone is doing their part.

(Participant #8; Age 19)

The other one announced:

In my group, there was one person who didn't even bother to show up for our meetings and another who just copied what we told them to do without adding anything. I ended up doing most of the research and putting the slides together. It's frustrating because group work is supposed to be shared responsibility, but it doesn't always work that way.

(Participant #4; Age 24)

D) Language Barriers (20% - Freq.=2)

Language barriers in English class can pose significant challenges for students, particularly for those whose first language is not English. These barriers can make it difficult for learners to fully comprehend lessons, participate in discussions, or express their ideas effectively in writing. As a result, students may feel isolated, discouraged, or left behind compared to their peers. Language barriers not only hinder academic progress but can also impact students' confidence and motivation to engage with the subject. Addressing this issue requires intentional strategies, such as differentiated instruction and additional support, to create an inclusive and supportive environment for all learners.

One of the partakers declared that:

Working on group projects in English class is really hard for me because I don't always understand what my classmates are saying. Sometimes, they talk too fast or use words I don't know, and I feel too embarrassed to ask them to explain. When it's my turn to contribute, I struggle to put my ideas into words, so I feel like I'm not really helping the group. It makes me feel like I don't belong.

(Participant #6; Age 22)

The other student stated:

During our last English project, I found it difficult to write my part because I'm not used to writing essays in English. I had the ideas in my head, but I couldn't translate them properly, and I was worried my group would think I wasn't doing my share. I wanted to do a good job, but it's frustrating when language gets in the way. I think it would help if the teacher gave extra resources or guidance to students like me.

(Participant #8; Age 19)

6 Discussion

The obtained results of the current study contribute to an increased understanding of the influence of culturally-oriented project work training on the social identity of Iranian EFL learners. In this section, the quantitative and qualitative results of the study will be discussed in terms of addressing the research questions, providing theoretical background, and analyzing the implications of the obtained results for the EFL field and social identity of the participants.

The results of quantitative analysis demonstrated that the indicators of social identity, including solidarity, literacy, and cultural competency, significantly increased among the participants of the experimental group. In this respect, the obtained results confirm the claims of sociocultural theory regarding the role of social interactions in cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). Specifically, the experiment shows that the experimental group has demonstrated higher solidarity due to the fact that they performed the project together. Thus, it can be concluded that the findings support the previous results of similar researches, which highlight the positive nature of collaborative and authentic tasks on motivation and engagement (Kusumawati, 2019; Ng, 2022). At the same time, the current results demonstrate that the impact of such tasks on social competence and extraversion is insignificant, which

means that further research should be undertaken in order to identify the nature of this relationship. Such a result can be explained by the fact that certain aspects of social identity, such as extraversion, are relatively stable throughout life, and thus project work cannot affect them significantly (Berzonsky, 2011).

As demonstrated by the qualitative results, the participants reported multiple benefits of project work, including increased collaboration and communication, improved social skills, and enhanced ability to solve problems creatively. The thematic analysis of participants' responses revealed that the majority reported improved relationships with other participants, as well as the development of their social skills and abilities. From this perspective, the results align with Norton's (2013) view of identity as a process, which emphasizes the ability of individuals to negotiate their identity in social interactions. Indeed, the participants reported that collaboration and project work allowed them to improve their relationships with other participants and better understand their social roles and rules.

Moreover, the focus on authenticity and real-life problems allowed the participants to develop their literacy and problem-solving abilities, which corroborates the viewpoint of active learning and authentic instruction. In this regard, the results of the current study are consistent with similar findings of Jafari and Mohamadi Zenouzagh (2018), who also reported the benefits of project work for EFL learners. In addition, the qualitative results highlight the limitations of project work, including the inability of some participants to collaborate effectively or complete tasks in a timely manner. Such a result aligns with the viewpoint of Pirouz and Maghsoudi (2022), who also report negative aspects of project work, including unequal contributions to the project and problems collaborating in groups. Therefore, the results demonstrate that project work has a considerable effect on the social identity of the participants, although specific organizational issues should be addressed to ensure optimal results.

The current study demonstrates that culturally-oriented project work has a considerable effect on the social identity of Iranian EFL learners, which contributes to the emergent viewpoint of hybrid identity. By focusing on authenticity and interdisciplinary problems, project work encourages students to negotiate their social identity and become more competent and confident users of the English language and its culture. From this perspective, the findings of the current study demonstrate the importance of hybrid identity for EFL learners, which is particularly crucial in the era of globalization. Specifically, the study highlights the ability of project work to enhance the social and cultural competencies of EFL learners, which has a significant impact on their social identity. In addition, the findings of the current study can be utilized to inform future studies and practical applications, including curriculum design and instruction. Indeed, the findings suggest that educators and institutions can benefit from implementing interdisciplinary and authentic tasks, such as project work, to enhance the social and cultural competencies of EFL learners.

7 Conclusion and Implications

The effectiveness of culturally-oriented project work training could be identified through its effectiveness in achieving the intended learning outcomes, and addressing its effectiveness in terms of the impact it makes on the learner. Culturally-oriented project work training refers to incorporating cultural awareness, knowledge, and sensitivity into the learning process, usually by engaging students in a learning experience that requires completing a project or applying knowledge in a culturally-related context. In terms of evaluating the effectiveness of this form of pedagogy, particular attention should be paid to the effect that it produces on the learner in terms of developing knowledge, skills, and attitudes

related to the subject of learning, acquiring language, and building and advancing their social identities. This pedagogical technique seems to have a profound impact on different aspects of the EFL learner's social identity, namely social competence, cultural competence, and literacy (or language competence). The active and engaging nature of the task at hand had a major influence on the results observed. The study also served to confirm the fluid and situational nature of social identity. It demonstrated that it is indeed negotiated in interaction and is contingent in nature. Negotiating social identity happens through an interactive process, where both parties (learners) bring their own ideas about their social identity and work it out together. Social identity is fluid, it changes as the circumstances change, and it is relational in nature, meaning that it changes depending on who you are interacting with, and the context of this interaction. One's social identity is not only shaped through personal factors, it is also formed by external, social factors and the influence of other people. In fact, Tajfel & Turner (1986) even suggest that social identities are formed through one's membership in social groups and are partially based on social comparison. In other words, we form our social identities in comparison to others, based on how similar or different we feel from other groups.

The learners were excited by the opportunity to perform project work but also acknowledged the lack of equity in some project work. This information is vital for the success of such a study in the future, as these limitations are crucial for the optimization of the effectiveness of the proposed methods. The inclusion of culturally-oriented project work allowed for deepening the learner's commitment to the target language and culture, and bridging the learner's culture and English as a foreign language.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors have conducted the study, collected data, analyzed and interpreted the data, and written up the manuscript.

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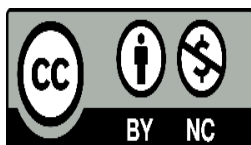
Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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