VOLUME 7 NOMOR 1 TAHUN 2025
ISSN: 2685-810X

RECLAIMING IDENTITY AND MOTIVATION FOR ADULT EFL LEARNERS' ENGLISH LEARNING NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how adult English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners construct their motivation and identity through personal narratives of language learning. Addressing a gap in the literature, it contributes original insight into the emotional and identity-related dimensions of English learning among adults outside formal academic settings. The study employed a narrative inquiry approach, using Riessman's thematic narrative analysis as the conceptual and analytical framework. Three adult learners participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews in which they recounted their English learning journeys, revealing key turning points, emotional struggles, and self-perceptions. The findings revealed three central themes: Rediscovering Myself through English, Struggling against Shame and Fear, and English as a Tool for Self-Empowerment. These themes demonstrate that English learning is not only linguistic, but also deeply personal and transformative, involving the reconstruction of identity and recovery from past educational trauma. The study concludes that narrative inquiry offers a powerful lens for understanding adult learner motivation in complex, human-centered ways. Implications include the need for more emotionally responsive pedagogy, identity-affirming classroom practices, and further research into adult learners' longitudinal experiences across diverse learning contexts.

Keywords: Identity, Motivation, Narratives, Adult EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, increasing attention has been given to the role of identity and motivation in second language learning, particularly within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts (Brown & Lee, 2025; Dewaele & Li, 2020; Doiz & Lasagabaster, 2018). Adult learners, who often return to language classrooms after prolonged educational gaps, bring with them unique life experiences, affective histories, and social roles that shape their language learning journeys. While traditional approaches have primarily conceptualized motivation as a stable, measurable construct, recent research has begun to acknowledge its complex, dynamic, and socially situated nature(Nesi et al., 2018; Reeve, 2024). Similarly, identity in language learning is increasingly viewed not as fixed, but as continuously constructed through interaction, reflection, and experience (Chuang, 2021; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023).

Within this evolving theoretical landscape, narrative inquiry has emerged as a powerful tool for exploring the lived experiences of language learners. It allows for deep engagement with personal stories, offering insights into how learners construct and reconstruct their identities and motivations over time (Avraamidou, 2019; McAdams, 2019) . Prior studies using narrative inquiry have shown that learners' self-perceptions, emotional investments, and future

aspirations significantly influence their language engagement (Dincer et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2024, 2024).

However, despite this growing body of work, there remains a significant gap in research focusing on adult EFL learners, particularly those outside of formal educational systems who are often overlooked in identity and motivation studies. Much of the existing literature focuses on adolescent or university student populations (Bannin, 2021; Csizér, 2020), using survey-based methods that risk oversimplifying the nuanced and evolving realities of adult learners. Moreover, few studies have examined how adult learners' personal narratives reflect not only their language goals but also their emotional healing, self-perceptions, and sense of agency.

To address this gap, this study adopts a narrative inquiry framework to explore how adult EFL learners construct their motivation and identity through storytelling. By centering learners' own voices and lived experiences, the study aims to uncover how English learning intersects with emotional transformation, social positioning, and the reclamation of self in adulthood. Narrative inquiry is particularly well-suited for this purpose, as it allows for the holistic examination of experience across time, place, and social interaction (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2019; Haydon et al., 2018; Mertova & Webster, 2019).

The significance of this approach lies in its potential to offer deeper, more humanized insights into adult EFL learning, moving beyond quantitative generalizations toward a richer understanding of learner identity formation. Additionally, it provides practical implications for EFL educators and program designers by highlighting the emotional and identity-based dimensions of motivation that often go unaddressed in adult education. In doing so, this study contributes both theoretically and pedagogically to the growing field of identity and motivation in second language acquisition.

These narratives offer compelling insights into how adult learners negotiate identity and sustain motivation through storytelling. Rather than viewing motivation as fixed or purely internal, the findings illustrate it as relational, temporal, and emotionally embedded. The dynamic construction of self through English aligns with the *L2 Motivational Self System* (Dornyei, 2019; Papi et al., 2019) and narrative identity theory (McAdams, 2021) suggesting that language learning serves both communicative and existential functions.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry approach to explore how adult EFL learners construct their identities and motivations through personal stories of language learning. Narrative inquiry was chosen for its ability to capture lived experiences, emotional depth, and temporal shifts in identity and motivation (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2019). The research was framed within Riessman's (2008) in (Bengtsson et al., 2020; Meraz et al., 2019) thematic narrative analysis, which emphasizes meaning-making through the structure, content, and context of individual narratives.

Participants

Three adult EFL learners were purposively selected to participate in the study. All participants were over the age of 30, had voluntarily enrolled in non-formal English learning programs, and had previous interruptions in their formal education. The participants represented diverse socio-economic and professional backgrounds:

Table 1. Demographic Information

Participant	Age	Occupation	English Learning Context
P1	32	Administrative staff	Community-based evening English class
P2	40	Teacher	Local adult education program
P3	36	Online entrepreneur	Blended learning course

Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured narrative interviews conducted individually with each participant. Interviews were held in a quiet, mutually agreed-upon location, either in-person or online via Zoom, depending on participant preference and availability. Each session lasted approximately 60–75 minutes. Participants were invited to share their English learning stories chronologically, starting from their earliest experiences to their present motivations and goals.

Open-ended guiding prompts were used to elicit rich narrative data, such as:

> *"Can you tell me about your earliest experience learning English?"*
> *"How do you see yourself now as an English learner compared to before?"*

All interviews were audio-recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed verbatim. Follow-up member checking was conducted by sharing summaries and interpretations with participants to confirm accuracy and authenticity.

Data Analysis

The transcribed data were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis based on Riessman, (2008) framework. Analysis focused not only on what was said but how it was said—the sequencing, emotional tone, and narrative coherence. First, individual narratives were read repeatedly to gain familiarity. Then, emergent themes were identified across cases, focusing on identity shifts, motivational turning points, and emotional patterns.

Themes were refined through constant comparison and analytical memo-writing. NVivo 12 software was used to organize and code the transcripts, supporting a systematic and traceable analytic process. Reflexive notes were maintained to acknowledge the researcher's interpretive role throughout the analysis.

Ethical Considerations

All research procedures followed ethical guidelines for qualitative research involving human subjects. Informed consent was secured in writing, and participants were assured of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to data collection.

RESULTS/FINDINGS

This study aimed to explore how adult EFL learners construct their identities and motivations through personal narratives of language learning. Using Riessman's (2008) thematic narrative analysis, three key themes were developed from the participants' stories: (1) *Rediscovering Myself through English*, (2) *Struggling against Shame and Fear*, and (3) *English as a Tool for Self-Empowerment*. These themes were identified through recurring narrative structures, emotional turning points, and identity shifts across the participants' accounts.

Qualitative Narrative Analysis

The first emergent theme, ***Rediscovering Myself through English***, captures how English learning enabled participants to reconnect with dormant parts of their identity and reawaken long-neglected aspirations. For P1, English represented a symbolic return to a former self, one tied to childhood dreams and international ambitions:

> *"When I started learning English again, I felt like I was returning to my younger self. I used to dream of working abroad, but life pushed me into something else. Now, in my 30s, I feel like I've found that part of me again."* (Interview, 04/07/2025, P1)

This narrative exemplifies how language learning functions not only as a cognitive task but as an affective and identity-laden process. P1's experience aligns closely with Dörnyei's (2009) *Ideal L2 Self*, where the vision of a future self is intricately connected to a personal history and emotional desire. Similarly, P2's story reflects a journey of self-reclamation through English learning:

> *"For years I thought I was too old, too tired. But now, I feel proud when I understand a movie or talk to someone online. It reminds me that I still have potential." (Interview, 04/07/2025, P2)*

Here, P2 challenges age-related assumptions and repositions herself as a capable, evolving learner. Her sense of renewed purpose is constructed through small achievements and a reclaimed sense of intellectual vitality.

The second theme, ***Struggling against Shame and Fear,*** highlights how participants' past educational experiences imposed long-lasting emotional barriers. For instance, P2 recalls a humiliating classroom moment that left a lasting impact on her willingness to speak:

> *"Back in school, I always kept quiet. My teacher once laughed when I mispronounced something, and I never forgot that. Even now, I hesitate to speak." (Interview, 04/07/2025, P2)*

This quote reveals how linguistic shame, rooted in early social experiences, continues to shape adult learning dispositions. Nevertheless, by narrating this painful memory in a reflective space, P2 begins to rewrite her narrative toward growth and confidence. Similarly, P3 shares her fear of judgment related to her pronunciation:

> *"I used to avoid English because I was afraid people would judge my accent. But now, after many online classes, I'm slowly gaining the courage to speak—even if my grammar is wrong." (Interview, 04/07/2025, P3)*

P3's story represents a shift from silence to voice, a movement that signals growing agency despite residual anxiety. Both narratives reflect a broader emotional struggle where learners must first confront internalized linguistic trauma before engaging confidently in language use. The final theme, ***English as a Tool for Self-Empowerment***, illustrates how participants use English learning to assert agency, gain social recognition, and access new opportunities. P1, for example, connects her newfound language skills to tangible life changes and increased self-worth:

> *"I now work part-time helping tourists in my city. Before that, I never thought I could do something like this. It gave me confidence—not just in language, but in myself." (Interview, 04/07/2025, P1)*

Her narrative presents English as more than a communication tool—it becomes a vehicle for both economic participation and personal transformation. Likewise, P3 expresses how language learning reshaped her familial identity:

> *"My children started asking me to help with their English homework. That changed how I see myself—not as someone left behind, but someone who still matters." (Interview, 04/07/2025, P3)*

In this moment, English learning facilitates a reconstruction of self as competent and relevant. P3's transition from perceived marginalization to relational authority reflects the empowering potential of language learning in adult life.

Taken together, these narratives reveal that adult EFL learners experience motivation and identity as dynamic, emotionally charged processes. English becomes a medium for self-discovery, emotional healing, and empowerment. These themes support the idea that language learning in adulthood is not only pedagogical but also deeply existential—tied to who learners were, who they are, and who they hope to become.

Figure 1. Three key themes



Visually present the three central themes that emerged from the participants' narratives: ***Rediscovering identity through English***, ***Overcoming shame and fear***, and ***Using English as a means of self-empowerment***. Each theme reflects the emotional, psychological, and transformative journey of adult EFL learners. The image highlights how English learning is not merely about language acquisition, but deeply tied to personal growth, resilience, and identity reconstruction.

As a researcher, I was acutely aware of my position as a listener and interpreter of deeply personal stories. During moments of vulnerability—particularly when participants described feelings of failure or shame—I maintained empathetic neutrality while ensuring accurate representation. Member-checking was conducted to validate interpretations and co-construct meaning.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed that adult EFL learners construct their identity and motivation through emotionally rich, transformative narratives shaped by personal history, social roles, and lived experiences. Specifically, three key themes emerged: *Rediscovering Myself through English*, *Struggling against Shame and Fear*, and *English as a Tool for Self-Empowerment*.

First, the theme *Rediscovering Myself through English* demonstrated that English learning served as a pathway for participants to reconnect with long-suppressed dreams and earlier versions of themselves. This finding highlights the deeply affective nature of language learning in adulthood—learners often experience it not just as academic pursuit, but as personal renewal. These experiences align with (Dornyei, 2019) Dörnyei's (2009) concept of the *Ideal L2 Self*, where future-oriented language motivation is grounded in personal identity narratives. This finding also resonates with Hillman, (2022) assertion that language learning is a site of identity negotiation, where learners reclaim agency and social meaning.

The second theme, *Struggling against Shame and Fear*, revealed the emotional burden adult learners carry from past educational experiences, particularly those marked by humiliation, silence, or fear of judgment. Such emotional residue often remains latent, yet powerful, influencing current willingness to participate and speak. This aligns with (Bloodstein et al., (2021) and Knoll et al., (2019) work, which emphasizes the affective dimension of second language learning, and with Järvenoja et al., (2018) call for motivation research to account for learner subjectivity and emotional complexity. However, while some studies suggest that fear debilitates motivation, the narratives in this study show that when learners are offered a safe and affirming space to share, they begin to rewrite their learning identities positively.

Third, the theme *English as a Tool for Self-Empowerment* emphasized how participants used English learning to gain self-confidence, fulfill familial roles, and access economic opportunities. This finding supports the view that English functions as symbolic capital (Sah & Li, 2018), enabling individuals to improve their social positioning. Learners in this study did not merely seek linguistic proficiency, but leveraged English to reconstruct self-worth and purpose. This outcome echoes findings by Mavrogordato & White, (2020) and Stephens & Francis, (2018) , who argued that access to English often transforms learners' trajectories both socially and personally.

Despite these compelling narratives, alternative explanations must be considered. It is possible that the emotional intensity and transformative power described by participants may be influenced by social desirability bias—participants may have emphasized positive transformation to align with what they perceived as the researcher's expectations. Additionally, the relatively small sample (three participants) may limit the generalizability of the findings, though narrative inquiry privileges depth over breadth. The use of thematic narrative analysis, while robust, is also inherently interpretive; researcher subjectivity may shape how themes were constructed, despite the use of member checking to enhance trustworthiness.

This study is not without limitations. First, all participants were voluntary learners engaged in community or online learning environments, which may suggest higher intrinsic motivation than other adult learners. Second, gender, cultural background, and previous language exposure were not fully explored, though they may have significantly shaped learners' narratives. Lastly, the findings reflect a specific sociocultural context and may not directly transfer to all adult EFL learning environments.

Nonetheless, these narratives offer important insight into the personal, emotional, and identity-related dimensions of English learning among adults. The findings underscore the value of narrative inquiry in capturing the lived realities behind language learning—realities

often overlooked by conventional research paradigms focused solely on proficiency, test scores, or behavioral outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore how adult EFL learners construct their motivation and identity through personal storytelling, using a narrative inquiry framework. By centering the lived experiences of three adult learners, this research sought to uncover how language learning intersects with emotional growth, self-perception, and social empowerment. The study responded to a gap in the literature regarding adult language learners, particularly those outside formal academic institutions—whose stories often remain unheard in mainstream SLA research. The findings revealed three core themes that shaped the participants' learning journeys: rediscovering one's self through English, struggling against shame and fear, and using English as a tool for self-empowerment. These themes illustrate that motivation and identity are not static constructs, but deeply dynamic, emotional, and context-dependent. English learning was experienced not simply as linguistic acquisition, but as an act of self-renewal and social re-engagement. The originality of this work lies in its focus on emotionally charged, identity-centered narratives that highlight the transformative power of English learning in adult life.

The achievements of this study align strongly with its objectives. It demonstrated that personal narratives provide a rich, nuanced understanding of adult EFL learning experiences. Furthermore, it showed that narrative inquiry is a valuable methodological tool for capturing the complexity of learner subjectivities—something that cannot be accessed through purely quantitative means. These findings underscore the importance of humanizing language learning, especially for adult learners who may carry emotional residue from prior educational trauma or social exclusion.

This study also contributes to current debates on motivation and identity in SLA by illustrating how adult learners exercise agency despite fear, shame, or marginalization. Their stories reaffirm the idea that motivation is not just about future goals, but also about reclaiming lost confidence, healing from past experiences, and imagining oneself differently. Such insights offer a more holistic understanding of language learning, one that is both psychological and social, both individual and relational.

Future research is encouraged to expand this line of inquiry by including a broader range of participants with diverse cultural, gender, and linguistic backgrounds. Comparative studies across different age groups, educational settings, or language policies could further deepen understanding of how adult learners construct their identities across varied contexts. Longitudinal narrative studies could also shed light on how motivation and identity evolve over time as learners continue their journeys.

Based on the findings, several practical suggestions can be made. For language educators and program designers, it is crucial to create emotionally safe and inclusive spaces that allow adult learners to share their stories, reflect on their experiences, and feel recognized as whole individuals—not just students. Teachers should be trained to respond sensitively to learners' past educational trauma, and curricula should incorporate elements of narrative reflection to promote learner agency. For policymakers and adult education providers, more support should be offered to non-traditional learners, recognizing that language learning is often a deeply personal and transformative experience.

In conclusion, this study affirms that adult English learners do not merely acquire language—they rebuild identities, challenge internal fears, and reimagine who they can become. Their stories remind us that language learning is not only an academic endeavor but a human one, rich with meaning, struggle, and possibility.

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