

# RECONSTRUCTION OF TEXTUAL IDENTITIES: A CASE OF A MEMBER OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITE AS CONTEXT FOR LITERACY

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**Abstrak.** Perkembangan teknologi internet semakin menjadi manakala situs jejaring sosial mulai menarik perhatian semua kalangan tak luput juga para pelajar/mahasiswa. Interaksi mereka di dunia maya, khususnya di jejaring sosial Facebook yang awam menggunakan Bahasa Inggris bisa menjadi salah satu medium bagi para pengajar untuk mencari tahu keberhasilan proses belajar mereka. Dalam pengamatan pada salah satu mahasiswa yang sedang menekuni Bahasa Inggris tampak jelas bahwa tidak selamanya praktik berbahasa Inggris melalui status update di Facebook berbuah manis. Perbincangan seputar identifikasi diri di dunia maya yang berbeda dengan identifikasi diri di dunia nyata ternyata menyuguhkan fenomena yang menarik tentang hubungan antara universalitas konteks maya dan nilai budaya dalam kehidupan nyata. Analisis dramaturgi yang tersaji dalam tulisan ini mencoba membuka satu sisi dari pembentukan identitas tekstual; rekonstruksi identitas pembelajar Bahasa Inggris, Noat, dan kaitannya dengan proses pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris yang dijalaninya.

**Kata kunci:** internet, identity, English

Internet technology has lent itself to the creation of new insights on the ways virtual realities are somehow connected to the real life situation. Whereas its development are still in its infancy, its effects has undoubtedly cast significant emergence of significantly new line of research in education and literacy (e.g. Miller 2004; Lam 2008; Block 2007; McGinnis *et.al.* 2007), socio-cultural studies (e.g. Warschauer 2000), study of World Englishes (e.g. Graddol2000, 2007; Crystal 1999a, 1999b, 2003). The spread of this technology (information and communication technologies—ICTs), is immense that almost becomes inseparable from the life of young people in particular (cf. Beavis in Coiro, Knobel and Leu 2007, p. 1216). Nixon (2003) highlights the importance of researching the context for better understanding of literacy and the lives and education of the young people by noting that

Global popular media culture, including online culture, has become integrally bound up with children's and teenager's affiliations, identities and pleasures. Their participation in global media culture shapes the ways they communicate and the kinds of social identities they take on. It informs how they present themselves

to others and their understandings about the social groups and communities to which they might conceivably belong. This kind of social participation is integrally bound up with the ways in which symbolic meanings are made, negotiated, and contested, and is therefore of central interest to literacy research. (p. 407 as cited by Beavies in Cairo, Knobel and Leu 2008: 1216-7)

The study of Computer-mediated Communication (CMC), in particular, has only recently begun to explore this “complex empirical reality” (Dannet and Herring 2007, p. 4-5; Graddol 2000, p. 56). The complexity of the reality includes the building of transnational social networks and identities and “to enable transnational spaces that center on the flows of goods, ideas, and cultural and material productions” (McGinnis 2007, p. 284; Stearns 2010, p. 122). In addition, Graddol reports that CMC closes the gap between spoken and written English (2000, p. 56). The cultural trends, according to Graddol (ibid), encourage the use of more informal and conversational form of English to certain extent that English is “destandardized”. Lam’s (2000) observation of Almon amplifies this. The authority of English as signification of English in the *inner circle* (B. Kachru, Y. Kachru and Nelson 2006) shifts to various groups of native and nonnative speakers around the world. However, it remains to be seen how much the shifts further push the magnification of the existing inequalities between the dominance of the white and the marginalized non-white. Warschauer (2008, p. 157) openly utters the two-faced potentials internet brings along, that it can both “magnify existing inequalities in society while also facilitating efforts to challenge these inequalities.” Yet, he remains optimistic that internet is “the most democratic media yet developed” (ibid). Although some remain pessimistic due to imbalance provision of facilities, mostly in poor countries (Graddol 2000, p. 39; Dannet and Herring , p. 408 ).

### **Internet as a site of identity enactment**

Among others, Wan Shun Eva Lam’s article “L2 Literacy and the Design of the Self: a case study of teenage writing in the Internet” (2000) is one of the first major works that consider internet as a medium for analyzing a new breed of identity, “textual identity”. This type of identity is by definition relates very closely to the “Discourse” (Gee 1996, 2000; also 2001) where learners choose the “design” (Kress 2000) through particular “voice” (Kramsch 2000) to establish “cultural belonging in the present age of

globalization and transborder relations” (Lam 2000 in Coiro, Knobeland Leu 2008, p. 1189). More appropriately, in her review of the article, Beavis (in Coiro, Knobel and Leu2008, p. 1215) calls “digital culture” as the site where internet users enact their identity. In Lam’s work, textual identity is the selected term to characterize the discursive strategies that an internet user uses to articulate and position himself in written texts and other semiotic media as he negotiates diverse discourse on the internet (Lam 2000 in Coiro, Knobel and Leu 2008, p. 1196).

Discourse analysis of language production in internet contributes great deals of information to our understanding of identity work (Block 2007; Norton 2000).

When users turn into internet to do an activity related to their work or to retreat after a day of hard work, they are actually preparing themselves into three different sets of reality. First, internet as just a tool to do another activity therefore internet offers nothing but an accomplishment of their professional obligations; internet is another means to an end. Second, enhanced tools in the internet offer users a little more facilities. An old email used to be a tool to send messages electronically. In few days, or instantly, we’ll receive a reply of our mail. And life goes on. Instant messaging services, like miRC, iCQ, Yahoo!Messenger, Google Talk, AOL Messenger, provide more or less the same function. Despite a few changes made, they remain a tool to achieve a certain goal, personal or professional. Third, specific function of the internet actually provide users a new reality where they can send mails, greet and call friends, falling in love, feeling compassion, even feed their pets. This is what enhanced emails service and networking sites in the internet offer us, a virtual reality. As it is a reality it provides us most of the things we cherish and feel in the real world. Facebook is different from any other networking sites (e.g. Twitter, Flickr, etc.) as it offers more flexibility in connecting users to their friends, their activities, and virtually, their life. Users can poke, ask questions, invite to a social activity, comments on others’ *wall*, send gifts, share video, tag friends in a picture and hundreds more (<http://www.facebook.com>).

All of the three set of realities, require an authentication by which users will be acknowledged during their online sessions. This authentication will be our identification during our online life to allow others to recognize the sender of emails they received, to acknowledge the sender of cakes in their holidays, to thank for the wise words they received during their hard times, also to feel different sensation of *poking*. One of the

oldest authentications that serve as identification is email address. It is interesting to think of how internet users decide to be recognized as. Some may not choose the free options to identify themselves online (i.e. automatically-generated email addresses/IDs), but some is privileged with such freedom to design their internet IDs. Given the second option, users apparently develop different strategies and considerations.

One can decide to use the same name in both real life and virtual life. Others may decide to hide their real life identity and choose to use different one, just because they don't want to be recognized. But is this the only reasons? Some fraudulent users intentionally change their online name to avoid identification so that they can commit crime without direct link to their real life identity. Some may have developed completely unpretentious reasons by choosing to use certain set of real names, e.g. show admiration of their idol, couldn't think of other names, etc. Some want to project certain images of themselves by relying on the semantic of the formal representation of the names as they appear on the screen, e.g. bigboy, sweet, hornybitch, heart1980, etc. Certainly, there should be more considerations. Finally, what becomes the concern of this essay is online formal representation of the self, i.e. internet names as proof of identities.

### **Noat's identities: in between two identities**

Noat is a student of English Studies in Jember, Indonesia. I started to see him when I was teaching in one of his classes. As any freshmen Noat apparently is indulged by the comforting friendship he made, self-encouraging activities, academic discussions, and flirting female friends once in a while. His confident is somehow boosted by his longer CV compared to most of his friends. He was educated in *pesantren* with great reputation for some years. The best thing about the *pesantren* is that it provides pupils with English classes and conversational practice settings which are abundance compared to any other *pesantren*, or, regular high school. In short he has a massive capital to stand tall and gain respect.

Interestingly, among his friends, Noat is a relatively shy guy. He finds himself more comfortable to talk to girls. As do most boys raised and educated in institution where boys and girls are segregated, Noat is a little bit over excited to meet and get acquainted with girls. Ironically, there's one side of his personality that would make his

girl-friends prefer to take him based on his feminist side. Before his boy-friends Noat is also assumed of developing a little bit more girly side; a character that will refuse him manly-kind-of boy-friends. So here he is ending up in a group of male friends, Fatty, a sluggish boy who is very good at making fun of himself and others; the joker of the group. Skinny, who is one year earlier in entering campus. Despite that everyone addresses him with 'big brother' (Mas), Skinny is definitely an in-group. Skinny is not the 'know-it-all' type of person. He tends to stay away from the crowd. But, the most obvious is that Skinny does not have the confidence to interact with boys his own age.

Occasionally, Noat would share thoughts and ideas with some of his seniors in the student body. As this was a common activity for him during his pesantren years, nevertheless his access to the higher other group increases his level of confidence and self-esteem. Furthermore, his current hype of Facebook also establishes himself as a member of the *Facebookers*, a common term coined to call for a constant Facebook user. As it is gaining its peak of popularity, a membership in Facebook site is considered as a requirement for modernity, for being *cool*. So, Facebook membership, and, thus, being active in it, is an investment (Norton 2000).

### **Offline Identity**

In real life Noat is from Madurese ethnic background living in Bondowoso. It is a regency in between Situbondo (to the north) and Jember (to the south). The migration of Madurese via the strait of Madura that headed toward the south somehow couldn't penetrate further south which was dominated by Javanese people. Thus, the half-way migration somehow slowed down and rested in Bondowoso. This creates a culture known as the "Pendhalungan" (Sutarto 2006; Rahardjo 2006). According to Sutarto (2006), the concept of Pendhalungan culture is similar to melting pot in America. The melting cultures are Javanese and Madurese. Administratively, the Pendhalungan culture covers Situbondo, Bondowoso, Jember and Probolinggo, known also as the "Tapal Kuda" (Sutarto 2006) or, literally, "horse shoe" region.

More specifically Noat belongs to Pamekasan Madurese ethnic group. Broadly speaking, Madurese diasporas are said to belong into two major sub-ethnic groups, namely Sampang and Pamekasan. Both are popularly identified based on the characteristic of phonological features with the first as having rougher tone of voicing compared to the latter. There is also a commonly perceived stereotypical point of view

that identifies this distinctive tone of voicing with attitudes or behaviour. Consequently, a Pamekasan Madurese will be reckoned as having a display of more polite and better behaviour than those of the Pamekasan sub ethnic group.

Sutarto (2006) retrospectively reports that Madurese people migrated to the mainland Javanese island under two different conditions. First, the relatively barren demography of Madura island forced them to seek better fortune in the lustrous *Jawa*. Second, the Dutch needed of workers to maintain production of their tea, coffee, rubber and chocolate plantations stretching in the northern hills and mountain of eastern regions of the East Java province. The characteristics of the Madurese people who are “hardworking, diligent, and solid” gave Dutch no choice but to employ them (Sutarto 2006, p. 2). This migration took place during the Dutch occupation of the region via the Jangkar harbor connecting Madurese Island to the mainland of Java; just like the Dover harbor that connects England to the mainland Europe. The characteristics of the mainland Madurese are highly relevant to the geographical characteristics of the soil and demography of the island which is dry and hot (Sutarto 2006, p. 2). As the result Madurese people, that is to say Sampang Madurese, are stereotypically bad tempered. Meanwhile the Pamekasan Madurese that has strong influence from Javanese culture display a more tolerable characteristics with softer tone of voicing and more polite manner.

Madurese people, of both the main islander and the migrants, are also characterized with strong Islamic piety. Noat membership to this sub-ethnic group contributes to our understanding toward his overall behaviors. For now, it is sufficient to consider how multiple identities of Noat are intertwined with everyday experiences (cf. McGinnis et.al. 2007, p. 285).

### **Online Identity/Textual Identity**

Noat is one of millions of Indonesian youngsters devoting most of his life to updating status in the hugely popular networking site Facebook. The number of Facebook users in Indonesia has been surprisingly increasing. The growing number of internet users has come with a certain price. People are getting more-more absorbed in virtual activities (communication, engagement).

What is fascinating about one of his behaviours in Facebook is his constantly changing account name. In most of the times, he manipulated his name to mimic morpho-phonemical components of English, or generally, Western, names. Once he used 'Benzema' as his surname. Benzema is the surname of a famous French footballer, Karim Benzema, currently playing for the Spanish giant Real Madrid. Two intriguing reasons behind the choice are: 1) Why Western name's properties? 2) Why footballer's name? 3) What benefit is he expecting to get with this investment?

To provide currency, in October 2010, Noat modifies his Facebook account name into "ReNoatGeli McCartney" (RNGM). This time the construction of his name suggests richer projection of images. Specifically, the middle name "Geli" is derived from Indonesian word which literally means "itchy". The selection of this particular word casts comical element in his textual identity construct. The impression expected with the use of this word is childishly fun, not serious, or even silly. However, it may also be due to his attempt to meet good rhyming with the final syllables of the middle name and the surname both end in /i/, i.e. /geli/ and /mka:tni/.

It has been obvious that his attempt of masking his 'old' identity by using western names has provided several important changes in his behavior, both offline and online. This writing will try to observe the changes and see if such really is the case.

The main subset of analysis in this writing is the challenge of teacher-students orthodoxy. The renegotiated subject positions between Noat and the cultural conceptualization of teachers emphasize how internet mediated communication and its discourse have provided him with new insight of his identity. During the observation, I acted as loyal commentator of his Facebook status updates, but only when he uses English. My reason for doing this is merely professional. As one of his English teachers, I am obliged to assist him in his attempts of practicing his English. And updating Facebook status in English becomes the most important exercise to enhance his writing skills. Best of all, it's an excellent medium for expressing his ideas. His writing becomes a *sign*. His status updates become signs that stand for or represent his concepts, ideas and feeling "in such a way as to enable others to 'read', decode or interpret their meaning in roughly the same way" (Hall 1997, p. 5; emphasis original) that he does. In Hall's sense status updates are signifying practices (ibid).

It was a pleasant thing that Noat also became one of loyal commentators of my status update. One day, he noticed that I have stopped updating my status for few days and casually requested, in December 17 2009 at 1.42am:

(1)

[RNGM] Sir, Im waiting for your inspiring and debatable status... from which I can learn a lot.

He enjoys practicing his English and his conceptual thinking by commenting on my status updates that usually contain philosophical quotation or remarks from famous philosophers or scientists or literary men. The status updates were meant to invite students to make comments with which they would practice their English and critical thinking.

The following is an example of one of his latest comment on my status update. On March 18 at 11.07 pm, I posted a link from a local newspaper website about Facebook addiction. I wrote, “apapun yang bersifat candu tidak baik tentunya.” (anything [that is] addictive certainly is not [a] good [thing]). Instantly one student, Tika Philomela (TP), commented by expressing her opinions about her being able to use Facebook just in moderation; for good reasons.

(2)

[TP] i never let it adict me i visit it when i have good words to write not to say rude things as most facebooker did i leave it when i work i am not worry about my absent so many days here means that i am not slave of FB.

Two days later, March 20, at 12.59pm, Noat made comment of my respond to TP’s earlier comment. The comment read:

(3)

[RNGM] that's the normative one Sir! who wants himself being addicted by facebook??? I bet not even one wants. but, somebody may think that it is a trend, something booming and needs utilizing. sometimes somebody reckon subjectively that there's something should be shared to others even though it's not so important.

about saying rude thing, I myself disagree.



My intention for the update with hyperlink to an online webpage containing reportage of Facebook addiction treatment clinic was to invite critical perspective from hundreds of user listed as my friend. Submerge in my formal wish was my expectation that most of those who read it would agree and start reflecting on their own track-record of Facebook using. It was, and it still is, evident that Facebook is an effective time killer. Literally, everyone is updating their status as if the whole world has to know what they were doing at anytime, anywhere, with anybody.

As is visible in his comment above, Noat opens up with an overwhelming confidence. His first remark, “that’s the normative one Sir!” clearly displays that confidence. Moreover, his use of exclamation mark informs his assertiveness. It clearly demonstrates his current position as a person who has the capacity to challenge my status as his teacher. This is somehow a manner that may be subversive toward my authority. Madurese people are known for their piety and sovereignty. Teachers are traditionally placed in a high social status under Kyai or religious leader. Teachers are even considered as more honorable than mediocre government officials. Therefore, a student challenging his teacher’s authority is very unlikely to take place in Madurese society. As educated person, religious leaders or teachers are those granted with privilege to be looked up to. Somehow, in this first remark, Noat has established his new identity as a person with certain degree of knowledge just about enough to say something to his mentor. Besides, academic openness has been a constant menu on my teaching agenda. So, it may also play part in Noat’s newly gained stature.

His second remark, “who wants himself being addicted by facebook???” gets himself into even further distance than his first. Here, he plays the role as someone who has been well educated and informed. He gets the message that Facebook can do anyone good if it is used in the right way also that being addicted to it will be a bad thing. He demands recognition that he is capable of understanding the very case that I was building upon. This is obvious in his choice of question mark, three of them. He thinks that I may have thought of himself as being one of the few fellows who would be so naively addicted to Facebook that he would do nothing of any good. He rejects the idea. And at the same time he promotes himself, implicitly. He suggests that both of us stand on the same ground; that he is just as tall as me—his teacher. Again, the idea that the

communication is between teacher-student needs to be emphasized due to high respect Madurese pay to their teachers.

### **The third Noat**

The different attitudes of Noat toward me as his teacher are worryingly vivid. In an instance when I invite him for further offline discussion, he rejected.

[HS] mas, noat. Should you wish to discuss anything, please find time to see me. I'm off-line more frequently.

(4)

[RNGM] I am terribly sorry Sir, It might burden you. It's been hard to find the time due to the tight schedule of ours, but I'll see you Sir.

His reason for rejecting my invitation is a clear indication that there is no collaboration of identities. Noat who is assertive and confident online is not the same person offline. Face-to-face interaction has always offered certain degree of awkwardness, discomfort, or even threat to one's face. It is also clear that the two situations (on-line and offline) has severe effects on Noat's perceptions of himself. His avoidance is a choice he made to safe himself. This assumption was proven accurately, when later on we have a chance to see each other. As a member of student body, Noat was active in fund raising organized by the student body. The fundraising itself was unstructured. The donator targeted was not specific. So the meeting was accidental. In the meeting, online Noat was no where to be found. The offline Noat is a genuinely shy person. Not a word uttered. Head faced down with eyes fixed on the floor. It was a typical pious *santri* behavior haunted by the obligation to follow the rule of the real world. And in real world Noat is a graduate of pesantren from Madurese family. He was supposed to be pious, well mannered, polite son who had to demonstrate capability of normative and sincere behavior in front of a person highly respected in his society. That appeared to be the end of the story.

At this point if we refer back to the discursive strategies he attempted in the excerpt (4) above we can see that the comment is a mediation that bridges his segregated identities. If the discussion was online, he would be more than happy to step up and rely on the neutrality of the Internet to function as an academic, an informed, and well-educated personae. Yet, as the invitation was for face-to-face interaction, his

cultural identity crept up. In between these two identities, Noat reconstructed the third self. He renegotiated his identities. In other words, the online discourse became the *habitus* of his online identity where he felt empowered by the language and safe within its norms and values. Whereas the negotiated meaning through the invitation was threatening to his offline identity whose norms and values will make him construct a completely different identity. This is his mitigating device or hedges he used strategically to mediate these two selves. His first set of sentence, “I am terribly sorry Sir, It might burden you,” discharged the initiation of the third identity. His use of “terribly” mitigates his rejection. Prior to the decision to renegotiate his identity by means of the hedge, Noat could’ve simply disregarded the invitation. Yet, he uses his knowledge of English to design his identity. This is a perfect display of his efforts to maintain control over his continuously changing identities. Disregarding the invitation or using other medium that he masters better (e.g. Indonesian language) was a rational option. It confirms Norton and Toohey’s (2001) idea that learning a language is a struggle of identity (in Ushioda 2008, p. 24).

The gravity of his offline identity is also obvious. He maintains his control over his manner by capitalizing *s* in the way he addresses me “Sir”. It stipulated the demand of his cultural identity norms (see excerpt 3 above). Additionally, his reason for not meeting my invitation is a cover up. It was arguable whether he was so busy at that time. This time Noat is being protective to his reputation. He wanted to show that he is a focal and active student. Furthermore, the promise he made “but I’ll see you Sir” contains indication of his effort to safeguard his self-image. These two poles of identity and the renegotiation of the third are highly situated. So here we see how Noat’s identities intertwined (cf. McGinnis 2007, p. 285).

### **Concluding remarks: Impacts to pedagogy of English**

Noat represents some hundred thousands of students who dream of mastering English as foreign language. His unstable construction of identity relates closely to his perception of English as the marker for globalization, pre-condition for educatedness. On the other hand, English has so far become the powerhouse of internet publications based on both company and personal. Mastering the language has never been so urgent. However, the increasing number of websites with local languages not necessarily threatens the ecology of the language of the internet. Thus, research using internet based data

should be promoted. Whilst conventional research methodologies are not outdated, internet based research methods have yet to come at its best. The increasing use of internet that attracts more users regardless of age adds up to its already inviting posture. In effect, English in the internet or “net English” (Graddol 2000, p. 2) may be a powerful medium for identities negotiation.

It is empowering its speakers. However, such empowerment may be disrupted by socially and politically situated activities and settings. The internet become an excellent site where empowerment can be achieved as it is developing new values and norms relatively independence of socio-political interests. Should teachers of English be encouraged to promote Internet, more specifically, Facebook and other networking sites, as a medium for practicing English? If they should, need we consider how much does this intertwining of identities come to affect students’ mastery of English. More samples of such observation are desperately crucial for us to generalize the notions of empowerment and disempowerment.

The study of dramaturgy in students’ participations in online activities can be as interesting as classroom research. The main different will be when students are interacting online the burden of face-to-face interaction can be minimized. Thus, students can feel more freedom in expressing their ideas. The overall result will be increasing not only mastery of the language but also communicative skills. The exchanges of role in a communication can be practiced much better when emotive factors are put to minimum.

Internet technology enables data elicitation and analysis so far impossible in real-life situation. Web archiving technology, such as the WayBack machine in internet accompanies massive data storage in virtual environment offered by numerous web-based companies, such as Google Incorporation’s Gmail, Yahoo Corportion’s Yahoo!Mail, Microsoft Corporation’s Skydrive Mushrooming social networking sites like Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, and hundreds of other also offer the same potentials. The data stored in the servers of these companies can be restored at any moment. This ability becomes the most beneficial feature Internet has to offer. With precision reaching perfection, data retrieval makes possible re-observation of a user’s track record. If anthropology study can contribute to the world of science with inspiring after-digging

analysis with only partially recovered artifacts, web archiving technology can provide researchers nearly perfect remains of a person's virtual life experience. Web-pages, emails, chats log, uploaded images, comments that a user once published in the internet can be retrieved in a staggering quality. These can be analyzed to measure students' progress.

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