Developing a Model of Identity Processing Styles for the Iraqi EFL learners

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Abstract

Despite some research on identity processing styles, there is a significant gap on identity processing styles in Iraqi EFL learners, a population with distinct sociocultural and educational backgrounds. This study aimed to address this gap by developing a model of identity processing styles tailored to Iraqi EFL learners. The participants were 30 conveniently selected Iraqi EFL learners, comprising 10 males and 20 females, who were already passing their General English course in different universities of Iraq. A semi-structured interview was conducted to collect the data about (the components of) identity processing styles. Utilizing a grounded theory approach, the gathered qualitative interview data was subjected to manual thematic analysis. According to the findings, the following major components were identified for identity processing styles from Iraqi EFL learners' viewpoints: Diffuse-Avoidant Style, Normative Style, and Informational Style, each consisting of some sub-components. The component Diffuse-Avoidant Style consisted of two sub-components including Positive Thinking and Negative Thinking. The sub-components of the component Normative Style were Religious Thinking, Personal Norms Thinking, and Social Norms Thinking. Finally, the component Informational Style was associated with two sub-components including Problem-Based Thinking and Reason-Based Thinking. The findings have some implications for Iraqi EFL teachers, learners, curriculum planners and teacher educators.

Introduction

Language learning is a complex process that involves various cognitive and affective factors (Kargar Behbahani & Razmjoo, 2023). In recent years, there has been a growing interest in investigating the role of individual differences in language learning (Kargar Behbahani & Karimpour, 2025; Kargar Behbahani & Rashidi, 2023; Karimpour & Kargar Behbahani, 2025a,). Recent studies have underscored the intricate relationship between identity and EFL learning, particularly in culturally distinct contexts. For instance, Alali and Alruwaili (2024) found that Saudi EFL learners' imagined identities positively influenced their investment in English learning, enabling them to negotiate new identities and connect with global communities. Similarly, Shahidzadeh and Mazdayasna (2022) explored how Iranian EFL students constructed identities through translated stories, revealing aspirations for both language investment in professional skills and consumption for pleasure. In collectivist societies, where social and religious norms often guide behavior, learners may face unique challenges, such as reconciling local cultural identities with Western influences from English learning (Al-Beshri, 2024). Despite these insights, research on Iraqi EFL learners remains scarce, with little exploration of how their sociocultural and educational contexts shape identity processing in language learning, necessitating a tailored investigation.

One of the most crucial individual differences that has been explored in the literature is learners' identity processing styles (Berzonsky, 2007). Identity processing style refers to the way learners perceive, process, and interpret their social identities and their interactions with others in the language learning context (Berzonsky, 2007). It is grounded in Berzonsky's Identity Styles Theory (1988) as a dominant framework in the study of identity formation. Berzonsky's Identity Styles Theory makes prominent the complexities between cognitive processes and identity development, putting emphasis on the significance of diverse factors in shaping identity. This theory simultaneously acts as a dominant framework for showing individual differences in identity development, and recognizes the dynamic and multi-faceted nature of identity (Berzonsky, 2011).

According to this theory, individuals take one of three primary identity styles: informational, normative, and diffuse-avoidant styles, each representing distinct approaches to processing and merging identity-related information. Identity Styles Theory has been paid remarkable attention in the realm of developmental psychology thanks to its comprehensive attention to the cognitive processes underlying identity development.

The informational identity style is represented by a proactive involvement in identity-related information, in which people search and critically examine different sources of identity-related knowledge (Berzonsky, 1988). This style shows an orientation towards examination and investigation, as people seek to develop a coherent identity through aggregating various views and experiences (Crocetti et al., 2013). Previous research has documented the adaptive characteristics of the informational style, associating it with a more robust sense of identity (Berzonsky, 2011).

The normative identity style is characterized with sticking to social norms and expectations in developing one's identity (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2022). Persons showing this style are concerned with conformity to societal norms and external validation and leadership in their identity construction processes. Although the normative style may generate a sense of security and belonging in social settings, it may inhibit individual' independence and self-expression (Berzonsky & Neimeyer, 1988).

The diffuse-avoidant identity style is associated with a dissociation from identity exploration, and avoidance towards identity-related matters (Berzonsky, 1988). Individuals taking this style are distinguished by a lack of path or goal in their identity formation, lack of self-reflection, and passivation when being exposed to existential questions. This style is tied to feelings of confusion and sadness, as individuals try to find a coherent sense of self (Berzonsky, 1988).

Several models of identity processing style have been proposed which provide frameworks for understanding how people deal with identity-related challenges and develop their sense of self. These models are informative on the cognitive, emotional, and motivational elements which build identity processing styles and their implications for identity development and formation. Some dominant models include Berzonsky's identity style model, Luyckx's identity processing styles model, Schwartz's model of identity content and processes and Meeus's identity styles model.

What is more, language learning is not just the acquisition of grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and syntax. It is a dynamic process that influences learners' sense of self. One of the most remarkable ways language learning impacts identities and is impacted by it is through learners' investment of different degrees of their feelings, motivations and experiences in the language learning process. A strong investment generates a feeling of becoming in the culture of target language, causing the learner to be identified more dominantly with the target language group (Norton, 2016). In contrary, a weak investment blocks progress the learner's identification with the target language. Further, language learning can serve as a channel to new social spaces and communities. Through language learning, learners can communicate with native speakers, be involved in cultural practices, and participate in new conversations (Mitchell et al., 2019).

However, the relationship between language learning and identity can be more complex. Language can act as a sign of difference and exclusion in some situations. Norton and Pavlenko (2019) mean the same thing by the concept of "imagined communities," referring to speakers' forming a sense of solidarity. Learners in such contexts may show resistance or prejudice based on their perceived "outsider" state. This can cause feelings of alienation and hinder learners' identification with the target language speakers. This confirms the role of learners' identity in forming the language learning trip. With a view to such arguments, exploring EFL learners' identity processing styles seems inevitable in solving various EFL learning problems learners confront in the path of language learning.

Despite some research on identity processing styles (Malmir & Derakhshan, 2020; Rahimi & Razmjoo, 2021; Razmjoo & Neissi, 2010), there is a significant gap on identity processing styles in Iraqi EFL learners. In other words, this research area suffers from parsimony with regard to Iraqi EFL learners, a population with distinct sociocultural and educational

backgrounds. This study aimed to address this gap by developing an identity processing styles model tailored to Iraqi EFL learners. Iraqi learners often face unique challenges in learning English, such as limited exposure to English outside the classroom and a different educational context. Understanding their identity processing styles could provide valuable insights for teachers and curriculum developers. By addressing this gap in the literature, this study will contribute to our understanding of the role of identity in EFL learning and provide insights for developing effective EFL instruction for Iraqi EFL learners. To this end, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are the major components of identity processing styles from Iraqi EFL learners' viewpoints?

2. What kind of a model can be suggested for identity processing styles in the Iraqi context?

Literature Review

Berzonsky's Identity Styles Theory

Berzonsky's Identity Styles Theory (1988) provides a context for understanding how individuals approach identity formation. The theory has three main identity styles: informational, normative, and diffuse-avoidant. Each of these styles represent different ways people process and integrate identity-related information.

- The informational identity style is characterized by searching and evaluating identity-laden information. People using this style engage in introspection and explore diverse perspectives to build a coherent sense of self (Berzonsky, 1988; Crocetti et al., 2013). This approach has been linked to greater psychological well-being and stronger identity formation (Berzonsky, 2011).

- The normative identity style is characterized by adherence to social expectations. People with this style often rely on societal standards and external validation in developing their identity. While this style offers a sense of belonging, it may limit personal autonomy (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2022; Berzonsky & Neimeyer, 1988).

- The diffuse-avoidant identity style represents a more disengaged approach to identity, where individuals avoid identity-related decisions. This style is often linked to confusion and dissatisfaction, as individuals struggle to find a clear sense of self (Berzonsky, 1988; Tsang et al., 2012).

Berzonsky's theory emphasizes the interplay between cognitive processes and identity development and acknowledges that both internal and external factors are responsible for forming an individual's identity. Although the theory categorizes identity formation into distinct styles, it recognizes the complexity of the identity formation process (Berzonsky, 2011). Empirical research based on Berzonsky's theory has explained how different identity styles affect various life outcomes. Studies have linked identity styles to factors like academic success, personal values, relationships and mental health (Jespersen et al., 2013). Cross-cultural research has also highlighted the role of cultural factors in identity development and showed

that how identity processes vary across different cultural contexts (Jensen et al., 2011; Schwartz et al., 2013).

Identity in Language Learning

Language learning is not just about learning grammar and vocabulary. It also involves a transformation of one's identity. Norton's investment theory explained that learners invest parts of themselves such as emotions, motivations, and experiences into the language learning process (Darvin & Norton, 2016). The extent of this investment can affect the learner's identity. A strong investment in the language can lead to a sense of belonging within the target language culture, while a weak investment can hold back progress and limit identification with that culture.

Undeniably, language learning can open doors to new social connections and communities. As learners gain language skills, they can engage with native speakers and participate in conversations they previously couldn't access (Mitchell et al., 2019). However, this process isn't always smooth. Sometimes, language can be a marker of difference, leading to exclusion. Norton and Pavlenko (2019) discussed the concept of imagined communities, where speakers of a language create a sense of belonging that may exclude learners. When learners feel like outsiders, they may experience alienation, which can hinder their progress in adopting the language. For those with a heritage language background, language learning takes on an additional dimension. The heritage language can be deeply tied to one's identity, but learning it may come with challenges. Family and societal expectations about proficiency can create anxiety that affects the learner's relationship with the language (Jessner, 2006). Individuals who grow up in multilingual environments often experience pressure to maintain proficiency in their heritage language while also learning a new one.

Pre-existing identity also has a role to play in language learning. Learners with strong cultural ties to their heritage language might be more motivated to learn a new language if it shares linguistic or cultural similarities (Hornberger & Wang, 2017; Scontras et al., 2015). On the other hand, if they have negative associations with the target language culture, they may be less inclined to engage in learning.

Recent studies have explored the concept of imagined selves in language learning. Learners may picture who they want to become within the target language which constructs their motivation as well as their engagement. For instance, a person who dreams of being an international journalist might be driven to improve his/her language skills, imagining conducting interviews or writing in that language (Al-Hoorie, 2018). Additionally, online platforms have provided new ways for learners to explore their identities. Online communities can help learners develop a sense of belonging by sharing experiences and supporting one another in their language learning processes.

To recap this heading, language learning and identity are deeply interconnected. The process can reshape how individuals see themselves and help them forge new connections and identities. Those language teachers who recognize the importance of this relationship can create inclusive and supportive environments that empower learners to deal with the complexities of language learning and self-development (Noels et al., 2020; De Costa & Norton, 2017).

Identity Processing Styles

Now that various aspects and dimensions of identity were dealt, it is time to discuss identity processing style which refers to the cognitive strategies individuals use to explore their sense of self within social and cultural contexts (Szabo & Ward, 2015). Before addressing this topic, it is worth mentioning that identity is not static but an ongoing process constructed and developed by both internal and external factors (Berzonsky, 2011). One of the foundational frameworks in this field is Berzonsky's identity style model which outlines three primary styles, namely informational, normative, and diffuse-avoidant (Berzonsky, 2011). These styles reflect different approaches to dealing with identity-related challenges and vary in terms of engagement and reflection during the identity formation process. Below, each is discussed:

1. Informational identity processors actively engage in seeking and evaluating information related to their identity. They tend to adopt a reflective and analytical approach while considering multiple perspectives and options before making identity decisions (Berzonsky, 2011). This style emphasizes autonomy and a willingness to explore various possibilities to construct a coherent self-concept. Informational processors are more likely to make informed choices that align with their personal values and aspirations.

2. Normative identity processors rely on social norms and external standards to guide their identity choices. They prioritize conformity, seek approval from others and are more likely to align their identity with societal expectations (Berzonsky & Papini, 2015). This style reflects a desire for social acceptance, often leading to a more rigid adherence to cultural values.

3. Diffuse-avoidant identity processors delay engaging with identity-related issues. This avoidance leads to a lack of commitment or direction in their identity development that results in uncertainty and a reluctance to explore identity options (Chung, 1997). Diffuse-avoidant individuals often struggle with decision-making and may experience confusion or ambivalence in their sense of self (Good, 2006).

These identity processing styles are influenced by personality traits such as cognitive abilities, environmental factors and they shape how individuals develop their identity throughout life. Research has further expanded Berzonsky's model, exploring additional dimensions of identity processing and their effects on psychological well-being and adjustment.

The next identity processing styles are proposed by Luyckx et al. (2011) who identified four additional identity processing styles, including moratorium, achievement, foreclosure and diffusion. These styles reflect varying degrees of exploration and commitment in identity development:

*   Moratorium refers to a phase of active exploration without yet committing to specific identity choices.

*   Achievement represents a state where both exploration and commitment to identity decisions have occurred.

- Foreclosure involves commitment without thorough exploration often due to external pressures or early socialization.

- Diffusion reflects a lack of both exploration and commitment that results in uncertainty.

Cultural and contextual factors significantly influence identity processing styles. People from different cultural backgrounds may exhibit distinct patterns of exploration and commitment due to the influence of cultural values and norms (Ozer et al., 2022). For instance, in collectivist cultures where interdependence and conformity are emphasized, people may gravitate toward normative processing styles to meet group expectations (Arnett, 2015). In contrast, individualistic cultures which prioritize autonomy are more likely to promote informational processing styles that encourage self-exploration (Schwartz et al., 2013). Even within the same culture, individual differences in values and socialization experiences can further impact identity processing styles (Branje et al., 2021).

Identity processing styles have shown crucial implications for psychological well-being, interpersonal relationships and adaptation to life changes. According to Luyckx et al. (2011), people who adopt informational processing styles tend to have higher levels of self-esteem, greater identity exploration and better psychological adjustment. In contrast, those who rely heavily on normative or diffuse-avoidant styles often face challenges in identity formation and managing identity-related stress (Luyckx et al., 2011). Furthermore, these processing styles interact with other dimensions of identity such as gender and ethnicity and can influence how individuals experience their social identities and handle their identity development (Berzonsky, 1988). To elaborate through an example, people from marginalized groups might approach identity development differently, influenced by both their identity processing style and the broader societal contexts they face (Berzonsky, 2011).

To recap, identity processing styles represent the cognitive strategies individuals use to manage the complexities of identity formation. These styles which are formed and developed by factors such as cultural, personal and environmental can impact psychological well-being and influence how individuals manage life's transitions.

Empirical Studies

Rahimi and Razmjoo's (2021) study aimed to develop and validate a tool to assess Identity Processing Styles in the EFL context of Iran. Through grounded theory data analysis, they developed a scale in 42 five-point Likert-scale items to measure EFL teachers' identity processing styles. In the quantitative phase, the new instrument was administered to 203 higher education teachers. The IPS scale was assessed for reliability and validity using Cronbach's alpha and confirmatory factor analysis, ensuring the tool's robustness.

Malmir and Derakhshan (2020) explored the relationship between different identity processing styles and proficiency in L2 speech acts among 122 Iranian learners. Through multiple regression analysis, they found that diffuse-avoidant and normative identity processing styles significantly contributed to both learners' pragmatic knowledge and production. The information-oriented identity processing style had a weaker but still significant predictive value. These findings suggested that teachers could adapt their instructional

strategies based on learners' identity processing styles to maximize pragmatic learning outcomes.

Barjesteh et al. (2017) explored the potential connection between identity processing styles and learning styles among young Iranian language learners. The study recruited 29 advanced learners from an English language institute using simple randomization. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study's title, significance and procedures. The findings indicated no relationship between learners' identity processing styles and their learning styles. Furthermore, an independent t-test comparing the mean scores of male and female participants showed no significant difference between the two groups regarding learning styles.

Razmjoo and Izadpanah (2012) investigated the potential association between identity processing styles and L2 literacy among 160 advanced EFL learners. The study found that identity styles had an impact on L2 literacy proficiency. A small positive correlation was observed between the informational style and both L2 literacy and L2 writing. Conversely, the normative style showed a weak negative correlation with these skills. However, neither identity style was a significant predictor of overall L2 literacy success.

Method

Design

In this study, grounded theory was employed to identify the key elements of identity processing styles from the perspectives of Iraqi EFL learners, with the aim of developing a framework specific to the Iraqi context. According to Ary et al. (2019), grounded theory takes an inductive approach, where the theory evolves organically from the data itself rather than being shaped by pre-existing hypotheses.

Participants

The participants were 30 Iraqi EFL learners, comprising 10 males and 20 females. They were passing their General English course in different universities of Iraq. Convenience sampling was appropriate for the selection of this group because they were chosen based on their availability to the researcher. It is worth noting that because this is a modeling study, there was no need to learners' homogeneity in terms of their English proficiency. Conversely, in such studies, lack of homogeneity of learners in terms of English proficiency level leads to richness of the developed model. The first language of this group was Arabic. It is important to note that the participants ranged in age from 18 to 35. Additionally, they had different proficiency levels: 5 participants were beginner learners of English, 10 learners were lower-intermediate learners, 10 were intermediate learners, 5 were upper-intermediate learners

This group (n = 30) participated in a semi-structured focus group interview (described below) designed to explore the key elements of identity processing styles, with the goal of developing a model tailored to the Iraqi context. The determination of the sample size was based on the point of data saturation. In other words, the researcher continued conducting interviews until no new information emerged which indicated that the data had reached saturation (Ary et al., 2019). To observe research ethics, the researcher informed the participants of the study's objectives and obtained consent before their participation.

Furthermore, they were assured that the data would be kept confidentially and their responses to the questionnaires and the interviews would not affect their current education state at all.

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1. *Demographic Background of the Participants*

No.	30
Gender	20 Females & 10 Males
Native Language	Arabic
Location	Different universities of Iraq
Academic Year	2023-2024

Instrument

Semi-Structured Interview

A semi-structured interview was conducted with the aim of exploring the participants' major components of identity processing styles. The semi-structured interview was used because it was appropriate for this study objectives. The interviews consisted of some open-ended questions which, following Rahimi and Razmjoo (2021) and the framework of Berzonsky et al. (2011), addressed different aspects of identity, life philosophy, personality type, etc. A few examples of the interview questions are: "How would you describe your personality?", "How do your friends perceive and describe you?", "What kind of person are you in the eyes of your family and friends?", "What traits make you unique?", "How do you approach social issues when addressing personal challenges?", "In what ways do you use personal information to resolve problems?", "What is your big weakness?" and "What do you consider your big strength?"

The questions of the interview were designed around broad identity categories such as personal challenges values, beliefs, life decisions and goals. It is important to mention that the researcher, following the approach outlined by Ary et al. (2019), employed semi-structured interviews to collect the primary data. According to Ary et al. (2019), semi-structured interviews are highly effective for obtaining detailed insights into participants' viewpoints, perceptions, and experiences. To pilot interview questions, a group of five TEFL experts were asked to review the initial draft of questions and give feedback on them. Based on their comments, two questions were modified, and one question was added to the interview.

The language of the interview was English and no time limitation was set for it. The researchers conducted and audio-recorded the interviews. The interviews were carried out in person. To ensure the credibility and dependability of the interview data, the researchers employed low-inference descriptors and conducted member checks, as recommended by Ary et al. (2019).

Data Collection Procedure

At the beginning of this investigation, sampling was done to select the participants, taking research ethics into account. In this process, participants were thoroughly briefed on the study's objectives. Moreover, they were ensured that their personal information would remain confidential and anonymous. Additionally, they were ensured that their current education status would not change under the effect of their cooperation with this study.

Following this, the study's main phase commenced with semi-structured interviews aimed at identifying the key elements of identity processing styles from the perspectives of Iraqi EFL learners. With the participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded for in-depth analysis. These recordings were then transcribed word-for-word to ensure accuracy in the data.

Next, the transcribed version of the interview data was read precisely and repeatedly by the researchers and exposed manually to open, axial and selective coding using the constant comparative method of analysis. It was conducted manually because the researchers were expert at manual thematic analysis. Full details of open, axial and selective coding will be presented in data analysis section.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data qualitatively, the interview data was subjected to manual thematic analysis through the grounded theory approach. In grounded theory analysis, the process generally starts with a thorough examination of the data to identify recurring themes. These themes are then coded using relevant keywords or phrases. Once coded, the data is organized into hierarchical concepts which allows for a deeper understanding of the patterns within the data. Finally, these concepts are categorized by examining the relationships that connect them.

In this study, qualitative thematic analysis was conducted manually, following the processes of open, axial, and selective codings. During the open coding stage, the data was carefully divided into smaller units, such as key sentences, phrases and terms. This allowed for the identification and organization of similar thoughts into categories based on their thematic significance. In this stage, main components including diffuse-avoidant, normative and informational styles were identified. In the axial coding stage, connections, associations and ties between these three components and their sub-components were recognized. In this stage, the following sub-components were identified: personal norm thinking, problem-based thinking, religious thinking, social norm thinking, reason-based thinking, negative thinking and positive thinking.

In the selective coding stage, a core classification was identified from the previously grouped components and sub-components as an "explanatory whole" to build the model (Creswell, 2020). In this stage, the identified components and sub-components were brought together to develop the model of identity processing styles specific to the Iraqi context.

Results

Results of the First Research Question

To answer the first research question about the major components of identity processing styles from Iraqi EFL learners' viewpoints, the transcribed interviews were exposed to thematic analysis which led to the identification of the following themes:

Theme 1: Diffuse-Avoidant Style

The first theme was Diffuse-Avoidant Style which was associated with two codes including Positive Thinking and Negative Thinking. The following quotations serve as evidence to Positive Thinking:

> *In the case of personal problems, I try to act immediately. I think that I am controlling my life. My life programs change positively whenever I talk about them to different people.* (Participant 8)

> *My personality does not change according to situations. I try to deal with problems as soon as I can. I like personal situations that require much thinking.* (Participant 19)

> *When I should make a decision, I try to act as soon as possible. I think about things in advance, not when they happen. I think about my future now.* (Participant 25)

The following quotations support Negative Thinking:

> *In the case of personal problems arise, I delay acting as long as I can. I do not think that I am controlling my life. My life programs change negatively whenever I talk about them to different people.* (Participant 11)

> *My personality changes according to situations. I delay dealing with problems as long as I can.* (Participant 3)

Theme 2: Normative Style

The second theme was Normative Style with three codes including Religious Thinking, Personal Norms Thinking and Social Norms Thinking. The following quotations confirm Religious Thinking:

> *I usually follow the religious principles. I think it is better to adopt a religious approach in life. I think it's better to hold on religious value systems.* (Participant 14)

> *When I make a decision about my future, I automatically follow what is true in religion. I prefer to be in situations in which religious standards are observed.* (Participant 30)

The following quotations act as evidence to Personal Norms Thinking:

> *I tend to follow my personal values. I am not open-minded. I think it's better not to consider different value systems.* (Participant 18)

> *When making a decision, I follow what I myself think is true. I tend to rely on personal norms and standards. I am not sure about my beliefs.* (Participant 5)

The following quotations corroborate Social Norms Thinking:

> *I tend to follow the social values. I like to be open-minded. I think it's better to consider different value systems.* (Participant 22)

> *When making a decision about my future, I consider what others expect from me. I tend to rely on social norms and standards.* (Participant 7)

Theme 3: Informational Style

The third theme was Informational Style which was composed of two codes including Problem-Based Thinking and Reason-Based Thinking. The following quotations show Problem-Based Thinking:

> *When making important decisions, I like to take a prom-solving approach. When facing a life decision, I think about problems associated with it.* (Participant 19)

When making important decisions, I like to regard them as problems that should be solved. When facing a life decision, I try to select the best solution. (Participant 3)

Talking to others helps me solve my personal problems. I handle problems in my life by problem solving. It is important for me to find different solutions for a problem. (Participant 10)

Reason-Based Thinking is confirmed by the following quotations:

When making important decisions, I spend much time thinking about different choices. When facing a life decision, I pay attention to different views before making a choice. (Participant 21)

It is significant for me to gather information from different sources. I like to gather as much information as possible. (Participant 28)

When making a life decision, I try to analyze it deeply. Consulting others helps me take better decisions. (Participant 14)

In sum, the following major components and sub-components were identified for identity processing styles from Iraqi EFL learners' viewpoints: Diffuse-Avoidant Style (sub-components: Positive Thinking, Negative Thinking), Normative Style (sub-components: Religious Thinking, Personal Norms Thinking, Social Norms Thinking), and Informational Style (sub-components: Problem-Based Thinking, Reason-Based Thinking).

Results of the Second Research Question

In order to answer the second research question *What kind of a model can be suggested for identity processing styles in the Iraqi context?* the following model was proposed through merging the extracted components and sub-components (See Figure 1):
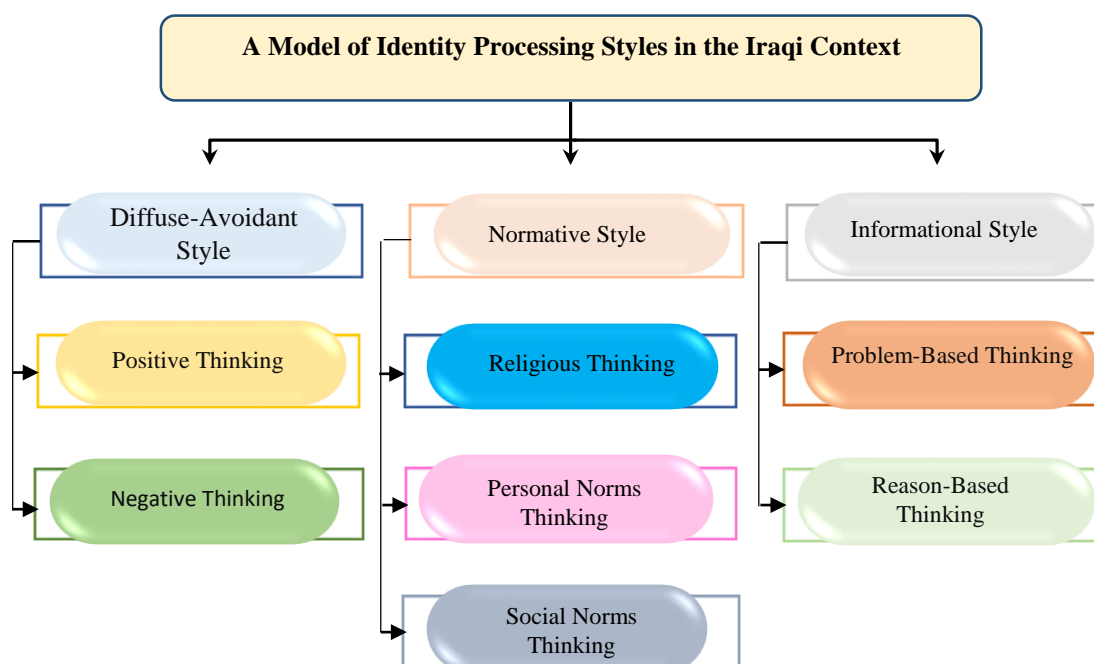

Figure 1. *A Model of Identity Processing Styles in the Iraqi Context*

As illustrated in the Figure 1, the proposed model for identity processing styles in the Iraqi context consisted of three main components including Diffuse-Avoidant Style, Normative Style and Informational Style. The component Diffuse-Avoidant Style consisted of two sub-components including Positive Thinking and Negative Thinking. The sub-components of the component Normative Style were Religious Thinking, Personal Norms Thinking, and Social Norms Thinking. Finally, the component Informational Style was associated with two sub-components including Problem-Based Thinking and Reason-Based Thinking.

This study's findings illuminate the nuanced ways Iraqi EFL learners process their identities, shaped by their unique sociocultural and educational contexts. The identification of Diffuse-Avoidant, Normative, and Informational Styles, with sub-components such as Religious Thinking and Problem-Based Thinking, underscores the interplay between cultural values and language learning. Notably, Religious Thinking within the Normative Style reflects Iraq's collectivist and Islamic cultural framework, where religious values often guide decision-making and identity formation, particularly in EFL settings with limited exposure to English outside the classroom. Conversely, the presence of Positive and Negative Thinking in the Diffuse-Avoidant Style suggests a tension among learners, where some exhibit proactive optimism in addressing challenges, while others avoid engagement, potentially due to linguistic insecurities or societal pressures. The Informational Style's emphasis on Problem-Based and Reason-Based Thinking aligns with learners who actively seek solutions and diverse perspectives, possibly driven by aspirations to integrate into global English-speaking communities. These findings extend Berzonsky's (1988, 2011) framework by incorporating culturally specific sub-components, providing a robust foundation for the proposed model and offering insights into how identity processing influences Iraqi EFL learners' engagement with English.

Discussion

With regard to the first research question *What are the major components of identity processing styles from Iraqi EFL learners' viewpoints?*, the following major components and sub-components were identified for identity processing styles from Iraqi EFL learners' viewpoints: Diffuse-Avoidant Style (sub-components: Positive Thinking, Negative Thinking), Normative Style (sub-components: Religious Thinking, Personal Norms Thinking, Social Norms Thinking), and Informational Style (sub-components: Problem-Based Thinking, Reason-Based Thinking).

Concerning the second research question *What kind of a model can be suggested for identity processing styles in the Iraqi context?* the proposed model for identity processing styles in the Iraqi context consisted of three main components including Diffuse-Avoidant Style, Normative Style and Informational Style. The component Diffuse-Avoidant Style consisted of two sub-components including Positive Thinking and Negative Thinking. The sub-components of the component Normative Style were Religious Thinking, Personal Norms Thinking, and Social Norms Thinking. Finally, the component Informational Style was associated with two sub-components including Problem-Based Thinking and Reason-Based Thinking.

The results are consistent with Rahimi and Razmjoo' s (2021) study wherein an identity processing styles scale was proposed for EFL teachers consisting of informational style,

normative style, and diffuse-avoidant style. However, the two scales were different in terms of their sub-components. For instance, in Rahimi and Razmjoo's (2021) scale, informational style consisted of intuitive thinking and rational/analytical thinking. Szabo et al. (2016) also developed an identity processing styles questionnaire which shared informational and diffuse-avoidant styles with the scale proposed in this study.

Moreover, consistent with the present study, McGuire et al. (2012) and Terzani and Turzo (2020) considered religious ideologies as a significant contributor to identity style. The results also align with the results of Deem and Lucas (2006), and Mathieson (2011) according to which social norms play key roles in shaping identity. Congruent with this study, Schwartz (1994) enumerated personal views as a main factor in identity construction. Additionally, Lay (1986) and Milgram and Naaman (1996) reported positive and negative thinking as two main factors in forming identity.

Identity is a complex and multi-layered construct which is under the effect of several factors. It is not constructed linearly but it is the product of dynamic and intricate interplays among different factors. Religion, social context, personal ideologies and values, and negative and positive attitude of individuals' influence shaping their identity. Moreover, problem-solving ability of individuals and their reliance on reason and rationality affect their identity construction.

The results imply that both personal and social aspects of life contribute to identity construction. Besides, affective and cognitive factors have the potential to influence identity styles. This supports the complexity and intricacy of the notion of identity. In other words, individuals should invest on all aspects of their life for development of their identity styles. Therefore, overemphasis on just one or two life aspects may not lead to full identity development.

This calls for EFL teachers' addressing different aspects of learners' life so that their identity styles can be fully developed. Just paying attention to cognitive aspects of language learning may contribute to partial construction of their identity. This does not imply that learners have no responsibility in this regard. They are required to work on their various personality aspects because it may guarantee their identity development.

Conclusion and Implications

Based on the results of the first research question, it can be concluded that from Iraqi EFL learners' viewpoints, identity processing styles include Diffuse-Avoidant Style, Normative Style, and Informational Style. Additionally, it can be argued that these styles consist of some sub-styles including Positive Thinking, Negative Thinking, Religious Thinking, Personal Norms Thinking, Social Norms Thinking, Problem-Based Thinking, Reason-Based Thinking. Accordingly, identity processing styles constitute a complex network of relations among styles and sub-styles which jointly make a whole concept called identity processing styles.

With a view to the results of the second research question, this conclusion can be put forth that the model for identity processing styles in the Iraqi is the product of three main components including Diffuse-Avoidant Style, Normative Style and Informational Style. Besides, Positive Thinking and Negative Thinking jointly build Diffuse-Avoidant Style. This is while Religious

Thinking, Personal Norms Thinking, and Social Norms Thinking together make Normative Style. Last but not least, Informational Style is the output of Problem-Based Thinking and Reason-Based Thinking.

In accordance with the study's findings, the first implication of the study for Iraqi EFL teachers is that they can benefit from the findings and make attempts to help construction of their students' identity processing styles. The other implication of the findings for Iraqi EFL teachers is that they can use the scale proposed in this study for training and assessment of learners' identity processing styles. Finally, they can use various instructional materials and methods in a way that different identity processing styles and sub-styles of their students are constructed.

The implication of the study for Iraqi EFL learners is that they can take valuable insights from the findings which are helpful for them in constructing their identity processing styles and sub-styles. They become aware that they should learn positive thinking, religious thinking, personal norms thinking, social norms thinking, problem-based thinking, and reason-based thinking and avoid negative thinking for their identity processing styles to be constructed.

Regarding the implication of the findings for Iraqi EFL curriculum planners, they can develop the educational materials in a way that learners learn positive thinking, religious thinking, personal norms thinking, social norms thinking, problem-based thinking, and reason-based thinking and avoid negative thinking. This can be achieved through different means including using identity processing styles-based tasks, activities, and content.

Given that this study suffered from some limitations and were delimited in some aspects, the researcher tends to suggest the following topics for further research: 1. Investigating the interplay among different identity processing styles and sub-styles, 2. Investigating potential differences between male and female Iraqi EFL learners' identity processing styles, 3. Investigating the role of language proficiency in identity processing styles of Iraqi EFL learners, 4. Investigating the prediction power of identity processing styles in predicting Iraqi EFL learners' writing, speaking and listening, etc. 5. Conducting a cross-cultural study wherein identity processing styles developed in different contexts are compared with each other, 6. Replicating the present study with other tools including reflective journals, narratives, etc., and 7. Replicating the present study with random sampling.

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