

Research article

## **Language, Identity, and Interaction in Multilingual Classrooms: A Study of Everyday Educational Practices**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores how language, identity, and interaction are negotiated in everyday practices within multilingual classrooms. Using a qualitative approach, the research focuses on how students and teachers use multiple languages during classroom activities, peer collaboration, and routine communication. The study involved 20 participants, consisting of 15 students and 5 teachers from a multilingual secondary school. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns related to participation, identity construction, and interactional dynamics. The findings reveal four central dimensions of multilingual classroom life. First, flexible language use functions as a resource that supports students' access to learning and encourages active participation. Second, language plays a significant role in shaping identity and belonging, as students draw on different linguistic repertoires to express cultural affiliation and social alignment. Third, peer interaction emerges as an important space for collaborative meaning-making, where students negotiate understanding through shared linguistic resources. Finally, classroom communication also reflects dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, as language competence and recognition influence students' confidence and social positioning. Overall, the study highlights that multilingual classrooms are not only spaces of language learning but also social environments where identity and relationships are continuously constructed through interaction. Understanding how everyday language practices shape participation and belonging can help educators create more inclusive and responsive learning environments that value linguistic diversity as an asset rather than a challenge.

Keywords: multilingual classrooms, language and identity, classroom interaction, translanguaging, student participation

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### **1. Introduction**

Multilingual classrooms are now widely recognized as common features of contemporary educational systems, reflecting increasing linguistic diversity shaped by migration, globalization, and the coexistence of local and global languages. Within these settings, language is understood not only as a medium of instruction but also as a social and cultural resource through which learners construct meaning, participate in interaction, and negotiate their identities. There is broad consensus in sociolinguistic and educational research that multilingual practices play a central role in shaping students' experiences in school, influencing how they communicate, collaborate, and position themselves within classroom communities (García & Wei, 2020; Norton, 2021; May, 2022; Creese & Blackledge, 2023). As a result, multilingual classrooms are increasingly viewed as dynamic social spaces where language use reflects broader processes of identity formation and social engagement.

In everyday classroom practice, students frequently draw on multiple linguistic repertoires to participate in discussions, express ideas, and interact with peers and teachers. Such practices are not random but are part of natural communicative strategies that allow learners to navigate complex academic and social demands. Research has shown that the flexible use of language can support inclusion, strengthen participation, and foster a sense of belonging among students from diverse linguistic backgrounds (Li, 2020; Canagarajah, 2021; Martin-Jones, 2022; Duff, 2024). At the same time, classroom interaction becomes a site where language choices shape relationships, influence confidence, and contribute to the ongoing construction of identity. These patterns indicate that understanding everyday language practices is essential for examining how multilingual learning environments function in real educational contexts.

Despite the growing recognition of multilingual classrooms as dynamic sites of identity construction and social interaction, much of the existing research has tended to focus on language policy, instructional strategies, or learning outcomes rather than the everyday practices through which language, identity, and interaction intersect in routine classroom life. While studies have explored translanguaging and bilingual education from structural and pedagogical perspectives, fewer have examined how students and teachers negotiate meaning, belonging, and participation through daily communicative exchanges. As a result, the subtle ways in which language use shapes social positioning and identity formation within ordinary classroom interaction remain underexplored (Flores & Rosa, 2020; Jaspers & Madsen, 2021; Kubota, 2022; Block, 2023).

Another limitation in current scholarship lies in the tendency to examine multilingualism as a linguistic phenomenon detached from social experience. Many studies emphasize proficiency, language acquisition, or curriculum design, but pay less attention to how students navigate multiple identities through their language choices in peer interaction, group work, and informal classroom dialogue. These micro-level interactions are important because they influence how students perceive themselves and how they are recognized by others within the learning environment (Heller, 2020; Piller, 2021; Busch, 2022; Pennycook, 2024). This gap suggests the need for closer qualitative attention to everyday educational practices in multilingual classrooms. By examining how language is used in natural interaction, it becomes possible to understand how identity is continuously shaped through participation, negotiation, and social engagement in real learning contexts.

Responding to these gaps, this study seeks to explore how language, identity, and interaction are negotiated within the everyday practices of multilingual classrooms. Rather than focusing primarily on policy, curriculum, or language proficiency, this research centers on the routine communicative exchanges that occur during classroom activities, peer collaboration, and teacher-student interaction. The classroom is approached as a social space where language use is closely connected to how students position themselves, form relationships, and construct a sense of

belonging. Through daily interaction, learners continuously draw on their linguistic resources to participate, express ideas, and navigate multiple identities within the educational environment.

This study adopts a qualitative perspective to capture how students and teachers experience multilingual interaction as part of normal classroom life. Particular attention is given to how language choices influence participation, inclusion, and self-expression, as well as how interactional patterns shape identity in subtle and ongoing ways. By examining these processes in natural classroom settings, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how multilingualism operates as a lived practice rather than simply a structural characteristic of the learning environment.

Through this focus on everyday educational practices, the research contributes to a more nuanced view of multilingual classrooms as dynamic sites of social meaning-making. It highlights how identity is continuously constructed through communication, negotiation, and participation in routine learning activities. Guided by this aim, the study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) How do students use multiple languages to negotiate identity in everyday classroom interactions?
- (2) How do interactional practices in multilingual classrooms influence participation and social positioning among students?

## **2. Research Method**

### *2.1 Research Design*

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how language, identity, and interaction are negotiated in everyday practices within multilingual classrooms. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study seeks to understand participants' lived experiences, perspectives, and social interactions in natural educational settings. As Creswell (2018) explains, qualitative research is particularly suitable for exploring how individuals interpret and construct meaning within specific social contexts. In line with this perspective, the classroom was treated as a dynamic social environment where language use and identity formation unfold through routine interaction. Additionally, this study draws on insights from Hirose (2021), who emphasizes the value of qualitative inquiry in examining multilingual communication as a socially situated practice shaped by context and interaction. By focusing on real classroom experiences, this design allows for an in-depth understanding of how students navigate multiple linguistic resources and how these practices influence participation, identity, and everyday communication in multilingual learning environments.

### *2.2 Research Participants*

This study involved 20 participants drawn from a multilingual secondary school where students regularly used more than one language during classroom interaction. The participants consisted of 15 students and 5 teachers who were selected through purposive sampling based on their active engagement in multilingual communication within classroom activities. The selection aimed to capture a range of experiences related to how different languages were used for learning, interaction, and self-expression.

The student participants represented diverse linguistic backgrounds, reflecting the multilingual nature of the school environment. They were enrolled in classes where the use of local languages, the national language, and foreign languages frequently occurred in both formal instruction and peer interaction. The teacher participants came from different subject areas and were chosen because they regularly facilitated classroom discussions involving students from varied

language backgrounds. This diversity allowed the study to explore how everyday interaction shapes identity, participation, and communication in multilingual learning settings.

**Table 1.** Demographic Information of Participants

<b>Category</b>	<b>Group</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Details</b>
Total Participants	Students	15	Multilingual learners
	Teachers	5	Subject teachers
Gender	Male	9	Students (7), Teachers (2)
	Female	11	Students (8), Teachers (3)
Age (Students)	Range 15-17 years	15	Secondary level
Age (Teachers)	Range 30-46 years	5	Varied experience
Linguistic Background	Multilingual	20	Use of local, national, and foreign languages

*2.3 Research Instruments*

To capture the complexity of language use, identity construction, and interaction in multilingual classrooms, this study employed multiple qualitative instruments. The primary instrument was a semi-structured interview guide designed to explore participants’ experiences with language use in everyday classroom activities. Separate interview protocols were developed for students and teachers. Student interviews focused on how they used different languages when interacting with peers and teachers, how language influenced their participation, and how they perceived their identity in multilingual settings. Teacher interviews explored classroom communication patterns, strategies for managing multilingual interaction, and observations of student engagement. In addition to interviews, non-participant classroom observations were conducted to document natural language practices as they occurred during lessons, group work, and informal exchanges. An observation checklist was used to record patterns of language choice, interactional dynamics, and participation. Field notes were also taken to capture contextual details, spontaneous language switching, and social interactions that reflected identity negotiation in everyday classroom life.

*2.4 Research Procedures*

The research was conducted through several systematic stages to ensure comprehensive and ethical data collection. First, formal permission was obtained from the school administration to observe selected classes where multilingual interaction frequently occurred. After approval was granted, the researcher introduced the study to potential participants and explained its purpose. Students and teachers who agreed to participate provided informed consent prior to the data collection process.

Data collection took place over several weeks. The process began with classroom observations to gain an initial understanding of how multiple languages were used in everyday interaction during lessons, group discussions, and peer collaboration. These observations helped identify communication patterns and select participants for deeper exploration. Following this stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with both students and teachers. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and later transcribed for analysis. Throughout the process, field notes were maintained to document interactional contexts, language use, and classroom dynamics that supported interpretation.

### 2.5 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach to identify recurring patterns related to language use, identity construction, and interaction in multilingual classroom practices. This process followed the interactive analytical framework proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which involves three interconnected stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. First, all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and observation notes were organized to build familiarity with the dataset. The researcher then conducted initial coding by identifying meaningful segments related to language choice, participation, identity expression, and interactional behavior. Next, similar codes were grouped into broader categories to capture shared experiences across participants. These categories were then refined into key themes that reflected how multilingual practices shaped everyday classroom interaction and identity negotiation. Data displays, such as thematic summaries and grouped excerpts, were used to support interpretation. To enhance credibility, insights from interviews were continuously compared with observation findings to ensure consistency and depth in the analysis.

## 3. Findings

The analysis revealed four interrelated themes that illustrate how language, identity, and interaction are negotiated in everyday practices within multilingual classrooms: (1) flexible language use as a strategy for participation, (2) language as a marker of identity and belonging, (3) peer interaction as a space for negotiating meaning across languages, and (4) classroom communication as a site of inclusion and exclusion.

### 3.1 Flexible Language Use as a Strategy for Participation

One of the most prominent patterns observed was the strategic use of multiple languages by students to support participation in classroom activities. Rather than relying on a single language, students moved fluidly between languages to clarify ideas, ask questions, and respond to teachers. This flexible use of linguistic resources allowed them to stay engaged, especially when they encountered difficulties expressing complex thoughts in one language alone. Teachers also recognized that students' ability to switch languages helped sustain communication and supported learning.

One student explained how using more than one language helped them stay involved in discussions:

*"Sometimes when I cannot explain my idea clearly in one language, I try to use another language to make it easier. It helps me keep participating in class because I don't feel stuck. I feel more confident when I can express my thoughts in a way that makes sense to me."* (S4, Female, 16 years old)

Another participant described language switching as a natural learning strategy:

*"During group work, we often mix languages to understand the topic better. If someone doesn't understand, we explain it again using another language. It makes communication smoother and helps everyone stay involved in the discussion."* (S11, Male, 17 years old)

A similar perspective was shared by another student who emphasized the role of language flexibility in comprehension:

*"When the lesson becomes difficult, I sometimes use my first language to understand the meaning before I respond in another language. This helps me follow the lesson and not feel left behind."* (S2, Female, 15 years old)

A teacher also observed how multilingual practices supported engagement:

*"I notice that students participate more actively when they are allowed to use the languages they are comfortable with. They become more willing to ask questions and share ideas when they are not limited to only one language."* (T3, Male, 38 years old)

These accounts indicate that flexible language use functions as an important participation strategy, enabling students to remain engaged and confident in multilingual classroom interaction.

### **3.2 Language as a Marker of Identity and Belonging**

Another important theme emerging from the data is how language functions as a marker through which students express identity and negotiate a sense of belonging within the classroom. Students often associated certain languages with particular aspects of who they are, such as cultural background, family environment, or peer group affiliation. The choice of language in interaction was not only a matter of communication but also a way of positioning themselves socially. In everyday classroom life, students sometimes shifted between languages depending on whom they were speaking with, reflecting how identity is continuously shaped through interaction.

One student described how language use helped them feel connected to their background:

*"When I use my local language with friends, I feel more like myself. It reminds me of where I come from and makes me feel comfortable. Even in class, sometimes we use it quietly to explain things to each other because it feels natural."* (S7, Female, 16 years old)

Another participant explained how language choice was linked to social relationships:

*"I notice that I speak differently depending on who I am talking to. With some friends, I use one language, and with others I use another. It feels like language shows which group I belong to."* (S12, Male, 17 years old)

A similar reflection was expressed by another student who connected language with confidence and self-expression:

*"I feel more confident when I can use a language that represents who I am. Sometimes when I have to use only one language, I feel like I cannot express my full personality." (S1, Female, 15 years old)*

A teacher also observed how language reflected identity in the classroom:

*"Students often bring their cultural identity into class through the way they speak. The languages they use show their background, and I can see that it shapes how they interact with others." (T1, Female, 42 years old)*

These responses suggest that language functions not only as a communication tool but also as a meaningful symbol of identity and belonging within multilingual classroom environments.

### **3.3 Peer Interaction as a Space for Negotiating Meaning Across Languages**

A further theme highlights how peer interaction becomes a key space where students negotiate meaning through the use of multiple languages. During group work, informal discussion, and collaborative tasks, students frequently relied on each other to clarify ideas, translate explanations, and co-construct understanding. These interactional moments showed that multilingual communication was not simply an individual strategy but a shared social practice that supported collective learning. Students often used familiar languages with peers to explain difficult concepts before re-engaging with the formal language of instruction.

One student described how collaboration helped them understand lesson content more clearly:

*"When I don't fully understand something, I ask my friend to explain it using a language we both feel comfortable with. After that, I can follow the lesson better. It feels easier to learn when we help each other this way." (S5, Male, 16 years old)*

Another participant reflected on how language flexibility supported group learning:

*"In group discussions, we sometimes mix languages to make sure everyone understands. If one person doesn't get the explanation, someone else will explain it again in another language. It helps us stay connected and work together." (S14, Female, 17 years old)*

A similar experience was shared by another student who emphasized the social nature of meaning-making:

*"Talking with friends in different languages helps me understand the topic faster. We explain things in simple ways, and then I feel more ready to answer when the teacher asks questions." (S9, Male, 15 years old)*

A teacher also noted the importance of peer interaction in multilingual settings:

*"I often see students supporting each other by translating or rephrasing explanations. This kind of interaction helps them understand the lesson and builds cooperation among them." (T4, Female, 36 years old)*

These accounts indicate that peer interaction plays a central role in negotiating meaning across languages, allowing students to collaboratively construct understanding and maintain active engagement in multilingual learning environments.

### 3.4 Classroom Communication as a Site of Inclusion and Exclusion

The fourth theme reveals that classroom communication practices can function as both inclusive and exclusionary spaces depending on how language is used and recognized. While multilingual interaction often supports participation, there were moments when students felt left out if they could not fully understand the dominant language used during instruction or discussion. These experiences shaped how comfortable students felt in contributing to the learning process. For some, the ability to use multiple languages created a sense of inclusion, while for others, language barriers occasionally led to hesitation, silence, or reduced participation.

One student described feeling included when their linguistic resources were acknowledged:

*"When the teacher allows us to explain things using different languages, I feel more confident to join the discussion. I don't feel worried about making mistakes because I can still express my ideas in a way that I understand."* (S6, Female, 16 years old)

Another participant shared an experience of exclusion when struggling to follow a conversation:

*"Sometimes when the discussion moves too fast in one language, I feel left behind. I understand a little, but not everything, so I prefer to stay quiet because I'm afraid of giving the wrong answer."* (S10, Male, 17 years old)

A similar concern was expressed by another student who felt language influenced participation:

*"There are times when I want to speak, but I'm not sure if I can explain my idea properly. When I don't feel confident with the language, I just listen instead of joining."* (S3, Female, 15 years old)

A teacher also recognized the dual role of language in shaping participation:

*"Language can bring students together, but it can also create distance if some students cannot follow the conversation. I try to create a space where everyone feels included, but it is not always easy."* (T2, Male, 40 years old)

These responses indicate that classroom communication in multilingual settings is a complex social process. While language diversity can support inclusion and participation, it can also create moments of exclusion, highlighting the importance of interactional sensitivity in multilingual educational environments.

## 4. Discussion

The findings indicate that flexible language use plays a crucial role in supporting students' participation in multilingual classrooms. Rather than functioning as a barrier, the presence of multiple languages often becomes a resource that allows students to access content, clarify understanding, and remain engaged in learning activities. The ability to move between languages enables students to express ideas more confidently, negotiate meaning, and maintain involvement in classroom interaction. This suggests that multilingual practices are not merely communicative

adaptations but active strategies that help students navigate academic demands and sustain participation.

This perspective aligns with sociolinguistic research that frames multilingualism as a form of communicative competence rather than a deficiency. Scholars have emphasized that students' use of multiple linguistic repertoires enhances access to learning by allowing them to process information through familiar linguistic resources (Hornberger, 2020; Cenoz & Gorter, 2021). From this viewpoint, multilingual practices support participation by reducing anxiety and enabling learners to remain engaged even when they encounter linguistic challenges. Similarly, translanguaging research highlights that the flexible movement across languages allows students to draw on their full linguistic knowledge to construct understanding and maintain interaction (Otheguy et al., 2020).

Beyond comprehension, language flexibility also shapes participation as a social process. Research shows that when students are allowed to use multiple languages, they are more likely to ask questions, collaborate, and contribute to discussion (Lin, 2022). García (2021) further argues that recognizing students' linguistic resources can democratize classroom communication by creating more inclusive spaces for interaction. More recent studies suggest that multilingual participation supports agency by enabling students to position themselves as active contributors rather than passive listeners (Tai & Wei, 2023). In this sense, multilingual practice functions as a key mechanism that supports access, engagement, and communicative inclusion in everyday educational settings.

The findings suggest that language in multilingual classrooms operates not only as a medium of communication but also as a central resource through which students express identity and negotiate belonging. The choice of language during interaction often reflects how students position themselves socially, culturally, and emotionally within the classroom. By shifting between languages depending on context, interlocutors, and purposes, students actively construct and project different aspects of who they are. This indicates that language practices are deeply intertwined with identity formation and social alignment in everyday educational settings.

This interpretation resonates with a large body of sociolinguistic research that conceptualizes identity as fluid, relational, and continuously shaped through interaction. Bucholtz and Hall (2020) argue that identity is not a fixed attribute but emerges through communicative practices, where language choices signal affiliation, distinction, and belonging. Similarly, De Fina (2021) emphasizes that linguistic behavior plays a key role in how individuals construct social selves within institutional contexts. In multilingual environments, this process becomes even more visible, as students draw on multiple linguistic resources to navigate different social roles and relationships.

Language is also closely linked to emotional attachment and cultural recognition. Research suggests that using familiar languages can reinforce feelings of comfort, legitimacy, and social inclusion (Pavlenko, 2021). At the same time, multilingual interaction allows students to negotiate multiple identities simultaneously, balancing local, national, and global affiliations (Blackledge & Creese, 2020). More recent work highlights that identity in multilingual classrooms is often shaped through everyday interactional positioning, where students align themselves with certain peer groups through shared linguistic practices (Zhu, 2022). In this sense, language becomes a symbolic resource that shapes belonging, recognition, and social connection in the classroom.

The findings highlight that peer interaction plays a central role in shaping how meaning is negotiated in multilingual classrooms. Rather than relying solely on teacher-led instruction, students frequently support each other by explaining concepts, translating ideas, and reformulating explanations across languages. This process suggests that learning in multilingual environments is inherently collaborative, with understanding emerging through social interaction rather than

individual processing alone. The presence of multiple linguistic resources allows students to co-construct knowledge, making learning more accessible and socially grounded.

This perspective aligns with sociocultural theories that emphasize the role of interaction in learning. Vygotskian-informed research has long argued that knowledge is constructed through dialogue and shared activity, and multilingual classrooms provide particularly rich spaces for such collaborative engagement. Swain (2020) highlights that collaborative dialogue allows learners to test ideas, refine understanding, and build meaning through interaction. Similarly, Mercer and Littleton (2021) emphasize that peer talk supports cognitive development by creating opportunities for explanation, negotiation, and reflection.

In multilingual settings, this collaborative meaning-making is often mediated through flexible language use. Studies show that when students draw on shared linguistic resources, they can scaffold each other's understanding more effectively, especially when dealing with complex concepts (Gibbons, 2021). García and Kleifgen (2020) further argue that multilingual peer interaction enables students to mobilize their full communicative repertoires to support learning. More recent research suggests that such interaction strengthens social bonds and encourages cooperative learning by allowing students to participate in ways that feel natural and meaningful (Sato & Ballinger, 2022). In this sense, peer interaction in multilingual classrooms becomes a key mechanism through which understanding is co-constructed and sustained.

The findings reveal that while multilingual practices often support participation and collaboration, classroom communication can also produce subtle dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. Students who are more proficient in the dominant language of instruction tend to participate more actively, while those who struggle may withdraw from interaction. This suggests that language is not a neutral tool but a social resource that shapes access, visibility, and positioning within the classroom. In multilingual environments, the ability to speak certain languages fluently can influence who is heard, who participates, and who feels confident to engage.

This interpretation is closely aligned with critical sociolinguistic perspectives that view language as intertwined with power and social hierarchy. Bourdieu (2020) argues that linguistic competence functions as a form of symbolic capital that can determine one's position within social spaces, including educational institutions. Similarly, Heller and McElhinny (2021) emphasize that language practices can reproduce or challenge existing power structures, depending on how they are recognized and valued in institutional contexts. When one language is prioritized over others, it can unintentionally marginalize students whose linguistic backgrounds differ from the dominant norm. Research in multilingual education further suggests that inclusion depends not only on language ability but also on how classroom practices acknowledge diverse linguistic identities. Cummins (2021) highlights that validating students' linguistic resources can create more equitable learning environments, while ignoring them may reinforce feelings of exclusion. García and Flores (2022) also note that inclusive multilingual pedagogies can help reduce linguistic hierarchies by recognizing the legitimacy of all languages in the classroom. More recent studies indicate that interactional sensitivity from teachers and peers plays a key role in ensuring that linguistic diversity becomes a source of inclusion rather than division (Piller & Takahashi, 2023). In this sense, multilingual classrooms become spaces where language both enables participation and reflects broader power relations.

## 5. Conclusion

This study set out to explore how language, identity, and interaction are negotiated within the everyday practices of multilingual classrooms. The findings demonstrate that multilingual

communication is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a complex social process that shapes participation, identity construction, collaboration, and inclusion in educational settings. Through daily interaction, students draw on multiple linguistic resources to access learning, express ideas, and position themselves within the classroom community. The discussion highlights several important insights. First, flexible language use functions as a key resource that supports access and participation, allowing students to remain engaged even when navigating linguistic challenges. Second, language plays a significant role in shaping identity and belonging, as students use different linguistic repertoires to express who they are and to align themselves socially. Third, peer interaction emerges as a central space for collaborative meaning-making, where students support one another by negotiating understanding across languages. Finally, the study reveals that language can also shape dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, as differences in linguistic competence and recognition influence confidence, participation, and social positioning. Taken together, these findings suggest that multilingual classrooms should be understood as dynamic social environments where communication practices are closely linked to identity formation and educational experience. Recognizing and valuing students' linguistic resources can contribute to more inclusive and participatory learning spaces. By paying attention to everyday interactional practices, educators can better support meaningful engagement and ensure that linguistic diversity becomes a source of strength rather than a barrier in multilingual education.

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