

# Exploration of Identity and Self-Cultural Development of Multilingual Learners from an Intercultural Perspective

**Ruixue Huang**

Chengdu Open University, Chengdu, China  
785598223@qq.com

**Abstract:** While the modes of bilingual teaching are prevalent because of the global market value of multilingualism, many parents eager to send their children into the International/global schools. However, there is ample evidence to suggest the relationship between students' language and identity, concluding that bilingual students' development on identity and cultural self is highly influenced by their home culture and lived experience.

**Keywords:** Identity; multilingual education; self-culture development

## 1. Introduction

In exploring the relationship between foreign language learning and identity, a study focusing on English learners' use of English names in school is thought-provoking. This research not only uncovers this emerging international educational phenomenon but also emphasizes the need to view bilingual education from a micro perspective of the relationship between language, culture, and identity<sup>[1]</sup>. From a sociocultural perspective, a question worthy of in-depth exploration is whether students' self-identity shifts when these two names are used interchangeably. Besides names, changes in curriculum demands also lead to changes in the language of instruction, raising the question of whether this contributes to the reshaping of students' self-awareness in a multilingual and multicultural educational environment. Multilingual acquisition is crucial in the context of globalization, and bilingual teaching models are quite prevalent domestically. When parents are enthusiastic about enrolling their children in private international/global schools, how do young bilingual students perceive the relationship between multilingual acquisition and identity, or the development of their own cultural identity? Meanwhile, in such diverse and complex teaching environments, educators should leverage students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds to help them enrich the meaning and value of their self-identity from a sociocultural perspective.

## 2. Theoretical Perspectives and Literature Review

When dive into the field of identity, it's often an abstract, broad, and ambiguous term because there's actually no fixed agreement on how to define and construct it. However, Esteban-Guitart, M. & Moll, L.C. (2015) introduced "funds of identity" by following "funds of knowledge approach based on a Vygotskian point of view"<sup>[2]</sup>. Vygotsky (1998) indicated the term "perezhivanie" as lived experience, which in Esteban-Guitart, M. & Moll, L.C. (2015)' words, is "the result of any transaction between people and the world, emphasizing the subjective significance of the situation on the person."<sup>[2]</sup><sup>[3]</sup>. In this way, identity is a lived experience of self, it's a personal development of self-understanding and self-defining in a given environmental context. And people learn from sociocultural practices and activities to fulfill themselves in the social and cultural communities. In addition, Norton (2010) states that people's speech can't be understood without thinking about the larger social relationships<sup>[4]</sup>. The construct of investment is also a significant part of understanding the learners' desire and commitment for learning a language and their ever-changing identity. In earlier years, Norton (2006) also writes to decode identity of second language learners from the sociocultural scope, "the identity of the second language learner is not a personality variable but a socially and historically constructed relationship to both institutional and community practices"<sup>[5]</sup>. Norton displays different perspectives of understanding the identity of second language learning, which provides me with a full scope of looking at this theory from diverse aspects, including identity categories, communities and literacy. Vygotsky, Wenger, Esteban-Guitart & Moll and

Norton discovered identity from a sociocultural way valued by the theory of funds of knowledge. They discussed methods of detecting the funds of identity with students, which is also a good resource of constructing research since languages and funds of knowledge are repositories when people define their identities.

### 3. Studies in a broader context

From earlier studies on in what ways to understand ELL children's construction of identity and cultural self, narratives and discourses based on sociocultural perspectives are often main methods used in the classroom. Martínez-Roldán (2003) and Hawkins (2004) illustrated two examples on how sociocultural perspectives can help educators to better serve ELLs in their classroom. Martínez-Roldán conducted a qualitative case study of a 7-year-old Mexican girl participating in small group literature discussions in a second-grade bilingual classroom. The case study is part of a larger study examining children's responses to literature. The student's use of Spanish and narratives enabled her participation in the literature discussions. Her ethnic and academy identities came together to support her participation and interpretation of texts. And Hawkins identifies some of the key theoretical concepts of how sociocultural perspective can help with ELL's education. It outlines research agenda and illustrates through broader examples to show teachers/researchers how to conduct this study in the classroom. During a yearlong collaborative project conducted in a mainstream Kindergarten classroom, the author started up a qualitative case study of one focal learner, Shoua and a teacher research with Lynn. Through the methods of narratives and critical discourse analysis, both Martínez-Roldán and Hawkins therefore illustrated the sociocultural ways in which narratives and discourses mediate students' constructions of academic and cultural identities<sup>[6][7]</sup>. As Hawkins highlights, "If our goal is to outline a research agenda that begins to account for classroom interaction, we must include a close examination of identity work in social interaction, and ways in which positioning is negotiated"<sup>[7]</sup>.

Kanno & Norton (2003) also addressed the importance of extending this ideology to a more diverse dimension. By showing a few different authors' working experiences in different educational communities across the world, "we can examine the interaction between national ideologies and individual learners' identities on the one hand, and the influence of globalization and transnationalism on language learning and identity construction on the other"<sup>[8]</sup>. Researchers at this time call for teachers to shift the task of teaching to provide social engagement, communication and practices of students' home and culture: What is the research in service of? How is it useful? And for whom? Learners and teachers are encouraged to imagine this world as different from current prevailing norms.

As previous studies urged researchers to move attention from the school to a broader field of experience including the student's home and culture, Fielding & Harbon (2013) started decoding this field by studying on how young students think about their own bilingual and bicultural experiences. Conducting their study in a bilingual French-English program at the government (public) primary school in Sydney, Australia and researching on the students' perceptions of their bilingual and bicultural identity, conflicting identities, and the value of connections to other cultures, they found out that "students felt more able to acknowledge their relationship to more than one culture than to say that they had skill in more than one language". Bilingual and bicultural are two different notions for the students and it is more difficult for them to be bilingual than be bicultural, so teachers are key to help students developing conviction and determination to become bicultural by connecting with their communities. Researchers need to better understand bilingual students' self-perceptions as well as the role of teachers, parents and communities in "helping students to set and achieve realistic language goals while simultaneously helping learners to develop strong and rewarding ties to the cultures in which the language is used"<sup>[9]</sup>.

Followed historical studies and researches on bilingual students' language and identity, Esteban-Guitart, & Moll (20 rebuilt and refined the concept of funds of knowledge in regard to the relation of identity and self-conceptions, that is, the funds of identity. The study was established on interviews and visual methods such as self-portraits and the relational maps called "significant circle", and these innovative research methods are used on two 19-year-old young women from two different cultural backgrounds. Through analyzing these two women's art-based self-portraits, the authors prove that the funds of identity don't come solely from the individual mind and thinking, but also from people, artifacts, activities and institutions around. It is not about the tool we use to build relation with the world, but the way how we use it because tools "are used to act upon the world (a car mediates our relation to the physical world), and signs, which are used to act upon the mind (language mediates our relation to our own and other minds)"<sup>[2]</sup>. The authors address the importance of using various methods to detect the possibilities of identities since some identities are hidden as invisible due to hegemonic societal values.

As for recent studies, the social and economic role of English has been addressed as a world-wide issue in bilingual education and second language learning. In Saneka & Witt (2019)'s study on barriers and bridges between mother tongue and English learning, due to the market value of English, there is "a bias against those whose home language is not English", and as a result, "the dilemma of the young English language learner remains an issue of equity, access and redress for past injustices" [10]. The authors suggest that while young children develop their own ways of participating in activities at both school and home, parents are encouraged to maintain their children's mother tongue learning.

#### 4. Studies under contexts in China

When discovering the relation of biliteracy and identity in China, this study was inspired by the phenomenon of adopting English names among Chinese learners at school. Edward(2006) raises the issue of personal and cultural identity in the particular phenomena and the relation of compliance and resistance between teachers and students. The author also addresses the teachers' attitudes to students' names by discussing some of the difficulties encountered when East meets West in the classroom. Edward seeks answers to meaningful questions in regard to the English names adopting among Chinese students: How and why Chinese mainland students change (or indeed keep) their names? What this says about them and the construction of their own identities? How this affects their experience in the classroom? If considered from the broader perspective of the national economy, this issue may be complicated. However, in a classroom setting, students commonly adopt English names primarily to make it easier for teachers to remember them. These phenomena make language a central aspect of identity construction, and names, as the core of communication, are part of how our identities are recognized by others and by ourselves. Therefore, when Chinese students change their names, they are also modifying their identities in accordance with the classroom context<sup>[1]</sup>. Identity struggle was also carried out in some researches about personal reconstruction of identities. These studies made a good start on reporting the cultural phenomena to help students and teachers understand what Wenger (1998) has revealed, a dual process of *identification* and *negotiation of meanings*, that is, the relation of the institutional and personal identities, and the tensions between compliance and resistance they may feel about their names and identities might be resolved in their further academic and personal development<sup>[11]</sup>.

Studies on Chinese students' English learning motivations and self-identity changes are also discussed in higher education. Gao, Zhao, Cheng, & Zhou (2007) discovered the relationship between ELLs motivation types and their self-identity changes within a university in China. By introducing types of motivation and self-identity in different categories, the researchers finally proved that motivation types and self-identity changes were correlative, such as, intrinsic interest was correlated with productive and additive changes, individual development with self-confidence change, social responsibility with productive and split changes. According to the result, "the most prominent self-identity change for the Chinese participants occurred in self-confidence" [12]. Later study also indicates such identity change among EFL students from Beijing, that positive *self-confidence change* was the most prominent throughout the 4 years in the university<sup>[13]</sup>. If students obtained English to study abroad or pursue high test scores, or if they were very sensitive to learning outcomes and performance, then they might be lost and confused in the two languages and cultures. And "the developmental course of theory of mind necessarily includes influences of both universal trajectories and specific experiential factors" [14]. In other words, there are actually multiple linguistic and sociocultural factors can shape the mind development. Specific meanings of these changes varied at different stages and for different learners; relations of the changes displayed complexities and ambivalence<sup>[13]</sup>. These studies show deeper consideration and analysis compared to the previous naming study, however, in reality, ELL students' self-identity changes would be influenced by many other factors other than the students' learning motivation, which were not taken into account in this article.

Besides the learning motivation, another factor that cause self-identity changes was taken into consideration in an article about the relation of language to the development of a cultural self. Learning from 125 children from Hongkong, it is proved that "bilingual children have different modes of self-associated with different languages" [15]. That is, language is a powerful medium to activate and reinforce cultural construction, maintenance and expression of self. And the reason why these Hongkong students have such unique construction of identity is because of the two varied education methods they have encountered. While mothers from western culture tends to focus on the children's roles and likings in the lived experiences and encourage them to elaborate on his or her own perspectives, Chinese mothers often pay attention to "shared activities, important others, and social norms", and expect the children to answer specific questions without elaboration. In an analysis on the bilingual students' positioning in their linguistic and cultural autobiographies, Pavlenko (2003) also suggests that "the traditional discourse of

linguistic competence positions students as members of one of two communities, native speakers or non-native speakers/L2 learners”<sup>[16]</sup>. Wang, Shao & Li (2010) conclude that “this group-oriented, pragmatic style helps children develop a sense of belonging and social compliance, and yet downplays the construction of elaborate personal stories and, further, a unique individual identity”<sup>[15]</sup>.

Considering the fact that in China English is a mandatory subject at school, speaking English has already become a silent “have-to” skill in students’ future career development, many parents have high expectation on their children’s language diversity and linguistic development. Bilingual education programs in both public and private schools, “has become an emerging educational phenomenon deserving greater attention from educators, researchers and practitioners in bilingual education”<sup>[17]</sup>. By studying on one of the immersion programs in south China, researchers revealed several emerging characteristics and argues for refines and rebuilt of the immersion model in order to implement local adjustments in educational, social, and cultural contexts. Feng (2009) introduced the notion “acting interculturally” and argued distinctions among different terms such as “biculturalism, multiculturalism, pluralism or interculturalism”, since national identity often has a priority in language education, and the balance between the local and the global, just like between ethnicity and nationalism is essential for everyone to expect<sup>[18]</sup>.

## 5. Conclusions & Implications

Through analyzing recent research, it is not difficult to discover that bilingual programs in both public and private schools have emerged as a novel educational phenomenon, meriting greater attention from bilingual education practitioners, researchers, and scholars. Immersion learning programs have unveiled emerging characteristics of foreign language learning, prompting scholars to advocate for refining and reconstructing immersion models to adapt to local educational, social, and cultural contexts. Similarly, studies on ethnic minority identity construction reveal similar aspirations, where scholars contend that ethnic minorities can develop multilingual and multicultural identities but also express the hope for constructing an appropriate instructional model tailored to local academic conditions and cultural needs.

Regarding language and cultural identity, as early as the beginning of the 21st century, Chinese scholars introduced the concept of “cross-cultural behavior” and made detailed distinctions among terms such as bilingualism, multiculturalism, pluralism, or cross-culturalism, as this is crucial for addressing the multifaceted issues where language education policies and curricula are shaped by governments’ political agendas to maintain national stability. In China, as in many other countries, ethnic identity and cultural identification hold a priority position in education, and striking a balance between the local and global, as well as the ethnic and national, is vital for everyone. Practitioners and learners engaged in research on bilingual competence and bicultural identity can also draw inspiration from this article. Additionally, research on culture and identity serves as an effective avenue for educational pioneers to find connections with their own classrooms and as an accessible resource for understanding students’ self-perception and identity orientation in multilingual and multicultural environments. Only in this way can our education truly be tailored to individual students’ needs, serving those from diverse life backgrounds.

Researchers study bilingualism and bicultural identities or seek for the findings under the global and Chinese contexts would probably learn from the findings of this study, while this study is also a readable resource for bilingual teachers to seek for connections to their own classroom, and more importantly, to know better about young students’ self-perceptions and self-situated identity in the bilingual and bicultural environment in general so that are able to establish a proper approach to serve the bilingual students in varied contexts.

## References

- [1] Edwards, R. (2006). *What's in a Name? Chinese Learners and the Practice of Adopting 'English' Names, Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 19:1, 90-103, DOI: 10.1080/07908310608668756
- [2] Esteban-Guitart, M. & Moll, L.C. (2015). *Funds of identity: A new concepts based on the Funds of Knowledge approach. Culture & Psychology*, 20(1), 31-48.
- [3] Vygotsky, L. S. (1998). *The collected works of L. S. Vygotsky (Vol. 5)*. New York, NY: Plenum.
- [4] Norton, B. (2010). Chapter 13: *Language and identity*. In N. H. Hornberger & S. L. McKay (Eds.), *New perspectives on language and education: Sociolinguistics and language education (349-369)*.
- [5] Norton, B. (2006). *Identity: Second Language. Encyclopedia of Language & Linguistics (2006)*, vol.

5, pp. 502–508

- [6] Martínez-Roldán, C. M. (2003). *Building worlds and identities: A case study of the role of narratives in bilingual literature discussions*. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 37(4), 491-526.
- [7] Hawkins, M. R. (2004). *Researching English language and literacy development in schools*. *Educational Researcher*, 33(3), 14-25.
- [8] Kanno, Y. & Norton, B. (2003). *Imagined Communities and Educational Possibilities: Introduction*. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 2:4, 241-249, DOI: 10.1207/S15327701JLIE0204\_1
- [9] Fielding, R. & Harbon, L. (2013). *Examining Bilingual and Bicultural Identity in Young Students*. *Foreign Language Annals*, Vol. 46, Iss. 4, pp. 527–544.
- [10] Saneka, N.E. & De Witt, M. (2019). *Barriers and bridges between mother tongue and English as a second language in young children*. *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 9(1), a516. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v9i1.516>
- [11] Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [12] Gao, Y., Zhao, Y. Cheng, Y & Zhou, Y. (2007). *Relationship Between English Learning Motivation Types and Self-Identity Changes Among Chinese Students*. *Tesol Quarterly* Vol. 41, No. 1.
- [13] Gao, Y., Jia, Z. & Zhou, Y. (2015). *EFL Learning and Identity Development: A Longitudinal Study in 5 Universities in China*. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 14:3, 137-158, DOI: 10.1080/15348458.2015.1041338
- [14] Liu, D., Wellman, H. M., Tardif, T. & Sabbagh, M. A. (2008). *Theory of Mind Development in Chinese Children: A Meta-Analysis of False-Belief Understanding Across Culture and Languages*. *Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 44, No.2.
- [15] Wang, Q., Shao, Y. & Li, Y. J. (2010). "My Way or Mom's Way?" *The Bilingual and Bicultural Self in Hong Kong Chinese Children and Adolescents*. *Child Development*. Volume 81, Number 2, Pages 555-567
- [16] Pavlenko, A. (2003). "I Never Knew I Was a Bilingual": *Reimagining Teacher Identities in TESOL*. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 2:4, 251-268, DOI: 10.1207/S15327701JLIE0204\_2
- [17] Xiong, T. & Feng, A. (2020). *Localizing immersion education: A case study of an international bilingual education program in south China*, *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 23:9, 1125-1138, DOI: 10.1080/13670050.2018.1435626
- [18] Feng, A. (2009). *Identity, 'acting interculturally' and aims for bilingual education: an example from China*. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 30:4, 283-296, DOI: 10.1080/01434630802658458