

Multilingualism and Language Identity Development in Study Abroad Higher Education Contexts

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Introduction

Increasing global mobility and the internationalization of higher education have led to greater attention on multilingualism and language identity among international students (e.g., Diao, 2016; Levine & Garland, 2015; Trentman, 2013). Study abroad (SA) settings, in particular, present rich linguistic and sociocultural environments in which students navigate unfamiliar language ecologies and renegotiate their identities (Aveni, 2005). Students often engage in complex multilingual practices shaped by English as a lingua franca (ELF), English-medium instruction (EMI), and contact with local languages. These dynamics influence not only their language use but also their evolving linguistic selves and sense of belonging (Benson et al., 2013).

Despite growing scholarly interest, research on multilingual identity in SA contexts remains fragmented, spanning diverse theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches (Fisher et al., 2018). This paper presents findings from a scoping review with thematic synthesis of empirical studies published between 2010 and 2025. It aims to explore the key factors that shape multilingual identity in SA contexts and identify recurring outcomes of such identity development. This synthesis lays the groundwork for a broader theoretical understanding of how students' identities shift through their SA experiences.

Methodology

The review followed a structured search process using three databases: Scopus, Web of Knowledge, and ERIC. The search, conducted in January 2025, targeted studies published between 2010 and 2025 that focused on

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multilingualism and language identity among international students in higher education SA contexts. The screening process was documented with reference to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (hereafter PRISMA) framework (Moher et al., 2009), to transparently present the search and selection procedures for this smaller scale scoping review. 19 empirical articles were selected for thematic synthesis. The majority of studies adopted qualitative or mixed methods, with a strong emphasis on longitudinal interviews, narrative inquiry, and reflective journals. This methodological trend underscores the need to capture identity development as a personal and contextually embedded process.

To analyze the selected studies, I adopted a thematic synthesis approach inspired by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022), which focuses not only on identifying recurring patterns but also on interpreting their broader meanings and implications. The process involved close and iterative reading of each article to become thoroughly familiar with the data. Key findings and recurring concepts were noted and grouped into initial categories. These categories were further refined into sub-themes and then clustered under broader overarching themes, allowing for a layered and coherent understanding of the field. Throughout the process, analytical reflections and comparisons were used to ensure that the emerging themes remained relevant to the research focus and accurately captured the diversity of findings.

Key Findings

Thematic analysis revealed two primary dimensions of multilingual identity development in SA contexts: (1) factors influencing identity negotiation; and (2) identity (re)constructions as outcomes of the SA experience.

Factors Shaping Multilingual Identity

SA multilingual identity is co-constructed through the dynamic interplay between structural factors and individual agency. Structural factors include sociolinguistic contexts, language ideologies, institutional EMI policies, and peer interactions (e.g. Maeder-Qian, 2017, 2018; Trenchs-Parera & Pastena, 2024). For instance, Sung (2024b) highlights how diverse language ideologies shape the student's identity negotiation and language use, including beliefs about the connections between language and ethnicity; the association of English proficiency with local or non-local student status, and the hierarchical valuation of different English varieties.

At the same time, students exercise individual agency in shaping their identities (e.g. Banerjee & Manning, 2024; Jin & O'Regan, 2024; Sung, 2023; Teng &

Bui, 2020). Some adopted new linguistic selves through ELF communication, constructing legitimate user identities despite their L2 speaker status (Sung, 2023). Motivation, investment, and emotional responses to inclusion or exclusion critically influence how they position themselves linguistically (e.g., Hajar & Mhamed, 2024; Mocanu & Llurda, 2024; Teng et al., 2024). For example, Teng and Bui's study (2020) explores how Thai students studying abroad in China navigate the complex linguistic and cultural challenges through the projected selves to agentively redefine their position and seek inclusion within the university community.

Identity Reconstructions as Outcomes

Students' SA experiences often lead to transformations in their linguistic selves, language proficiency, and broader personal growth (Benson et al., 2013; Hajar & Mhamed, 2024; Sung, 2024a). Rather than automatically fostering positive change, the outcomes of SA hinge on students' engagement with new sociocultural environments (Jackson, 2008; Gu et al., 2010). Studies show that students' affiliations with different languages shift in context-dependent ways. For instance, Reynolds et al. (2024) and Maeder-Qian (2018) highlight how students' investment in languages like English or Mandarin often reflects perceived social value and future utility, while cultural heritage and peer dynamics influence which identities are prioritized. These findings underscore the complex and negotiated nature of multilingual identity development, shaped by both internal self-perception and external sociolinguistic positioning.

Discussion and Implications

The reviewed studies demonstrate that multilingual identity development in SA is a dynamic and situated process, shaped by the convergence of macro-level language regimes and micro-level agency. Structural factors can enable or constrain students' multilingual identity development, while students' own motivations and resilience shape their responses. As a preliminary scoping review, these findings are exploratory, and the insights carry tentative implications for policy and pedagogy. Institutions are suggested to move beyond monolingual assumptions and recognize multilingual legitimacy. This could include valuing ELF communication, supporting inclusive EMI practices, and encouraging engagement with local languages. Future research could value longitudinal, multi-site designs to better capture how multilingual identities evolve before, during, and after SA, especially in relation to global English and intercultural adaptation.

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