



International Mobility and the Multilingual Identity: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Study Abroad Experiences

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Abstract

Pakistani students studying in diverse global settings actively shape their multilingual identities in response to varying sociolinguistic contexts. The present research employed an Identity and Investment Theory proposed by Darvin and Norton (2015), utilizing semi-structured interviews with five PhD students studying abroad in China, Italy, the UK, Canada, and Sweden, who were selected by using a purposive sampling technique. The results suggest that the students made deliberate choices in their language use, prioritizing English and their mother tongue, Urdu, due to the emotional, social, and academic benefits associated with each. At the same time, local languages such as Mandarin and Italian were also incorporated for social integration and day-to-day interactions. Linguistic choices are often influenced by broader ideological constructs, including the perceived prestige of certain accents and the desire to achieve native-like fluency. Emotional challenges are significant, which is why students often feel tired and insecure. Overall, the research emphasized the need for educational systems to recognize the emotional and cultural dimensions of language use and to support students from diverse linguistic backgrounds in more impactful and inclusive ways.

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1. Introduction

It has become increasingly common for students to pursue higher education abroad nowadays. They encounter a variety of languages and cultures when they move to different nations, which has a significant impact on the way they use language and how they perceive themselves. Since language is fundamentally social in nature, it cannot exist independently beyond its practical application (Norton & Toohey, 2011) ^[13]. According to Bakhtin, learning a language is an effort to communicate effectively with specific speech communities. Bakhtin emphasized that speakers are limited by these past usages since language use involves the use of an instrument that has previously been employed by others. However, he also recognized that speakers can express their own meanings through language, which can be both traditional and innovative in its use. Additionally, Bakhtin emphasized that an individual's capacity for free speech can be influenced by social factors beyond language (Norton & Toohey, 2011) ^[13]. Students' linguistic identities constantly shift in these situations. Their geography, their friends, and the languages they are expected to speak all influence their speech patterns and how they see themselves as language users. Language identity has evolved from a static concept that changes depending on the situation. The investigation of themes, concepts, and contradictions that have characterized European and American perspectives since the eighteenth century, rather than a historical breakthrough, ultimately marked the end of the twentieth century's growing interest in the relationship between language and identity.

The long-standing discussion about the connection between a language's structure and its speakers experienced a significant change during the Romantic era. Aristotle (384–322 BC) was on one side of this debate, claiming that "what is in the voice symbolizes the passions of the mind/soul, which are the same for all people." *Pathemata*, which refers to "passions," encompasses everything the mind experiences, including its responses to sensory inputs. According to Aristotle, these "passive" mental experiences serve as the basis for all active cognitive processes. He believed these experiences are universal and consistent across all people, regardless of their linguistic or cultural backgrounds (Joseph, 2003) ^[8]. The world of experience is purified into words by language. Engaging with language elevates us beyond the level of experience and engagement in our current situation. Instead of simply being as we are, this enables us to develop a sense of self (Norton, 2010) ^[12].

Managing multiple languages becomes a regular occurrence for students in multilingual nations (Huhtala *et al.*, 2021) ^[5]. This can be challenging, but it can also help them become more proficient and self-assured when speaking other languages. When their speech patterns don't align with what is expected from them in their new environment, some students may feel uncertain or uneasy because they feel pressured to talk like native speakers. Particularly in social situations or schools, this might undermine their self-esteem and cause them to feel excluded (Aichhorn & Puck, 2017) ^[1]. Only a few investigations have focused on how students overcome language barriers and develop their language identities while adjusting to a new environment, despite the fact that many have examined second language acquisition and the advantages of studying overseas (Hashemi, 2011) ^[7]. Students from countries such as the USA, UK, China, or Japan were the primary subjects of the research. The experiences of Pakistani learners, particularly those studying in countries such as China, Turkey, or Italy, where English is not the primary language, have not been thoroughly investigated.

Pakistani students studying in such multilingual environments are the subject of the current study. It examines how individuals manage their linguistic identities, the issues they encounter, and the methods they employ to adjust to speaking different languages on a daily basis. The purpose of this study is to investigate how pupils adapt to social and academic contexts where multiple languages are spoken, using interviews. The goal of the study is to give voice to students whose views are frequently disregarded and to help universities understand how they can better support international students in such diverse language settings. The purpose of this study is to shed light on the actual challenges and advantages faced by Pakistani students studying abroad, as well as how their identity and language usage change during this journey.

1.1. Research Objectives

1. To investigate how Pakistani students maintain their linguistic identity while living and studying in a multilingual environment
2. To explore the strategies Pakistani students, use to improve their linguistic skills and manage communication in multiple languages during their study abroad experience
3. To investigate how living in a multilingual setting influences students' perception of their own language

identity and usage over time

1.2. Research Questions/Hypothesis

1. How do Pakistani students maintain their linguistic identity in a multilingual environment?
2. What strategies do Pakistani students use to enhance their multilingual proficiency while studying abroad?
3. How does exposure to a multilingual environment influence Pakistani students' perceptions of their own linguistic identities and usage?

2. Literature Review

Sung (2022) ^[17] presented a narrative case study of a Brazilian-Chinese student in Hong Kong, offering a sociolinguistic perspective on the experiences of international students in bilingual university environments. In academic and social contexts, language (in)competence intersects with experiences of inclusion, exclusion, empowerment, and marginalization, and has a direct connection to identity construction (Sung, 2022) ^[17]. The student's identity positioning in different context-dependent settings is closely linked to his perceived linguistic (in)competence. The researcher highlighted how language proficiency is connected with feelings of empowerment and marginalization, as well as with larger processes of inclusion and exclusion, rather than being viewed as a neutral ability. Thus, identity is considered as socially negotiated and continuously reconstructed in response to contextual language practices, rather than as fixed or internally derived (Sung, 2022) ^[17].

Similarly, Kinginger (2013) ^[9] offered a thorough analysis of the literature on identity and language acquisition in study abroad settings, highlighting the ways in which identity both shapes and is shaped by language learners' interactions. The literature was divided into two main methodological categories by the researcher: (1) comprehensive, qualitative studies that looked at how learners' identities affect their access to language learning opportunities, and (2) studies that concentrated on the development of pragmatic skills associated with identity. Kinginger (2013) ^[9] used examples from both methodological strands within each category to illustrate how identity influences learners' decisions to adopt or reject particular language practices. Language learners' path is significantly shaped by identity-related elements and their sociolinguistic positioning in host communities where they are studying (Kinger, 2013) ^[9].

The long-term effects of study abroad (SA) experiences have garnered attention in second language acquisition (SLA) research, particularly in relation to their impact on language development, identity formation, and career trajectories. There are concerns regarding the long-term sustainability of these changes, particularly for English-speaking L2 learners moving to English-dominant countries, despite SA being commonly acknowledged as a stimulant for linguistic and intercultural development. Mitchell *et al.* (2020) ^[10] conducted a longitudinal study to fill this gap, selecting 33 graduates of a UK institution who had completed a two-semester SA program three years later. By employing a mixed-methods approach, the researchers gained insight into the participants' linguistic journeys, language use in social and professional contexts, and the evolution of their language identities. The results showed that some students continued to utilize their second languages professionally, while others experienced a reduction due to fewer opportunities. Many

individuals retained a strong bilingual identity, shaped by their SA experience, which in turn influenced their intercultural perspective and professional choices. Post-graduation opportunities and SA programs are enhanced to maintain language use and promote identity development (Mitchell *et al.*, 2020) ^[10].

The increasing number of international students (ISs) in Asian higher education and their experience and development in multilingual competencies within linguistically varied academic environments have begun to be investigated by many scholars nowadays. In his research, Chang (2024) ^[3] investigated the multilingual development of a Vietnamese doctoral student in a Taiwanese university where both English and Chinese are used as academic lingua franca. The researcher, by utilizing Darvin and Norton's (2015) ^[4] identity and investment theory, highlighted the significance of individual historical and social contexts in multilingual development and challenged the widely held belief that ISs formulated a homogeneous community. The findings suggested that multilingual behaviors could be promoted in increasingly globalized academic contexts and contributed to larger conversations regarding the deficiencies of monolingual ideology in higher education.

3. Methodology

3.1. Theoretical Framework

The present study was grounded in Darvin and Norton's (2015) ^[4] Identity and Investment theory, a framework that brings together the ideas of identity, capital, and ideology. Identity is seen as flexible and shaped through ongoing negotiation within multilingual environments. In the context of studying abroad, students retain their social, cultural, and linguistic assets, often referred to as forms of capital, which influence their interactions in a new environment. The prevailing beliefs regarding language and status (ideology) influence their sense of belonging and exclusion, and how they feel and adapt these beliefs. Darvin and Norton (2015) ^[4] challenged the traditional ideas about motivation in second language learning by shedding light on how the availability of cultural resources and the social status of the learners impact their language engagement. Norton (1995) ^[11] introduced the concept of investment, which highlights the relationship between learners and the foreign language, acknowledging that learners are social beings with complex identities (Norton, 2013; Norton & Peirce, 1995) ^[11, 14]. According to this framework, commitment arises not just for motivation, but also because learners invest in their language and understand how it can provide them with material and symbolic resources that enhance the worth of their cultural capital and social influence. Norton (1995) ^[11] argued that language learning has a complex relationship with social bonds, identity conflicts, and power dynamics rather than being solely an individual cognitive activity. Due to their perceived advantages and social mobility, international students in multilingual contexts participate actively in learning a new language rather than passively acquiring new linguistic skills. For example, foreign students may be more motivated to learn a language if they believe it will help them succeed academically, integrate into their community, or advance in their careers. However, students' perceptions of themselves may also be influenced by linguistic hierarchies in their host countries, where dominant languages are seen as having greater prestige. As a result, students may choose to

accept or reject particular linguistic identities. This theory is highly relevant to this study, as it sheds light on how students navigate their multilingual identities, feelings of belonging, and the socioeconomic implications of their language choices while studying abroad.

3.2. Research Design

This research adopted a phenomenological research design to explore the participants' lived experiences and deep insights. The study aimed to demonstrate how language usage, identity negotiation, and intercultural adjustment intersect in unfamiliar academic and social contexts by exploring the lived experiences of students studying abroad. Strong relationships with participants were established through this process, making it possible to gather insightful, meaningful, and rich data.

3.3. Participants

Five participants currently enrolled in PhD programs in China, Canada, Italy, Sweden, and the UK were selected using a purposive sampling technique. These countries were selected to represent a variety of multilingual settings where English is used alongside regional languages as a primary or academic lingua franca. Only five participants were selected because the aim of the study is to get detailed and in-depth stories rather than a large number of responses. Interviews were continued until data saturation was reached, meaning no new ideas emerged. At that point, no further interviews were needed.

Table 1: Overview of the Participants

Participant	Country of Study	Level of study
P1	China	PhD (Eng. Literature)
P2	Canada	PhD (Computer Science)
P3	Italy	PhD (Civil Engineering)
P4	Sweden	PhD (Foreign Languages)
P5	UK	PhD (Eng. Linguistics)

3.4. Measure

A multi-step process was used to create a semi-structured interview guide, employing a data collection method. For example, to develop interview questions aligned with the study's research goals and questions, a thorough literature analysis was conducted on multilingual identity, study abroad experiences, and linguistic strategies in algorithmic systems as the first stage. In this study, algorithmic systems refer to online tools and apps that utilize computer programs or AI to facilitate language learning (Pokrivcakova, 2019). To gain a deeper understanding of students' experiences with feedback, content personalization, performance prediction, and sentiments of inclusion and exclusion, draft and preliminary interview questions were developed. Three qualitative research experts, each with a PhD and at least five years of teaching experience, were given the draft of the interview question after it had been developed. After they provided suggestions and feedback for modifying the interview questions, three students who met the inclusion requirements participated in a pilot study. It was revised again based on student input to make the questions more sensitive and clearer. With follow-up questions to go deeper into meanings, the final interview guide was designed to encourage genuine conversation. Furthermore, recording medium, interview locations, and times were decided.

3.5. Data Collection

The interview guide was created, and then the respondents were contacted using their phone numbers. They gave their permission to be interviewed online using Google Meet and Zoom. Data was gathered over a period of five weeks. The length of each interview was between 40 to 50 minutes. The interviews were only audio recorded with consent and were conducted in English. After recording, the interviews were transcribed and reviewed through multiple rounds of analysis.

3.6. Data Analysis

The data was transcribed within 15 hours after each interview, and NVivo software was used for analysis. To identify patterns and meanings in the participant narratives, a thematic analysis approach grounded in the phenomenological tradition was employed. This investigation followed the six-step approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) [2]. The researcher thoroughly reviewed the transcripts in the first phase, engaging extensively with the data and taking analytical notes to facilitate inductive coding. The identification of frequent

trends related to changes in language identity, emotional attachments to native languages, strategic multilingual practices, and responses to language ideologies in the targeted countries was made possible by this method, which gave participants an opportunity to speak. After that, these initial codes were categorized into more general themes, examined for consistency across transcripts, and matched Darwin and Norton's (2015) [4] Identity and Investment framework, particularly with regard to linguistic capital, cultural belonging, and symbolic significance in social and academic contexts. Themes have been placed within relevant sociolinguistic literature and are well-defined. By maintaining flexibility through group discussion and memo writing, the interpretations gained credibility. The final themes, Multilingual Identity Transformation through International Mobility, Strategic Language Practices, Symbolic Investment, and Navigating Language Ideologies and Power Dynamics, emphasized the social, intellectual, and emotional aspects of students' multilingual journeys. Table 2 provides an overview of the thematic alignment and coding procedure.

Table 2: Thematic Coding Matrix

Themes	Codes	Alignment with research questions	Link to the theoretical framework
Multilingual Identity Transformation through International Mobility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I feel I am becoming multilingual Urdu feels like home I use English for everything now Picked up some mandarin too 	How do Pakistani students maintain their linguistic identity in a multilingual environment?	Identity is dynamic and ever-changing, influenced by context and mobility (Darvin & Norton, 2015) [4]
Strategic Language Practices and Symbolic Investment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most of my energy goes into managing my academic writing Didn't learnt French, it wasn't urgent Speak Italian just enough to manage 	What strategies do Pakistani students use to enhance their multilingual proficiency while studying abroad?	Language investment for symbolic capital (belonging, academic achievement)
Navigating Language Ideologies and Power Dynamics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Need to sound fluent to be taken seriously Still worry if I sound smart enough Write blogs in Urdu 	How does exposure to a multilingual environment influence Pakistani students' perceptions of their own linguistic identities and usage?	Identity negotiation, ideology and power: students as agents challenging prevailing norms

3.7. Research Ethics

Five participants involved in the present study provided a consent form before to their participation. They were guaranteed confidentiality, the voluntary nature of their engagement, and the right to withdraw at any time. Interviews were recorded with the participants' consent, and pseudonyms were used to protect their identities. Data were stored securely, and ethical approval was secured in accordance with university regulations. Cultural sensitivity and reflexivity were sustained throughout the research process.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Multilingual Identity Transformation through International Mobility

Five Pakistani students studying abroad were interviewed, and the results revealed that their language identities have undergone significant changes since moving abroad. Every

participant described how joining a new academic and cultural setting changed the way they used language in daily situations. Before leaving Pakistan, most of them spoke Urdu at home and mostly used English in school settings. However, after their move, English became their primary language for both academic and social contacts. One participant who was studying in China said, "Since arriving in China, English has become my major language of communication... I've also started using basic Mandarin... It's been a necessity more than a choice"(Participant 1, line 5-7). This statement suggests that students often switch languages because their environment necessitates it, rather than doing so willingly. People's language choices are influenced by the opportunities, power, and resource availability in their new contexts (Darvin & Norton, 2015) [4].

The Italian student expressed, "Before I saw myself as bilingual, now I feel I'm becoming multilingual. It gives me confidence, but I am also confused, like, where do I really

belong? " (Participant 3, line 20-21). It illustrated how students' self-perceptions are influenced by the change in language use. Learning new languages makes them feel proud, but it can also cause them to lose touch with their cultural and individual identities. Linguistic identity is flexible and dependent on surroundings, experience, and time (Darvin & Norton, 2015) ^[4].

All participants reported a stronger emotional connection to the language after moving abroad, despite using Urdu less frequently in their daily lives. One student said that he missed Urdu and it made him feel that he was losing touch with Part

of himself. Urdu was the "emotional backup," according to another participant, who added, *"I don't speak Urdu much now, but it's what I fall into when I'm tired or emotional"* (Participant 5, line 35-36). The comments of the participants showed that, despite its rare usage, Urdu continued to play a significant role in their private lives. Individuals who move away from their home country often develop a stronger bond with their mother tongue, particularly when they are unable to hear it spoken around them (Kinger, 2013; Sung, 2022) ^[9, 17].

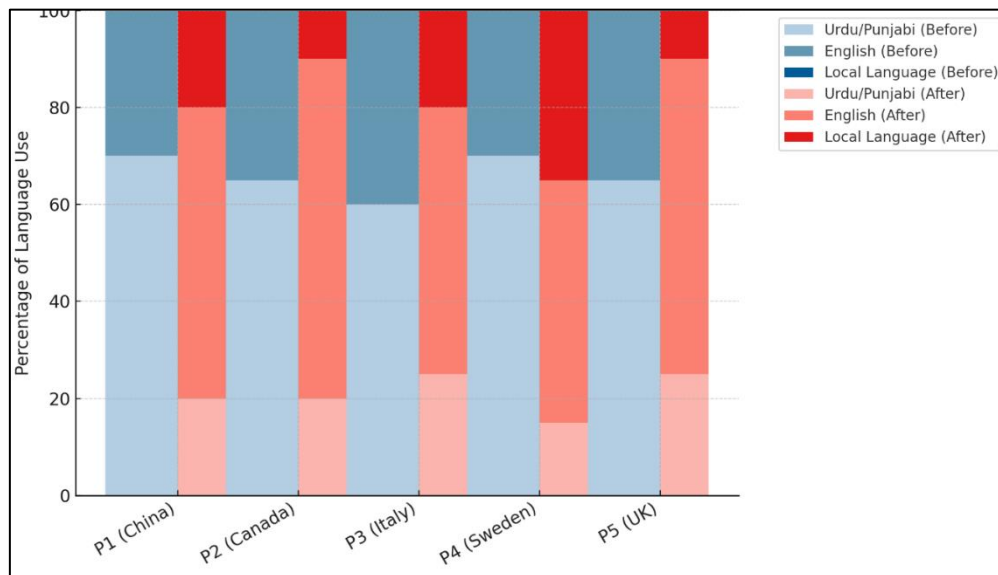


Fig 4.1: Language Usage Before and After Studying Abroad

However, the level of emotional attachment varies among students. The participant from Sweden said, *"I still love Urdu, but Swedish is what gets things done here, it's survival"* (Participant 4, line 40). For this student, speaking Urdu was not as important as communicating and integrating into the community, and his experience illustrated how pragmatic demands frequently influence language use and identity. A person's identity is affected by the demands they face in real life and the choices they make in response (Darvin & Norton, 2015) ^[4].

According to some students, watching Pakistani dramas, listening to Urdu poetry, and music helps them stay connected to their culture. Participant 3 from Italy mentioned that he often played Pakistani dramas in the background while cooking, as they made him feel at home. This illustrated how being away from home can reconnect someone to their language and cultural roots. Despite challenges, students had actively chosen to preserve their languages rather than letting them perish. People maintain their identities and personal value by investing in their languages (Darvin & Norton, 2015) ^[4].

The linguistic identity of students changed according to their living situation, the languages they had to speak, their emotional state, and the decisions they made regarding maintaining a connection to their homeland. The results revealed that all students, regardless of their educational and linguistic settings, had dynamic and complex identities. The majority of the students spoke English more frequently, despite speaking the local languages of their host countries,

as it aligned with their academic success (Participant 4, lines 10-11). For some students, their mother tongues, Urdu and Punjabi, still hold great significance, particularly as a sign of cultural respect and emotional solace (Participants 1 and 5). The students' comments, memories of their homeland, and attempts to use Urdu media all indicated that a multilingual identity is a lived and emotional experience that is influenced by both the inner self and the external environment.

4.2. Strategic Language Practices and Symbolic Investment

Strategic language practices have been demonstrated by all five participants, especially in relation to their acquisition and use of English. Four out of five participants made an intensive effort to enhance their English abilities, particularly in academic writing and speaking. This indicates a distinct connection to Darvin and Norton's (2015) ^[4] investment theory, wherein learners intentionally devote time and resources to languages that grant access to symbolic capital such as academic achievement, identity, and social inclusion. One participant remarked, *"Most of my energy goes into improving my English academic writing... I seek feedback from peers and use online writing tools like Grammarly, etc."* (Participant 1, line 45-46). Participant 5 from the UK added that he joined a writing center on campus and recorded himself to improve his pronunciation. These statements illustrated that students studying abroad utilize available resources to maintain their symbolic and cultural power within academic and social environments.

Strategic choices were also obvious in how learners prioritized their language studies. For instance, one participant chose not to learn French, saying, "*Learning French didn't seem crucial for me personally*" (Participant 5, line 30). This aligns with Chang's (2024) observations that international students typically focus on languages that offer the most immediate benefits in their current academic or

social contexts. On the other hand, participants 1 and 3 tried to learn Mandarin or Italian, not for fluency, but to address everyday practical or relational necessities. One student explained, "*It's more about respect and practicality than fluency*" (Participant 3, line 15). So, Strategic planning was involved in language use, investing just enough to operate effectively in local situations.

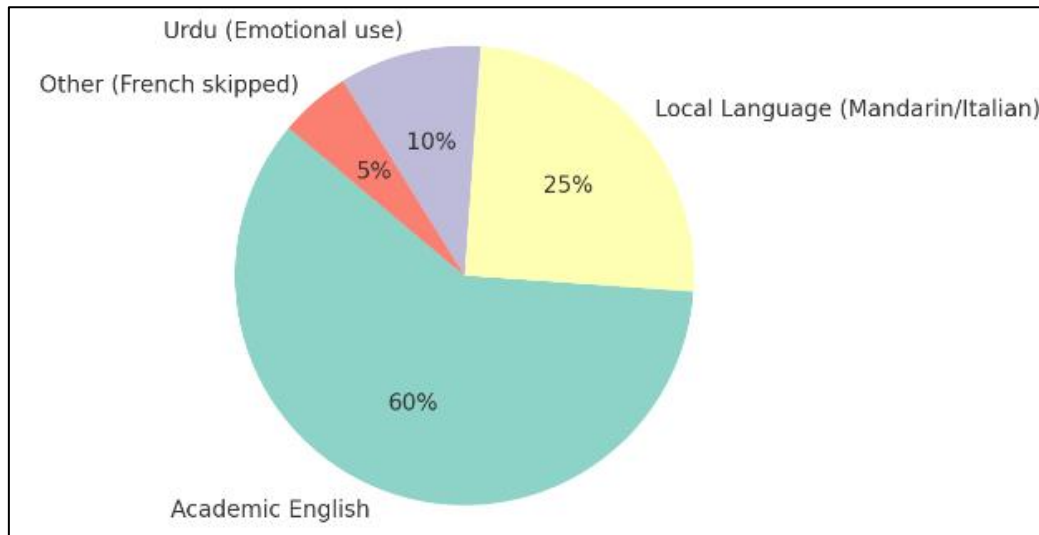


Fig 4.2: Distribution of Strategic Language Investment among Participants

However, these choices came at an emotional cost. Three participants reported feeling mentally fatigued from the constant language switching. One noted, "*It's a constant switch and sometimes it's exhausting*" (Participant 1, line 13). Kinginger (2013)^[9] proposed that learners actively manage their language use in complex environments, where their agency is challenged by both internal and external demands. Learners' perceptions of how others observed them also had an impact on their language learning. Four students expressed a feeling of pressure to speak English like native speakers. One participant said, "*I feel pressure to sound academic in English, which isn't always straightforward*" (Participant 5, line 25), while another said that he was continually asking himself whether he was pronouncing the words or sentences right. These insecurities align with Sung's (2022)^[17] research, which found that foreign students often feel assessed on the basis of their language proficiency, particularly in educational settings. Darwin and Norton's (2015)^[4] discussion of linguistic ideologies, in which some accents or styles are perceived as more acceptable than others, is further reinforced by the desire to adhere to native-like standards. Two participants further described how their social experiences were influenced by language ideologies. One participant studying in Sweden explained, "*Swedes switch to English when they hear my accent; it's polite, but it makes me feel like an outsider.*" Another said, "*People assume you're less educated if you don't speak fluent Italian*" (line 25-26). These expressions illustrated how learners can

become isolated even when others seem flexible, when symbolic capital is denied due to fluency or accent.

4.3. Navigating Language Ideologies and Power Dynamics

The perspectives of the five students studying in various countries illustrated how they dealt with the pressure of speaking English fluently, particularly in academic environments. Most of the students believed that sounding fluent is essential for being taken seriously. One student remarked, "*There's an unspoken expectation that you must sound like a native English speaker to be taken seriously in academic discussions*" (Participant 5, lines 7-8). Participant 3 added that he felt he needed to communicate in a manner that seemed fluent or native-like to meet academic requirements. These remarks reflected how the language norms (or ideologies) of host countries influence their self-perception and standing in academic contexts. Language and power are intricately linked (Darvin & Norton, 2015)^[4]. Three students expressed that they occasionally feel anxious or less assured due to their speaking abilities. One student stated, "*I still worry if I sound intelligent enough at times*" (Participant 5, line 9-10). So, the statements by the students highlighted how accents and speech patterns can impact how they are perceived by others and how they perceive themselves. This notion is also supported by Sung's (2022)^[17] research, which suggests that feeling judged based on language proficiency can lead to a reduction in self-confidence.

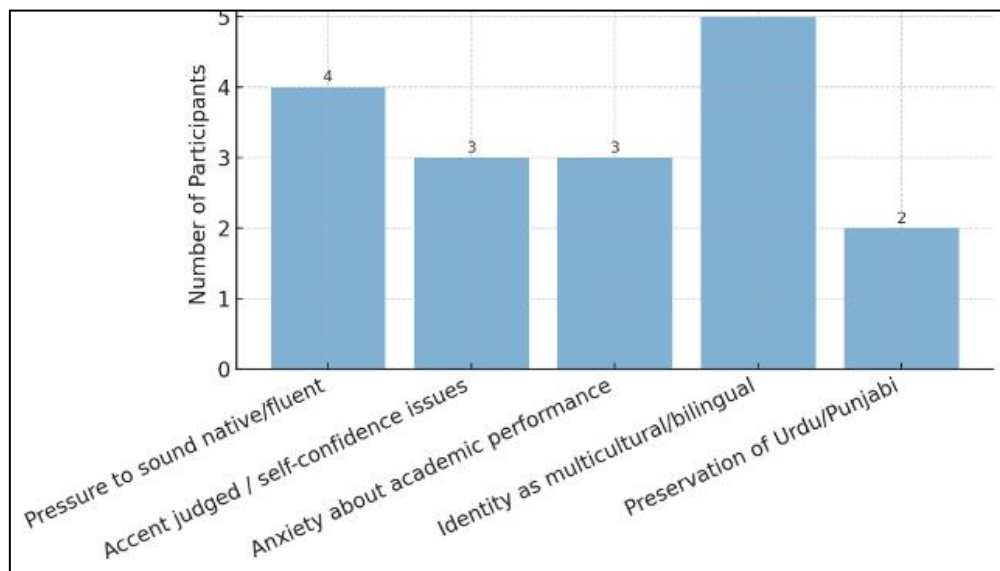


Fig 4.3: Frequency of Themes in Navigating Language Ideologies and Power Dynamics

However, all participants demonstrated that they were not merely following the rules; rather, they challenged them in their own unique ways. The students expressed feeling as though they now belonged to multiple cultures after moving to a new nation. One participant stated that he began to perceive himself as someone who belongs to both places, not just Pakistan. Another student said that he felt he was living in two languages. So, power dynamics and language ideology have a great impact, and they felt like they were developing into bilingual, multicultural people who are no longer merely Pakistani. Some, such as Urdu and Punjabi, worked to preserve their native languages. Some participants studied Urdu literature, and participant 3 shared that he wrote Urdu blogs to stay connected to his mother tongue. These examples demonstrated their self-importance and efforts to preserve their heritage, supporting Norton's (2013) ^[14] idea that language learners have agency over their language practices.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how language serves not only as a communication tool but is also connected to a person's identity, sense of belonging, and opportunities for social interaction. Students actively tried to master language skills that enhance their academic and social success, rather than merely learning new languages (Horwitz, 2020) ^[6]. The students frequently prioritized learning the language that provided the greatest advantages, typically English, for academic purposes, while still connecting their mother tongues, such as Urdu and Punjabi, for emotional support and family interactions (Rodríguez *et al.*, 2014) ^[16]. Language usage is flexible and varies according to the environment and the situation in which a person exists. Some students also experienced anxiety when switching between languages or attempting to speak in a manner that appears more "native," which could challenge their confidence in non-native contexts. Another important aspect is the impact of language-based evaluations. Students often felt mandatory to alter their accent or speaking style to be taken seriously, particularly in scholarly contexts while studying abroad. These linguistic pressures often stem from broader societal perceptions regarding which modes of speaking are considered more appropriate or acceptable. Identities are not static but evolve as they engage within various social and educational

contexts. Through the experiences of Pakistani students studying in different countries, who are frequently overlooked in language learning research, the present study emphasized the necessity for educational systems to acknowledge the emotional and cultural dimensions of language use and to assist students from diverse linguistic backgrounds in more impactful and inclusive ways to survive in a non-native setting.

6. Recommendations

Through the experiences of Pakistani students studying in different countries, who are frequently overlooked in language learning research, the present study emphasised the necessity for educational systems to acknowledge the emotional and cultural dimensions of language use and to assist students from diverse linguistic backgrounds in more impactful and inclusive ways to survive in a non-native setting. Pakistani Universities should provide professional workshops for faculty and students to build awareness about the unique struggles faced by students from non-native backgrounds, ensuring more empathetic and supportive engagement.

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