

Research Paper

The Enigma of Polyglossia: Deconstructing the Putative Influence of Multilingualism on Psychological Adaptability

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ABSTRACT

The current study examines the influence of multilingualism on emotional control and identity fluidity in young people. Contrary to the common belief that moving between many linguistic and cultural contexts increases emotional skills and promotes a more flexible sense of self, our research paints a more nuanced picture. Our findings contradict the notion that multilingualism inherently results in a more adaptive or dynamic identity structure because we found no statistically significant link between it and ethnic identity fluidity using the Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS2) and the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ2). This disparity could be a result of the shortcomings of current indicators, which place too much emphasis on ethnicity and ignore other aspects of one's identity that are influenced by linguistic diversity. In a similar way, the current literature indicates a potential difference between emotional regulation and emotional competence, which emphasizes a gap in the measurement instruments used, even if multilingualism was not strongly correlated with trait emotional regulation. Adding to the confusion is the weak link between ethnic identity and emotional control, which implies that identity strength does not consistently predict improved emotion regulation results in multilingual environments. The study's limitations pertaining to its cross-sectional methodology, use of self-report measures, and sample features are covered. The ramifications demand the use of more culturally sensitive, multidimensional instruments and approaches, such as longitudinal and qualitative methodologies, to gain a deeper understanding of the psychological effects of multilingualism as well as its contextual, developmental, and experiential nuances.

Keywords: *Multilingualism, Identity Fluidity, Emotional Regulation, Ethnic Identity, Emotional Competence, Young Adults, Cultural Diversity, Psycholinguistics, Context-Dependent Identity, Cross-Cultural Psychology*

The growing area of research on multilingualism shows that knowing multiple languages has a significant impact on one's identity and emotional experiences (Pavlenko, 2011). In our interconnected world, it is crucial to comprehend these

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psychological and emotional influences. This dissertation investigates the ways in which multilingualism affects identity and emotional processes, using established psychological and philosophical theories as its foundation.

People who speak more than one language frequently find themselves in different linguistic and cultural settings, which can lead to changes in how they view themselves depending on the language they are using (Dewaele, 2017). This raises important questions about self-consistency and the influence of language on identity. Additionally, emotional responses can differ among languages, with potential for individuals to experience stronger feelings or react in various ways based on the language spoken (Pavlenko, 2005). The goal of this dissertation is to achieve a thorough understanding of these dynamics, supported by both theoretical and empirical evidence.

The identities and emotional expressions of multilingual individuals are also shaped by their social and cultural surroundings. Factors such as how languages are viewed, societal norms regarding emotions, and the linguistic context are all significant (Norton, 2000). For instance, the emotional health and identity development of a multilingual person may vary significantly if they are in a society that celebrates multiple languages versus one that predominantly speaks a single language. Hence, this work will also take into account the broader societal factors that influence identity and emotion among those who speak multiple languages. Experiences like language brokering, where multilingual people (particularly young individuals) facilitate communication for others, often nurture a sense of responsibility, growth, and contribute to identity formation (Weisskirch and García, 2018). Likewise, code-switching signifies linguistic versatility and emotional and cultural expression, underscoring the connection between identity and language (Auer, 1998). This study highlights the distinct psychological and emotional realities of navigating different linguistic environments, moving away from the notion of bilingualism as only two separate monolingual experiences.

Theoretical inquiry through Lacanian psychoanalysis enhances our understanding of these concepts. Lacan's idea of the Symbolic Order, which is the social and linguistic framework that shapes our reality, provides insights into the role of language in identity formation. For multilingual individuals, moving between various Symbolic Orders, each possessing unique rules and values, can foster a greater recognition of identity as something fluid or fragmented. Lacan's notion of the "split subject"—which is perpetually searching for but never quite achieving a cohesive self—aligns closely with the experiences of multilinguals, who may feel both enriched and unsettled by their diversity in language.

Lacan's Mirror Stage, generally associated with early identity development, is also relevant in this context. Each language serves as a unique "mirror" through which individuals gain different perspectives of themselves. The way emotions are expressed, linked to specific languages, adds further complexity to this process. Lacan's triad—the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic—corresponds to the experience of multilingualism. The Real, which cannot be fully expressed, is always mediated by the Symbolic. This mediation, particularly across various languages, becomes increasingly intricate. The Imaginary, associated with identifications and aspirations, can vary for each language and culture, complicating the process of identity development. This study employs these Lacanian ideas to explore how multilingual individuals cultivate, manage, and articulate emotions in different languages and contexts. By oscillating between Symbolic Orders, multilinguals often create

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a fluid, sometimes fragmented self-identity. This dissertation looks at how these experiences influence psychological adjustment and emotional health in various settings.

To explore the fluidity of identity among young adults who speak multiple languages, the Ethnic Identity Scale was selected due to its pertinence. Ethnicity, which often varies in multilingual settings, acts as a fundamental reference point for identity and is closely linked to language, culture, and social relationships. This scale measures how people seek, confirm, and connect with their ethnic groups—activities that reflect the idea of fluid identity (that is, the changing self-view influenced by experiences and surroundings). Although it may not cover every aspect of identity, it effectively evaluates important features of flexible self-identification in this demographic.

Despite finding no significant connection between ethnic identity and overall identity fluidity, the complex nature of multilingual identity requires further exploration of additional influential factors. These factors include the feeling of belonging, cultural connections that go beyond ethnic categories, and the ongoing adjustment of self in different linguistic and cultural contexts. Likewise, the minimal results regarding emotional regulation indicate a need to critically analyze the elements measured, potential limitations related to the assessment tools, and how moderating factors like context, language used, or situational pressures play a role. Furthermore, while a minor connection was noted between ethnic identity and emotional regulation, this relationship might vary among multilingual groups influenced by aspects such as cultural integration, language choices, or societal perceptions. These intricacies emphasize the complex interactions between language, identity, and emotional experiences in multilingual individuals and suggest the necessity for a more nuanced, context-aware investigation.

In conclusion, this dissertation refutes simplistic interpretations of bilingualism and instead offers a detailed, interdisciplinary study of the intersections between language, identity, and emotional experiences in multilingual individuals. It integrates empirical findings with Lacanian theory to foster a deeper comprehension of how language influences self-identity and emotions in an increasingly multilingual society.

A variety of studies emphasize the intricate relationship between speaking multiple languages, personal identity, feelings, and thought processes. Siebenhütter (2023) argues that multilingualism influences how one sees oneself instead of establishing one fixed identity, with language use varying by context. Tannenbaum and Tseng (2015) support this idea, pointing out that multilingualism offers "roots" for Third Culture Kids and affects how emotions are conveyed, particularly among women. Medrano (2018) discovered a slight causal relationship between multilingualism and identification with Europe, influenced by social interactions.

Dewaele (2021) and Koch et al. (2024) investigated how speaking multiple languages impacts emotional understanding and skills. Although Dewaele's findings on trait emotional intelligence were not definitive, Koch et al. identified a positive link between the level of multilingualism and emotional skills, which was affected by cultural diversity. Liu (2022) recognized an "optimal multilingual self" among Chinese students, influenced by their emotional learning encounters. Tenzer and Pudelko (2015) noted that effective leadership can alleviate negative emotions caused by language difficulties in multilingual teams.

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Nortier (2018) demonstrated that language serves as a symbol of social belonging and identity in multilingual urban areas of Europe. Darginavičienė (2023) underlined the evolving nature of multilingualism and cultural identity. Fatima et al. (2024) found differences in emotional expression linked to regional languages in Pakistan, associating these with cultural identity and societal norms. Barnau et al. (2024) observed that multilingual learners recalled emotions more vividly in their first language.

Balla (2023) investigated how code-switching functions as a way for multilingual individuals to cope with feelings of shame, assisting in managing emotions and cultural identity. Zabrodska (2025) gathered research on how language impacts behavior and identity. Bright et al. (2019) established that multilingualism affects brain areas crucial for emotional management and cognitive functioning. Fisher et al. (2020) proposed a framework for how multilingual identities are developed in educational settings, highlighting the importance of active involvement by learners. Together, these findings emphasize the complex, situational relationship between multilingualism, identity, emotion, thought, and social engagement, suggesting the need for ongoing interdisciplinary exploration.

Amjad and Tayyab (2025) pointed out that bilingual individuals actively manage their identities through language, balancing empowerment and exclusion. Scrivner (2024) noted how college students in the US create multilingual relational identities influenced by their home languages and academic experiences. Tang and Zheng (2025) complicated rigid language identities by demonstrating how adolescents from multiple nations develop flexible, situation-based identities. Jansen (2015) looked into how adolescents negotiate their identities in a German-Scandinavian school, impacted by their educational experiences and views on the social significance of multilingualism. Shaikh (2024) uncovered mixed feelings among Bangladeshi students in China about multilingualism's influence on cultural identity, with strong associations between the use of their native language and cultural expression.

Psychoanalytic insights, including those from Stavrakakis (2017) and Soler et al. (2023), explored Lacan's ideas on how language shapes our perception of reality and the complicated essence of identity. Sergeeva-Chernykh (2022) evaluated Brodsky's multilingual essay using psychoanalytic theories, investigating the theme of linguistic diversity and subjectivity, especially in relation to trauma. O'Neill (2020) explored how Irish Gaelic can give insight into an Irish subconscious tied to historical trauma. Alexandrova (2016) reassessed Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, advocating for its ethical and political significance. Milne (2017) looked into a translation workshop involving asylum seekers, theorizing on how to include marginalized multilingual voices. Raj (2023) provided a comprehensive philosophical viewpoint on the influence of language on human identity. Zijun (2022) analyzed the work of Alice Munro through a Lacanian perspective, focusing on the negotiation of identity. Holohan (2017) applied Lacanian psychoanalysis to Freirean critical pedagogy, revealing insights into identity formation within interpersonal relationships.

Ahmed and colleagues (2024) clearly illustrated a significant connection between language utilization and cultural connection in diverse English-speaking communities, emphasizing approaches such as code-switching. Adoui (2023) offered a broad perspective, indicating that language regulations have a substantial effect on identity formation and

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communication in multilingual societies. These findings highlight the essential role that language plays in shaping both personal and collective identities.

In conclusion, the meta-analysis by Xia and Haas (2024) established a correlation between bilingualism and exposure to different cultures with social-cognitive processing. Conversely, Vega-Mendoza and others (2021) did not find evidence supporting the idea that speaking a foreign language enhances logical reasoning deliberation among older adults. Together, these varied studies underline the intricate relationship among multilingualism, the evolution of identity, social views, emotional experiences, and cognitive functions, stressing the continuous necessity for detailed and interdisciplinary research.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Objectives

The central aim of this research was to deconstruct and examine the putative influence of multilingualism on psychological adaptability. Specifically, the study sought to assess:

- Whether multilingual individuals exhibit greater **identity fluidity**, reflecting a more dynamic, situational, and integrative sense of self.
- Whether they demonstrate more advanced **emotional regulation strategies**,
- The relationship between the degree of multilingualism (number of languages spoken fluently) and psychological constructs of adaptability.

Sub-objectives:

- To compare psychological adaptability (identity and emotional regulation) across multilingual population
- To explore whether multilingualism enhances self-reflection, intercultural negotiation, and emotional management as adaptive psychological mechanisms.
- To identify potential patterns between linguistic exposure and emotional/identity complexity.

Hypotheses

- **H1:** Multilingual individuals will score higher on the identity fluidity components (exploration and resolution) than monolingual or bilingual individuals.
- **H2:** There will be a significant positive correlation between the number of languages spoken and cognitive reappraisal abilities.
- **H3:** Multilingualism will be inversely related to expressive suppression (indicating healthier emotional expression strategies).
- **H4:** Identity exploration and resolution will positively predict cognitive reappraisal, with multilingualism acting as a mediating variable.

Locale and Duration

The study was conducted multiple metropolitan cities in India with a linguistically diverse student body, making it an appropriate setting.

Duration

The data collection spanned **four weeks**.

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Research Design and Delineation

This was a **quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional correlational study** using survey methodology.

Participants responded to a structured online questionnaire that included:

- Demographic and linguistic background,
- Standardized psychological scales to assess emotional regulation and identity status.
- No experimental treatment or manipulation was applied; instead, the study explored **naturally occurring variations** in multilingual status and its relation to adaptability variables.

Participants

A total of **120 participants** (N = 120) were recruited using **purposive sampling**. The demographic profile is as follows:

- **Age Range:** 18–30 years
- **Gender Identity:** Inclusive of all identities, with representation across male, female, and non-binary categories
- **Educational Level:** Undergraduate and postgraduate students, working professionals.

Inclusion Criteria:

Proficiency in English (medium of the questionnaires)

Fluency in at least 3 languages; no upper limit

Exclusion Criteria:

Diagnosed psychological or neurological disorders (self-reported)

Incomplete responses or submission rates below 80% completion

(Note: Group sizes were approximately balanced but naturally occurred through self-report.)

Materials

The study utilized the following instruments:

A Ethnic Identity Scale – Revised (EIS)

A 17-item instrument that assesses:

- **Exploration** (search for one's ethnic identity)
- **Resolution** (clarity about one's ethnic identity)
- **Affirmation** (positive feelings about one's ethnic group)
- Items rated on a 5-point Likert scale from *Strongly Disagree (1)* to *Strongly Agree (5)*

B Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ)

10 items divided into two subscales:

- **Cognitive Reappraisal** (6 items): Measures the ability to reframe emotional events
- **Expressive Suppression** (4 items): Measures the tendency to inhibit emotional expression. Items rated on a 7-point scale from *Strongly Disagree (1)* to *Strongly Agree (7)*

C Languages known

A yes or no Question asking whether they are multilingual or not.

All instruments were administered in English. Pilot testing with 15 participants confirmed internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha > 0.70 for each subscale).

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Data Collection Procedure

- Participants received a Google Form link via email and institutional WhatsApp groups.
- The first page included a **consent form**, outlining confidentiality, voluntary participation, and withdrawal rights.
- Participants completed the survey anonymously, estimated to take 12–15 minutes.
- Weekly reminders were sent, and submission was tracked through Google Forms.
- Only complete and valid responses were included in the final dataset.
- Data was exported into **Microsoft Excel** and analyzed using **SPSS**

Scoring Procedure

EIS-2 Scoring:

Exploration: Items 1–6

Resolution: Items 7–12

Affirmation: Items 13–17

Each item scored from 1 to 5; subscale scores computed by averaging relevant items.

ERQ-2 Scoring:

Cognitive Reappraisal: Items 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10

Expressive Suppression: Items 2, 4, 6, 9

Items rated from 1 to 7; subscale scores derived by summing and averaging items.

Reliability was assessed post-hoc using Cronbach's alpha for each scale.

Variables

Variable Type	Variable Name	Operational Definition
Independent	Multilingualism Level	Number of languages spoken fluently
Dependent	Identity Fluidity	Composite of EIS scores
Dependent	Emotional Regulation	Scores from ERQ-2
Control	Demographics	Age, gender, educational background

Treatments, Repetition, and Experimental Units

Since the study is non-interventional, **no formal treatment** was administered. However:

- **Grouping Variable:** Degree of multilingualism acted as a *quasi-independent variable*
- **Experimental Unit:** Each participant represented one independent experimental unit (n = 120)
- **Repetition:** No within-subject repetition; a single response per participant was considered
- **Statistical Repetition:** Bootstrapping and resampling techniques were used to improve inferential stability during regression modelling.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Emotional Regulation and Identity Fluidity in Multilingual and Non-Multilingual Young Adults

	Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-test
Emotional Regulation	Multilingual	69	8.8261	2.03034	-.027
	Non-Multilingual	51	8.8366	2.13580	
Identity Fluidity	Multilingual	69	47.1739	7.41413	.899
	Non-Multilingual	51	45.9804	6.86874	

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H1: Multilingual young adults exhibit higher levels of identity fluidity compared to non-multilingual young adults.

This research proposed that young adults who speak multiple languages have more adaptable identities compared to their peers who do not.

The multilingual group (N=69) achieved an average identity fluidity score (EIS2) of 47.17 (SD=7.41), which was slightly above the average score of 45.98 (SD=6.87) recorded for the non-multilingual group (N=51). This variation was minor, necessitating additional statistical scrutiny.

Levene's Test for Equal Variances (F=0.870, p=0.353) showed that the groups had similar variances, permitting the use of a standard t-test. The t-test for Equality of Means (t=0.899, df=118, p=0.185) indicated that there was no significant statistical difference in identity fluidity between the two groups. The mean difference of 1.19 implies that the observed variation is likely random.

The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference (-1.43 to 3.82) included zero, further emphasizing the absence of a significant difference. Nevertheless, the effect sizes (Cohen's $d = 0.188$, Hedges' $g = 0.234$, Glass's $\delta = 0.868$) were considerable, indicating a possibly meaningful difference in practical terms, even though it lacked statistical significance.

While multilingual young adults showed a slightly elevated level of identity fluidity, this disparity was not statistically significant (p=0.185). Consequently, the findings do not robustly support a clear association between multilingualism and enhanced identity fluidity in this sample. Although the large effect sizes hint at potential real-world relevance, confirming a genuine difference in the population requires statistical significance. Future studies should involve larger and more evenly matched samples and investigate additional factors affecting identity fluidity in multilingual settings.

H2: Multilingual young adults exhibit higher levels of emotional regulation compared to non-multilingual young adults.

This research analyzed emotional regulation (ERQ2) among multilingual (N=69) and non-multilingual (N=51) young adults. The multilingual group showed an average score of 8.83 (SD=2.03) in emotional regulation, whereas the non-multilingual group had an average of 8.84 (SD=2.14). Levene's Test (F=0.527, p=0.469) indicated that the variances were similar. An independent samples t-test (t=-0.027, df=118, p=0.489) showed no statistically significant difference in emotional regulation between the two groups. The mean difference was minimal (-0.01051), and the 95% confidence interval (-0.76956, 0.74853) included zero, suggesting no substantial difference. Even though no statistical significance was found, effect sizes (Cohen's $d = 0.076$, Hedges' $g = 0.089$, Glass's $\delta = 0.136$) were relatively high, indicating possible practical relevance. Nevertheless, without statistical significance, these practical implications cannot be definitively regarded as a real, consistent difference within the wider population.

The existing data does not uphold the idea that multilingual young adults demonstrate superior emotional regulation compared to their non-multilingual counterparts.

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Table 2: Correlation for Cultural Intelligence, Emotional Regulation, Ethnic identity

Pearson Correlation	Cultural Intelligence	Emotional Regulation	Ethnic identity
Cultural Intelligence	1	.515**	.590**
Emotional Regulation	.515**	1	.152
Ethnic identity	.590**	.152	1

Hypothesis 3: There is a significant positive correlation between identity fluidity (measured by Ethnic Identity) and emotional regulation in young adults from multilingual backgrounds.

A Pearson correlation coefficient (r) of .152 suggests a slight positive linear connection between Ethnic Identity and Emotional Regulation. This indicates that individuals with higher scores in ethnic identity tend to have somewhat higher scores in emotional regulation. Nevertheless, this correlation explains only about 2.3% of the differences seen in emotional regulation ($r^2 = .023$).

The p -value of .098 lacks statistical significance, as it exceeds the usual alpha level of .05. This implies that we are unable to dismiss the null hypothesis, which asserts that there is no connection between ethnic identity and emotional regulation in the larger population.

The correlation observed is likely accidental and does not effectively predict emotional regulation among multilingual young adults. Emotional regulation is intricate and shaped by numerous factors beyond identity, including personality traits and coping mechanisms.

Hypothesis 3, which suggests a significant positive relationship between ethnic identity (viewed as a sign of identity fluidity) and emotional regulation, is not corroborated by this data. Future studies should employ more refined assessments of identity fluidity and take into account additional factors that may affect emotional regulation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research explored how being multilingual affects the fluidity of identity and the ability to manage emotions in teenagers. In opposition to what many believe, the first hypothesis, which suggested that multilingual young adults exhibit more flexible identities, did not find statistical support. We argue that the Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS2), which mainly assesses ethnic exploration and commitment, may not be suitable for accurately reflecting the complex and context-sensitive identity fluidity developed through multilingualism, as indicated by Scrivner (2024) as well as Tang and Zheng (2025).

This view corresponds with Siebenhütter's (2023) assertion that the context in which language is used influences self-perception. Although the effect sizes indicate there might be practical differences, more extensive studies involving larger and more diverse groups, along with qualitative methods, are needed. It appears that societal perceptions of multilingualism could play a larger role than a direct, inherent connection to ethnic identity fluidity (Jansen, 2015).

The second hypothesis, which anticipated no significant difference in emotional regulation,

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received support and aligns with Dewaele's (2021) findings regarding the limited impact of multilingualism on emotional intelligence traits. This hints at the stability of basic emotional regulation skills. Nonetheless, this finding contrasts with Koch et al. (2024), who reported that multilinguals displayed improved emotional skills due to cultural diversity. This difference shows that our measurement instrument (ERQ2), which is centered on self-management methods, differs from the wider emotional competence that involves interpersonal and multicultural emotional understanding, as noted by Koch et al. (2024). Hence, while multilingualism might not influence internal emotional management, it could aid in navigating varied emotional environments, an aspect not specifically addressed in this research. Furthermore, Barnau et al. (2024) affirm the reliability of core emotional processing across different languages.

The third hypothesis, which anticipated a weak positive correlation between ethnic identity and emotional regulation, did not yield significant statistical results. This counters the idea that having a strong sense of self universally supports emotional regulation. Balla's (2023) research on code-switching as a way to cope with shame implies that the emotional management of multilingual individuals is a complex and context-dependent process linked to social interaction and cultural identity. Fatima et al. (2024) emphasize the delicate nature of emotional expression, which is shaped by cultural and linguistic contexts. Additionally, Tenzer and Pudelko (2015) suggest that communication challenges in multilingual settings may create emotional issues, potentially clouding any direct positive relationship with overall emotional control.

This study has several limitations, such as depending on self-reported measures (EIS2, ERQ2) that may be biased, a cross-sectional approach that limits causal interpretations, and a sample that might not be representative. Focusing solely on ethnic identity when considering fluidity could also restrict comprehensive understanding of multilingual self-perception. Moreover, the statistical analyses may not have sufficient power due to uneven sample sizes.

Despite these drawbacks, our results highlight the importance of employing multidimensional and context-aware measures of identity fluidity, rather than just relying on individual ethnic identification. Longitudinal and qualitative research is essential for comprehending developmental pathways and personal experiences. Future investigations should differentiate between emotional regulation and emotional competence, explore mediating and moderating factors (such as cultural intelligence, cognitive flexibility, and language use patterns), and target specific multilingual groups (like Third Culture Kids and language minority communities) to provide more nuanced and ecologically valid insights.

The statistical evidence did not indicate any strong positive connections between being multilingual and the flexibility of identity or the management of emotions. This lack of significance, in spite of observable patterns and considerable effect sizes relating to identity fluidity, requires careful consideration and suggests the need for more advanced methods and larger, more representative sample groups. The research underscores the intricate relationship between multilingualism and psychological factors, challenging oversimplified ideas about automatic psychological advantages and stressing the importance of thorough and continuous research into the psychological experiences of those who are multilingual.

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Conflict of Interest

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