

Title: Beyond Traditional Boundaries: Code-Switching as Identity Negotiation in Multilingual Higher Education (Pakistan)

Abstract

In increasingly globalized university classrooms, multilingual students constantly negotiate their identities, balancing academic expectations with personal and cultural linguistic practices. While code-switching has traditionally been seen as a pragmatic strategy to fill lexical gaps, this study shows that it operates as a powerful tool for identity construction and social navigation within higher education.

Focusing on multilingual classrooms in Pakistan, this research explores how students deliberately alternate between English and Urdu to assert agency, signal group membership, and maintain academic credibility. Using classroom interactions and semi-structured interviews, the study highlights the nuanced ways in which language mediates social roles and facilitates both inclusion and differentiation. The analysis emphasizes the lived experiences of students, revealing how everyday bilingual practices reflect broader negotiations of authority, solidarity, and institutional expectations.

Findings reveal that code-switching patterns extend beyond communication, functioning as markers of identity and as strategies to challenge conventional boundaries between “academic” and “personal” spheres. Instructors and students alike employ bilingual repertoires to manage classroom dynamics, demonstrating that language choice is a structured, socially meaningful performance. Students who adeptly navigate these linguistic practices report heightened confidence, belonging, and agency, even under pressures to conform to monolingual norms. Moreover, strategic use of Urdu in English-medium settings emerges as a subtle form of cultural assertion and identity reclamation.

By shifting attention from structural constraints to the agency and social meaning of speakers, this study contributes to translanguaging research in higher education. It underscores that academic success need not come at the cost of linguistic diversity and offers a framework for understanding how multilingual students construct hybrid identities within institutional policies. Ultimately, the research advocates for pedagogical approaches that value and support multilingual repertoires, recognizing their cognitive, social, and cultural significance.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, Code-switching, Multilingualism, Higher Education, Identity Negotiation