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Language Switching and Identity among Chinese-English Bilingual High School Students

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Abstract. Chinese-English bilingual high school students often change linguistic environments associated with different relationships, expectations, and emotional histories. This paper examines whether switching between Chinese and English can lead bilingual adolescents to experience different versions of themselves. Rather than treating bilingualism as the possession of two separate personalities, the paper reviews psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, and identity-based research on linguistic relativity, cultural frame switching, emotional resonance, language choice, heritage-language identity, and translanguaging. The literature suggests that language can function as a contextual cue: it may activate culturally learned ways of interpreting situations, memories connected to particular relationships, different degrees of emotional intensity, and different social roles. These effects are shaped by proficiency, age and context of acquisition, interlocutor, and the domains in which each language is normally used. For Chinese-English bilingual students, Chinese may be more strongly associated with family and heritage contexts, while English may be more related to school and peer contexts, although these patterns are not true for all bilinguals. The paper concludes that language switching can change self-expression without creating two independent selves. Understanding this distinction can help educators and families interpret bilingual students' silence, formality, code-switching, and emotional expression more accurately.

Keywords: Language switching, bilingual identity, self-expression, emotional resonance, psycholinguistics

1. Introduction

A Chinese-English bilingual students speak Chinese with family, English in class, and mix both languages with bilingual peers. Because audience and context vary, their tone, confidence, humor, politeness, and emotional openness often shift across languages. This raises a key question: Do bilinguals become different people in different languages—or does each language simply highlight different facets of the same person?

Psycholinguistics offers clarity. Linguistic relativity does not claim language determines thought, rather habitual language use shapes attention, categorization, and interpretation [1]. Bilingualism is not two separate monolingual systems coexisting in one mind. As Grosjean notes, bilinguals are integrated users whose languages activation shifts flexibly with context and communicative need

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[2]. For bicultural bilinguals, language also cues cultural frame-switching, activating distinct cultural concepts and self-views within a single individual [3].

Studies of Chinese heritage speakers and adolescents further show that language and identity develop through relationships, migration histories, community expectations, and changing social environments [4, 5]. Research on bilingual emotion adds a critical dimension: first and later-learned languages often carry unequal emotional resonance, especially when they were acquired in different social settings [6, 7]. Together, these findings suggest that feeling "different" across languages may result from several interacting processes rather than from a divided personality.

This paper focuses on Chinese-English bilingual high school students. It examines how language switching affects emotional expression, identity, confidence, politeness, and social behavior. Drawing on foundational and recent research, it outlines four core mechanisms: language-linked ways of organizing expression, cultural and social identity, emotional resonance, and context-sensitive language choice. Code-switching and translanguaging are framed as normal bilingual resources rather than evidence of confusion. This topic is significant because bilingual students' behavior can easily be misread. A student who is quieter in English may not have fewer ideas, and a student who mixes Chinese and English may not have weak language skills.

2. Literature review and theoretical foundation

2.1. Language, thought, and expression

Language gives speakers a set of categories, grammatical patterns, conventional phrases, and pragmatic choices for turning thought into communication. Linguistic relativity research, therefore, focus on whether language makes some distinctions more habitual or more accessible during thinking and speaking [1]. For bilingual speakers, two languages provide partially overlapping but not identical expressive systems. The same event can be described with different lexical choices, levels of explicitness, forms of address, or emotional vocabulary depending on the language in use.

This matters for self-expression because expression is not simply the translation of a fully formed thought from one code into another. Speakers choose words while also deciding how direct to be, how much background to explain, and what emotional tone is socially appropriate. Dewaele and Pavlenko found that the use of emotion vocabulary in a second language is influenced by factors such as proficiency and sociocultural competence [8]. A bilingual student may therefore understand an emotion clearly but still find that one language provides a more automatic or socially familiar way to describe it.

However, language differences should not be turned into cultural stereotypes. It would be inaccurate to claim that Chinese always produces an indirect personality or that English always produces a direct one. Bilingual behavior depends on individual experience. A student who has used English for many years with close friends may express intimate feelings easily in English, while another student with similar proficiency may still associate English mainly with school performance. Language influences expression through learned patterns and experiences, not through a fixed personality rule.

2.2. Bilingual identity and cultural frame switching

Identity is especially important because bilinguals often participate in more than one cultural and social environment. Luna, Ringberg, and Peracchio showed that bicultural bilinguals can shift between culturally related mental frames when different languages are activated [3]. This does not

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mean that a person has two independent identities. Instead, different cues make certain beliefs, memories, expectations, and interaction styles more salient at a particular moment.

For some Chinese-background bilinguals with Chinese heritage backgrounds, the heritage language can also become connected to family membership and ethnic belonging. Zhou and Liu's study of Chinese heritage speakers describes heritage-language identity as dynamic rather than fixed, developing across life histories and changing relationships [4]. Yang's research on Chinese-Australian adolescents similarly shows that Chinese can function in multiple ways during identity construction: it may provide a link to heritage, act as a visible indicator of identity, and sometimes create pressure when expectations about language ability do not match an adolescent's actual proficiency [5]. These findings are useful for understanding high school students because home identity and school identity may be organized around different linguistic expectations.

Language may therefore make different social roles, expectations, and aspects of identity more salient in different contexts. For some bilingual students, a language associated with family or heritage may activate different patterns or self-expression from a language used more often in other social or educational settings. However, the specific form of these differences varies across individuals and should not be understood as a fixed set of personality traits [3-5]. Such differences are not proof of inauthenticity. Social identity is naturally context-sensitive even for monolingual speakers, who speak differently to teachers, parents, teammates, and close friends. Bilingualism adds language as another powerful contextual signal.

Grosjean's argument that a bilingual is not simply "two monolinguals in one person" is important here [2]. The two languages interact within a single communicative system shaped by the speaker's whole life. The most useful interpretation is therefore not "two personalities," but "one person with multiple language-linked ways of presenting the self."

2.3. Bilingual emotion and emotional resonance

Emotion is one important reason bilingual speakers may report feeling different across languages. Pavlenko's work shows that languages can acquire different emotional meanings because they are learned and used in different relationships and environments [6]. A first language is often acquired through early family interactions, affection, conflict, comfort, and everyday routines, whereas a later language may be associated more strongly with school, media, or peers. These different histories can affect how emotionally immediate words and expressions feel.

Toivo, Scheepers, and Dewaele developed the RER-LX scale to examine reduced emotional resonance in a later-learned language and emphasized substantial individual variation [7]. A later language is therefore not automatically emotionally weak, and a first language is not always the language of greatest comfort. Emotional resonance depends on how, when, where, and with whom a language has been used.

Related research on the foreign-language effect suggests that language of processing can also influence decision-making, although such effects vary with bilingual experience and task conditions [9]. Emotion vocabulary also depends on proficiency and sociocultural competence [8]. In Chinese immigrant families, heritage-language maintenance can involve affection, responsibility, anxiety, and conflict [10]. Thus, Chinese may feel emotionally close for one adolescent but stressful for another if it is tied to correction or obligation. English may feel distant for one student yet emotionally rich for another whose close friendships were formed in English. The emotional weight of a language is therefore autobiographical rather than fixed.

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2.4. Social context, proficiency, and context-dependent language choice

Language switching is also influenced by the immediate social environment. Bilingual speakers do not choose a language only because of internal preference, they respond to the people around them and to cues about what language is expected. De Bruin and Martin found that bilingual language choice during production is shaped by both personal preference and external primes [11]. This supports the idea that a student's language use can shift quickly when the audience, setting, or topic changes.

Research with school-aged bilinguals also suggests that code-switching behavior is related to language proficiency. Quirk's study of French-English bilingual children found that interspeaker code-switching was associated with expressive lexical and grammatical proficiency, while attitudes toward the two languages were not strong predictors in that context [12]. Although this study involved younger children and a different language pair, it shows why code-switching should not automatically be interpreted as confusion or lack of commitment to one identity.

For high school students, academic language can add another layer of self-monitoring. Speaking in class may require accuracy, speed, appropriate vocabulary, and awareness of evaluation at the same time. A student who is highly expressive in informal English may become more cautious during a graded presentation. The language itself is therefore only one part of the experience, proficiency, task demands, audience, and perceived judgment can shape how much of the self is expressed.

3. Code-switching, translanguaging, and the bilingual self

Code-switching generally refers to switching between two or more languages within a conversation or interaction. Although code-switching and translanguaging are closely related, they are not exactly the same. While code-switching focuses on the alternation between identifiable languages, translanguaging emphasizes how multilingual speakers use their full linguistic repertoire. Li describes translanguaging as a way of understanding how multilingual speakers draw from an integrated communicative repertoire instead of simply switching between two separate linguistic systems [13]. From this perspective, mixing Chinese and English can be a meaningful choice that allows a speaker to select the most precise or socially appropriate resource available.

For some bilingual adolescents, concepts learned mainly through English-language schooling may be more accessible in English, while family-related experiences, humor, or culturally specific expressions may be more readily expressed in Chinese. In a bilingual peer group, mixed language can also signal a shared background. Educational research supports treating this flexibility as a resource. Tai and Wong found that a translanguaging space can help students recognize multiple languages as resources and support participation, social-emotional well-being, and identity development [14]. Their study is not specific to Chinese-English high school students, but the principle is relevant: students may communicate more fully when their complete linguistic repertoire is recognized.

Table 1. Key mechanisms linking language use to bilingual self-expression and identity [1, 3-14]

Dimension	Main mechanism	Possible experience
Language and expression	Different languages make different lexical, pragmatic, and conventional choices more accessible	One language feels easier for a certain idea, tone, or level of formality

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Table 1. (continued)

Identity and cultural framing	Language cues culturally and socially learned frames	Family-linked and school-linked roles become more or less salient
Emotional resonance	Languages carry different autobiographical and emotional histories	Emotional topics feel more intense, distant, comfortable, or difficult depending on language
Social context and language choice	Interlocutor, proficiency, task, and external cues influence language selection	Confidence or amount of speech changes across audiences
Bilingual repertoire and translanguaging	Code-switching and translanguaging combine resources from both languages	Mixed language communicates meaning or belonging that one language alone may not provide

Note. The patterns summarized here are literature-based mechanisms and tendencies, not universal traits of Chinese-English bilingual students.

Table 1 illustrates why the question "Which language is the real self?" is too simple. A student can be authentic in both languages while using different communicative resources. Language switching changes which experiences and expectations are most available, not the continuity of the person.

4. Discussion

The literature suggests a contextual model of bilingual self-expression in which language interacts with cultural framing, emotional history, proficiency, and social context. None of these factors works alone. Chinese may activate family memories for one student, but if it is also the language of correction or of weekend classes, it may feel stressful. English may be a later-learned language, yet if it is the language of close friendships and daily school life, it can become emotionally rich.

The model explains why bilingual students can sincerely feel "different" when using one language rather than another without implying the existence of two separate selves. Cultural frame switching explains changes in interpretation and social expectations, heritage-language research explains belonging and identity pressure, emotion research explains differences in emotional resonance, and language-choice research highlights the influence of audience, proficiency, and context [3-12].

There are also implications for education. Teachers should be careful not to assume that poor English communication in class indicates poor reasoning skills. Planning time, multilingual brainstorming, or flexible language use may give students more opportunities to express and develop their ideas than instantaneous English-only conversation. Translanguaging research suggests that recognizing students' full linguistic repertoires may support inclusion and identity development without necessarily lowering academic expectations [13, 14]. For Chinese-English bilingual students, families can likewise avoid interpreting greater use of English as rejection of Chinese identity. Heritage-language use can strengthen family relationships, but constant correction may also create negative emotional associations with the language [10].

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5. Conclusion

Chinese-English bilingual high school students may experience noticeable changes in self-expression when switching between languages, but these changes should not be understood as evidence of two separate personalities. Instead, language switching can influence which parts of a student's identity, emotional experience, and social role become more noticeable in a particular situation. Different languages may be connected to different relationships, memories, expectations, and communications settings, which can shape how comfortably or naturally a student expresses certain thoughts and emotions.

For many bilingual students, language use is closely connected to context. One language may be used more often with family members, while another may be more common in school or peer interactions. As a result, students may communicate differently across these settings. However, these differences are not fixed personality traits. The way a bilingual student expresses themselves depends on many factors, including language proficiency, age of acquisition, social environment, audience, topic, and personal experience. Code-switching and translanguaging further show that bilingual communication is flexible rather than divided into two completely separate language systems.

Overall, language switching is better understood as a change in the conditions of self-expression rather than a change in the person. A bilingual student can remain the same individual while presenting different aspects of identity in different linguistic and social contexts. This perspective can help teachers and families avoid misinterpreting quieter behavior, mixed-language use, or differences in emotional expression as signs of confusion or weak language ability.

This paper also has several limitations. Much of the existing research focuses on adults, immigrant families, or bilingual groups other than Chinese-English high school students. Future research could focus more directly on adolescents and compare students with different language backgrounds, proficiency levels, migration experiences, and family language practices. Interviews, language diaries, and observations across home, school, and peer settings could provide a more detailed understanding of how bilingual identity develops over time.

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