

MULTILINGUAL IDENTITY IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: A PSYCHOANALYTIC EXPLORATION OF SEMIOTIC AND SYMBOLIC PROCESSES

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Abstract

Multilingual Identity has become a central concern in contemporary advances in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, reflecting a shift beyond purely cognitive and input-based models of language learning. The study draws on Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory and Julia Kristeva's notions of the semiotic. A qualitative exploratory case-study design was employed involving 30 postgraduate multilingual learners from the Department of English at Manonmaniam Sundaranar University. Data were collected through group discussions, autobiographical narratives, classroom observations, and interactional transcription analysis. Thematic analysis informed by psychoanalytic and semiotic interpretation was used to examine identity negotiation within multilingual experience. The findings appear to indicate that multilingual identity is dynamic, emotionally negotiated, and shaped through tensions between symbolic forces (institutional norms, grammatical regulation, and academic expectations) and semiotic forces (affect, rhythm, embodiment, and desire) and that English is associated with social recognition and academic mobility while code-switching provides emotional comfort and communicative confidence. The study proposes a psycho-semiotic framework for understanding language learning as a process of fluid subject formation and contributes to SLA research by integrating psychoanalytic and semiotic perspectives into multilingual identity studies.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Multilingual Identity, Psycho-Semiotic Theory, Psychoanalytic Approaches, Subjectivity in Language Learning, Qualitative Research Design

1. Introduction

Second language acquisition (SLA) research has developed through several theoretical phases, beginning with cognitive and psycholinguistic models that emphasized input, memory, and rule acquisition as central to language learning (Ellis, 1994; Krashen, 1985). Later sociocultural approaches highlighted the importance of interaction, mediation, and social context in shaping learning processes. Lev Vygotsky (1978) argues that "human learning presupposes a specific social nature" (p. 88), emphasizing the role of socially mediated cognition in language development. Building on this perspective, James P. Lantolf and Steven L. Thorne (2006) describe SLA as "a socially mediated process" shaped through interaction and cultural tools (p. 197).

Contemporary SLA research increasingly emphasizes identity, recognizing that language learning is closely connected to learners' social positioning, cultural affiliation, and evolving subjectivities. Bonny Norton (2013) defines identity as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p. 45). Learners are therefore viewed not only as cognitive processors but also as social agents negotiating meaning, participation, and legitimacy. Despite these developments, identity-oriented SLA research often gives limited attention to unconscious processes, affective tension, embodiment, and pre-symbolic meaning-making. Psychoanalytic theory offers important insights into these dimensions. Jacques Lacan (1977) argues that "the unconscious is structured like a language" (p. 203), suggesting that subjectivity is formed through symbolic systems and linguistic structures. Similarly, Julia Kristeva (1980) emphasizes that meaning emerges not only through linguistic structure but also through bodily affect, rhythm, and emotional intensity. Kristeva's concept of the semiotic chora conceptualizes a pre-symbolic space of rhythm and affects underlying communication. However, psychoanalytic perspectives remain insufficiently integrated into mainstream SLA research. As a result, multilingual identity is often examined primarily through discourse and sociocultural participation rather than through emotional and psycho-semiotic processes. This study examines multilingual identity as a psycho-semiotic process emerging through the interaction between symbolic regulation and semiotic expression. Focusing on 30 postgraduate multilingual learners in higher education contexts, the study investigates how learners negotiate institutional expectations, emotional experience, and multilingual subjectivity. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do postgraduate learners construct multilingual identities in academic contexts?
2. How do symbolic and semiotic processes interact in their language learning experiences?
3. How do affective and institutional pressures shape multilingual subjectivity?

The study contributes theoretically by integrating psychoanalytic and semiotic perspectives into identity-oriented SLA research. Empirically, it provides qualitative insights into multilingual learners' lived experiences within academic contexts. Pedagogically, it highlights the importance of emotional experience, identity negotiation, and multilingual flexibility in language learning.

Literature Review

Identity and SLA: Identity in SLA has been theorized through sociocultural, poststructuralist, and narrative lenses. Bonny Norton (2013) defines identity as "how people understand their relationship to the world" and how they "construct possibilities for the future" (p. 45), emphasizing investment in particular languages and imagined communities. Norton and Toohey (2011) further argue that identity is relational and shaped through power, access, and recognition. Claire Kramsch (2014) connects language learning with subjectivity, arguing that language learners are "positioned both socially and symbolically" (p. 305), and that emotional and symbolic dimensions influence linguistic trajectories.

More recent work has emphasized the role of affect and emotion in SLA. Jean-Marc Dewaele (2021) demonstrates that motivation, anxiety, confidence, and self-esteem are central to language learning processes. Similarly, Annamaria Pinter (2019) calls for greater attention to learners' "inner worlds" and emotional experiences in language education (p. 62). Nevertheless, these studies often stop short of explicitly engaging psychoanalytic and semiotic frameworks to conceptualize unconscious and pre-symbolic dimensions of identity.

Translanguaging and Multilingual Practices: Translanguaging and code-switching have become central to understanding multilingual learners' meaning-making practices. Ofelia García and Li Wei (2014) argue that multilingual speakers possess "one linguistic repertoire from which they select features strategically" (p. 22). Suresh Canagarajah (2013) shows how code-switching functions as a resource for negotiation, creativity, and identity construction in multilingual communication. More recent pedagogical research highlights the transformative potential of translanguaging in SLA classrooms. Li Wei (2018) conceptualizes translanguaging as "a practical theory of language" (p. 15) that challenges monolingual ideologies and foregrounds fluid multilingual practices. Later studies (Li, 2020, 2022) argue that validating learners' full linguistic repertoires can enhance engagement, conceptual learning, and identity affirmation. However, these approaches rarely connect translanguaging with psychoanalytic concepts such as desire, recognition, and the unconscious.

Psychoanalytic and Semiotic Perspectives: Psychoanalytic perspectives on identity emphasize processes of identification, desire, and the unconscious (Appignanesi & Forrester, 1992; Erikson, 1968; Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973). In educational contexts, psychoanalytic scholarship has explored how students' inner worlds interact with institutional structures and researcher expectations. Granger (2011), for example, examines how silence and hesitation in classrooms may reflect emotional and symbolic tensions, while Palmer (2011) highlights the importance of emotional experience in learning processes.

Within SLA research, several scholars have tentatively introduced Lacanian and Kristevan perspectives. Claire Kramsch (2014) discusses the role of desire and the unconscious in language learning, while Granger (2011) proposes a psychoanalytically informed understanding of learner identity. More recent studies (Melazzo, 2021; Norton et al., 2020) have linked psychoanalytic notions of subjectivity and desire to multilingual identity formation. However, there remains limited empirically grounded research that explicitly integrates Lacan's symbolic order and Kristeva's semiotic chora into classroom-based SLA analysis. This study addresses that gap

by operationalizing Lacan's symbolic order and Kristeva's semiotic chora as interpretive lenses for analyzing how multilingual learners negotiate identity through affect, rhythm, silence, hesitation, and code-switching in academic contexts.

Theoretical Framework: This study proposes a psycho-semiotic model of multilingual identity formation grounded in Lacanian psychoanalysis and Kristevan semiotics within a poststructuralist SLA framework. The model conceptualizes identity through three interconnected dimensions: the symbolic, the semiotic, and the imaginary.

Symbolic Order (Rules, Grammar, Institutions): The symbolic dimension refers to structured language systems, institutional norms, and grammatical regulation. According to Jacques Lacan (1977), "the Symbolic order is the order of language, customs, and social laws" (p. 66). Lacan further explains that the symbolic order structures recognition, legitimacy, and subjectivity through language and institutional authority. In multilingual classrooms, symbolic structures regulate participation through correction practices, pronunciation standards, and academic expectations. These processes may simultaneously generate aspiration and anxiety among learners.

Semiotic Dimension (Affect, Rhythm, Embodiment): The semiotic dimension involves affective and pre-linguistic forces such as rhythm, tone, gesture, silence, and bodily expression. Julia Kristeva (1980) conceptualizes the semiotic as a disruptive force operating within language beyond grammatical structure. Recent semiotic research similarly characterizes language learning as "an embodied experience shaped by desire and emotional intensity" (Fekete, 2020, p. 86). In multilingual contexts, learners often express uncertainty, desire, and emotional tension through embodied communicative practices, including hesitation, repetition, silence, and code-switching.

Imaginary Dimension (Ideal L2 Self) The imaginary dimension refers to idealized self-identification and aspirational linguistic identities. In SLA, this corresponds to the learner's imagined second-language self as fluent, confident, and socially recognized. Jacques Lacan (1977) describes this process as the formation of the "ideal-I" through symbolic recognition and external images (p. 2). While such aspirations may motivate language learning, they may also produce tension when learners perceive a gap between their actual and ideal linguistic selves.

The interaction among symbolic regulation, semiotic expression, and imaginary aspiration forms the basis of multilingual identity construction in this study.

Methodology

Research Paradigm: The study adopts a poststructuralist qualitative paradigm that views identity as dynamic, fragmented, and socially constructed through discourse and power relations. Poststructuralist perspectives in SLA emphasize that identities are "multiple, contradictory, and constantly changing across time and place" (Norton, 2013, p. 4). It is additionally informed by psychoanalytic epistemology, which considers affect and unconscious desire important dimensions of language use and subject formation. As Stephen Frosh (2020) explains, psychoanalytic qualitative inquiry focuses on "the hidden emotional and relational dimensions of discourse" (p. 18). Psychoanalytic concepts are employed as interpretive analytical categories rather than clinical or diagnostic tools.

Research Design: A qualitative exploratory case-study design was used to investigate multilingual identity formation among postgraduate learners in a higher education institution in the Tirunelveli region of Tamil Nadu, India. Qualitative case studies enable "an in-depth exploration of a bounded system" within natural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 96). This design enabled in-depth exploration of lived experience, emotional negotiation, and interactional meaning-making within naturalistic academic contexts.

Participants: Participants were selected through purposive sampling from 30 postgraduate learners in the Department of English at Manonmaniam Sundaranar University. The sample included 8 male and 22 female multilingual learners aged between 21 and 24 years who regularly used English and regional languages in academic and social contexts. Participants were selected based on multilingual language use and willingness to participate in the study. All participants voluntarily participated in group discussions, autobiographical narratives, classroom observations, and interactional transcription analysis.

Data Collection: Multiple qualitative data sources were used to capture the complexity of multilingual identity formation. Data triangulation enhanced credibility by enabling analysis from multiple perspectives.

Primary data sources included:

1. Group discussions
2. Autobiographical narratives
3. Interactional transcription analysis
4. Classroom observations

Autobiographical narratives were elicited through guided reflective writing tasks focusing on language learning experiences, classroom participation, emotional responses, and multilingual identity negotiation. Classroom observations were conducted over a period of three weeks in postgraduate classrooms. All interactional data and discussion responses were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis: Data were analyzed using a two-layer psycho-semiotic thematic framework that combined thematic analysis with psychoanalytic and semiotic interpretation. Thematic analysis enables researchers to identify "patterns of shared meaning" across qualitative datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 331). Inductive coding identified recurring patterns such as linguistic anxiety, code-switching, classroom silence, identity conflict, and aspirations for fluency. Psycho-semiotic interpretation was integrated throughout the coding process rather than applied retrospectively. Data collection was conducted over three weeks. Semi-structured group discussions were held with all 30 participants, each lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. Discussions focused on multilingual identity negotiation, emotional experiences in language learning, classroom participation, and aspirations related to English learning. Participants also completed two autobiographical narrative tasks that enabled reflection on emotional and symbolic dimensions of multilingual experience not always expressed in spoken interaction. In addition, nine classroom observations were conducted using an ethnographic approach. Observations focused on participation patterns, discourse practices, and identity positioning. Field notes documented verbal and non-verbal behavior, including silence, hesitation, turn-taking, laughter, and code-switching.

Data Analysis Procedures: Data analysis combined thematic analysis with psychoanalytic and semiotic interpretive strategies. All interviews, narratives, and interactional recordings were transcribed verbatim. The analysis followed six stages:

1. Familiarization with the data through repeated reading and listening to transcripts and recordings
2. Open coding to identify recurring emotional expressions, linguistic behaviors, and identity-related experiences
3. Axial coding to organize related codes into broader categories such as symbolic anxiety, identity conflict, linguistic aspiration, and emotional attachment
4. Interpretive coding informed by psychoanalytic and semiotic theory to examine affect, symbolic positioning, and desire
5. Cross-case comparison to identify recurring and divergent patterns across participants
6. Refinement and validation of themes through iterative review

Psychoanalytic interpretation was applied as a structured analytical lens rather than a metaphorical reading. It focused on recurring patterns of anxiety, symbolic authority, desire, and identity fragmentation emerging through narratives and interactional practices. Semiotic interpretation examined non-verbal and affective dimensions of communication, including rhythm, repetition, silence, gesture, tone variation, and code-switching, to understand how meaning and identity were constructed beyond grammatical structure.

Coding Procedure

Coding was conducted in three stages.

1. **Open Coding-** Open coding involved identifying recurring expressions, emotions, and multilingual practices within the dataset. As Strauss and Corbin (1998) explain, open coding involves "breaking data apart and delineating concepts" (p. 102).
2. **Axial Coding-** Axial coding organized related codes into broader conceptual categories. Strauss and Corbin (1998) define axial coding as the process of "relating categories to their subcategories" (p. 123). Categories included symbolic anxiety, emotional attachment, institutional regulation, identity fragmentation, and linguistic aspiration.
3. **Interpretive Coding-** Interpretive coding involved psycho-semiotic analysis of symbolic positioning, affective tension, and multilingual identity negotiation. As Saldaña (2021) notes, coding functions as "a way of linking data to ideas" (p. 5).

In this study, codes derived from transcripts, observation notes, narratives, and interactional data were systematically compared across datasets to ensure analytical consistency and interpretive depth. Interpretive coding linked recurring linguistic and interactional patterns to psychoanalytic categories such as symbolic anxiety, desire for recognition, and subject fragmentation through iterative comparison across datasets.

To ensure methodological precision, psycho-semiotic concepts were operationalized through observable linguistic, interactional, and affective features in the data rather than treated as abstract theoretical constructs. Symbolic anxiety was identified through recurring patterns of hesitation, self-monitoring, fear of grammatical correction, and withdrawal from participation, while desire for recognition was evidenced in repeated aspirations for fluent or socially valued English use. Identity fragmentation was appearing to indicate through contradictory self-positioning, self-correction, and shifts between languages within interactional sequences. Semiotic dimensions were operationalized through recurrent embodied and affective features such as pauses, repetition, silence, prosodic variation, laughter, gesture, and code-switching, interpreted in relation to context. Coding decisions followed an iterative process across multiple datasets, beginning with inductive open coding, followed by axial grouping of recurring patterns, and finally interpretive coding informed by psycho-semiotic theory only when categories were stable across data sources. Analytical consistency was maintained through coding memos and cross-dataset comparison. Interpretations were restricted to recurrent, context-supported patterns and were not treated as evidence of unconscious psychological states; instead, psychoanalytic constructs were used as heuristic tools alongside alternative explanations such as linguistic proficiency and classroom norms. Reflexivity was maintained through continuous documentation of interpretive decisions and peer debriefing to ensure transparency and reduce researcher bias.

Table 1. Sample Coding Framework

Participant Excerpt	Open Code	Axial Category	Psycho-Semiotic Interpretation
"I become very conscious when speaking English."	Self-consciousness	Symbolic Anxiety	Learner experiences symbolic pressure and linguistic self-monitoring
"Mother tongue feels natural, English feels dangerous."	Emotional contrast	Semiotic Expression	Emotional attachment to mother tongue and symbolic insecurity in L2
"I stop speaking when researchers correct me immediately."	Fear of correction	Institutional Regulation	Institutional authority produces silence and withdrawal
Frequent pauses and hesitation during speech	Hesitation markers	Identity Fragmentation	Split multilingual subjectivity and anxiety
Switching to Mother tongue during emotional discussion	Code-switching	Identity Negotiation	Movement between emotional comfort and symbolic legitimacy
"Fluent English makes people respect you."	Desire for recognition	Ideal L2 Self	Symbolic aspiration and desire for social legitimacy

Inter-Coder Reliability

To strengthen credibility and dependability, inter-coder reliability procedures were employed. A second qualitative researcher with expertise in applied linguistics independently coded 20% of the dataset using the initial coding framework. The coded data were compared to identify similarities and differences, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was achieved regarding thematic categories and coding boundaries. The overall inter-coder agreement was approximately 86%, indicating a high level of consistency in thematic interpretation. According to Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020), reliability in qualitative coding refers to "the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category" (p. 301). This process enhanced analytical reliability and reduced subjective bias in psycho-semiotic interpretation.

Table 2. Major Themes and Frequency

Major Theme	Frequency Across Participants
Symbolic anxiety	21
Fear of grammatical judgment	18
Desire for fluent English identity	30
Code-switching for emotional comfort	24
Identity fragmentation	19
Classroom silence and hesitation	17
Emotional attachment to mother tongue	26
Aspiration for social recognition	22

Methodological Positioning of Psychoanalytic Interpretation: Psychoanalytic interpretation in this study was employed as a heuristic and interpretive framework rather than a clinical or diagnostic method. Features such as pauses, hesitation, repetition, silence, and code-switching were interpreted in relation to recurring discourse patterns, emotional expression, and institutional contexts rather than as direct indicators of unconscious psychological states. Concepts such as symbolic anxiety, desire, and subject fragmentation were therefore treated as analytical categories for understanding multilingual identity negotiation within SLA contexts. As Stephen Frosh (2020) explains, psychoanalytic qualitative research focuses on "the hidden emotional and relational dimensions of discourse" (p. 18). Similarly, Ian Parker (2021) argues that psychoanalytic interpretation should be understood as "an interpretive engagement with patterns of meaning rather than clinical diagnosis" (p. 42). This approach emphasizes meaning-making through language, affect, and social interaction rather than deterministic psychological inference. Psychoanalytic interpretation was operationalized as an interpretive analytical framework examining recurring patterns of symbolic anxiety, desire for recognition, silence, hesitation, self-monitoring, repetition, and code-switching in relation to institutional language expectations and multilingual identity construction.

Psychoanalytic and Semiotic Analysis: Psychoanalytic interpretation was informed primarily by the theories of Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva. The analysis examined how learners expressed anxiety, desire, symbolic aspiration, and emotional attachment through multilingual interaction. Psychoanalytic indicators included:

1. Repeated emotional expressions
2. Contradictions in self-representation
3. Pauses, silence, and hesitation markers
4. Expressions of inadequacy and desire for legitimacy
5. Emotional attachment to particular languages
6. Identification with institutional or academic authority

Semiotic analysis focused on dimensions of meaning-making beyond literal verbal content, including:

1. Code-switching patterns
2. Rhythm, tone, and prosody
3. Repetition and emotional emphasis
4. Narrative metaphors and framing strategies
5. Silence and non-verbal communication
6. Pronoun use and self-positioning

This combined analytical approach enabled examination of multilingual identity as both symbolically structured and affectively expressed within institutional discourse.

Validation and Trustworthiness; To ensure rigor and credibility, multiple strategies of trustworthiness were employed. Data triangulation was achieved through comparison of group discussions, autobiographical narratives, classroom observations, and interactional transcription analysis. Member checking involved participants validating selected interpretations, while peer debriefing with qualitative research experts helped refine emerging themes. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that credibility in qualitative inquiry depends on "prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation" (p. 301). Thick description was used to provide detailed contextual representation of participants' experiences, and reflexivity was maintained through continuous documentation of the researcher's interpretive decisions and assumptions. Together, these strategies enhanced credibility, dependability, and interpretive validity.

Ethical Considerations: Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional authority prior to data collection. Ethical qualitative research requires respect for "participants' autonomy, privacy, and dignity" (Orb et al., 2001, p. 93). Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided voluntary informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of pseudonyms and secure storage of all research data.

Findings and Analysis

The findings of this study emerged from thematic analysis, psychoanalytic discourse analysis, semiotic interpretation, narrative analysis, and multimodal interaction analysis conducted across interviews, reflective journals, classroom observations, and audio-video recordings involving 30 postgraduate multilingual learners. The analysis revealed that multilingual identity was not stable or fixed but continuously negotiated through emotional, symbolic, institutional, and affective processes.

These findings support poststructuralist SLA perspectives that conceptualize identity as “multiple, contradictory, and dynamic” (Norton, 2013, p. 4). The findings further demonstrate that second language acquisition (SLA) operates not only as linguistic development but also as a psycho-semiotic process of subject formation.

Theme 1: Fragmented Identity and Split Subjectivity

Psychoanalytic discourse analysis revealed that multilingual identity among the participants was fragmented, unstable, and context-dependent. Learners frequently experienced shifting versions of the self while moving between mother tongue and English as a second language. This finding aligns with Jacques Lacan’s (1977) argument that “the subject is split by language” (p. 299), suggesting that identity emerges through unstable symbolic positioning. These identity shifts were expressed through hesitation, self-correction, contradictory self-positioning, and emotional uncertainty during multilingual interaction.

Example 1: Hesitation and Linguistic Anxiety

During an interview about classroom participation, *Participant 4* stated: “I know the answer... but when I speak in English... I feel... maybe others will judge my grammar ... so I stop in between.” The pauses and hesitation markers reflected anxiety associated with institutional evaluation and fear of grammatical judgment.

Example 2: Self-Correction and Symbolic Legitimacy

Participant 8 explained: “Sometimes I speak Mother tongue in class— no, actually, I try not to speak Mother tongue because English is expected... but in my mind Mother tongue comes first.” The immediate self-correction reflects tension between linguistic comfort and institutional expectation. English was positioned as the legitimate academic language, while the mother tongue became less acceptable in formal interaction.

Example 3: Contradictory Self-Positioning

Participant 11 stated: “I am confident in English... but when researchers ask questions suddenly, I become silent.”

Although the learner expressed confidence, spontaneous academic interaction produced withdrawal and uncertainty. This pattern was reinforced in another interactional sequence observed in class:

Researcher: “Answer this question in English.”

Participant 11: looks down, smiles nervously, remains silent

Follow-up reflection:

Participant 11 stated: “I knew it... but I needed time to translate it properly.” Similar tensions appeared in the following responses:

Participant 1: “When I speak my mother tongue, I feel natural... I don’t think about mistakes.”

Participant 9: “English changes my personality... I become very careful, so I speak less.”

Participant 6: “Even simple questions become difficult when everyone is watching.”

Observations further revealed repeated silence, delayed responses, nervous laughter, and reduced eye contact during English interaction, particularly in researcher-centered contexts.

Theme 2: Semiotic Expression and Embodied Communication

Semiotic and multimodal analysis demonstrated that multilingual identity was expressed not only through verbal language but also through pauses, repetition, silence, gesture, rhythm, and emotional tone. This finding supports Kristeva’s (1980) argument that meaning emerges through “rhythm, intonation, and bodily drives” operating beneath formal linguistic structure (p. 136).

Example 1: Repetition as Emotional Emphasis

Participant 5 repeatedly stated: “I want to speak fluently... fluently... fluently like others... I want it without thinking.”

The repetition emphasized emotional intensity and aspiration for linguistic legitimacy.

Example 2: Silence and Symbolic Anxiety

During classroom observation:

Participant 10 remained silent for nearly 30 seconds after being asked to respond in English. The learner later stated: “My mind was translating everything first... I was forming sentences in Mother tongue before speaking.”

The silence reflects cognitive monitoring combined with affective anxiety and fear of error.

Example 3: Tone Fluctuation

Participant 14 stated: “Mother tongue is easy... natural... but English feels dangerous sometimes... like I may make mistakes anytime.”

The tonal shift indicates emotional insecurity associated with English-mediated interaction.

Example 4: Linguistic Insecurity

Participant 7 stated: “I know the answer... I know it fully... but when I start speaking, words don’t come properly.”

The pause before “but speaking is difficult” these expressions revealed emotional insecurity associated with English-mediated interaction. Classroom observations also showed frequent use of gestures and code-switching when learners struggled to articulate complex ideas in English. Across participants, semiotic features such as silence, repetition, and tone fluctuation consistently reflected emotional strain, identity negotiation, and communicative uncertainty.

Example Interaction: Peer Discussion

Participant 6: “Explain in English”

Participant 10: “Wait... Mother tongue first I will say... then English.”

Across participants, silence, repetition, and tone fluctuation consistently reflected emotional strain and identity negotiation.

Table 3. Semiotic and Multimodal Features across Learners

Semiotic Feature	Interpretation
Pauses and silence	Anxiety and uncertainty
Repetition	Emotional intensity
Tone fluctuation	Identity instability
Voice lowering	Linguistic insecurity
Hand gestures	Embodied meaning-making
Code-switching	Emotional negotiation

Theme 3: Symbolic Regulation and Institutional Anxiety

Symbolic analysis revealed that institutional English norms strongly shaped multilingual identity formation.

Participant 12 stated: “If my grammar is wrong, I feel everyone notices... even small mistakes feel big.”

Participant 13 stated: Similarly, “Researcher says only English... so I try to speak... but sometimes I just avoid because I feel fear of correction.”

Researcher correction:

Researcher: “Not like that. Say it properly in English.”

(Participant immediately stops speaking)

Participant 13: “After correction I lose confidence... I prefer silence than mistake.” English functioned simultaneously as aspiration and constraint.

These accounts show that institutional discourse regulated participation through evaluative pressure. English functioned as a symbolic authority that produced both aspiration and self-surveillance. This finding reflects Michel Foucault’s (1977) concept of disciplinary power, where institutional norms produce self-monitoring behavior (p. 170). Classroom observations confirmed reduced participation during researcher-centered interaction, while peer interaction showed comparatively higher fluency and reduced anxiety.

Theme 4: Desire, Aspiration, and the Ideal L2 Self

Narrative analysis revealed strong association between English fluency and imagined identity transformation.

Participant 3 stated: “At home I speak freely... I don’t think... but in class I calculate every sentence before speaking.”

Participant 30 stated: “If I speak fluent English... I feel I can become someone better... more confident... more respected.”

Participant 17: "People listen differently when English is good... they take you seriously."

Participant 7: reflected: "English gives opportunities... but sometimes I feel smaller when I cannot express properly."

Participant 21: "I imagine myself speaking like researchers... but when I try, I get stuck."

Participant 16): "I want my English to be perfect... then only I will speak freely."

The findings support Lacan's (1977) notion that desire is mediated through "the desire of the Other" (p. 235), where learners seek recognition through socially valued linguistic identities. The findings also resonate with Dörnyei's (2009) concept of the "ideal L2 self" as an aspirational future identity (p. 29). These responses reflect desire structured through social recognition and symbolic legitimacy, producing both motivation and anxiety.

Table 4. Lacanian Desire Structures across Learners

Desire Pattern	Number of Learners
Desire for fluent English identity	30
Need for social recognition	13
Aspiration for native-like speech	11
Fear of judgment	12
English linked to success	14

Theme 5: Code-Switching and Identity Negotiation

Code-switching emerged as a flexible communicative strategy for managing emotional, cognitive, and institutional pressures.

Participant 8 stated: "When emotion comes, I cannot explain in English... Mother tongue comes automatically."

Participant 6 explained: "In group discussion, I used Mother tongue + gestures... otherwise I cannot explain the idea fully."

Participant 12 added: "I speak softly in English... but in Mother tongue I speak freely."

Classroom observations confirmed that switching frequently occurred during humor, emotional expression, or conceptual difficulty. These findings support García and Li Wei's (2014) argument that multilingual speakers draw from "one integrated linguistic repertoire" rather than separate language systems (p. 14). Code-switching functioned as mediation between symbolic constraint and emotional expression.

Subject-in-Process and Fluid Identity Formation

The findings support Julia Kristeva's notion of the "subject-in-process," where identity is continuously reconstructed through interaction between symbolic structures and semiotic drives (Kristeva, 1980, p. 134).

Participant 20 stated: "Sometimes English gives confidence... sometimes it makes me feel very small in front of others."

Participant 18: "At home I am different... in class I become very careful with every word."

Participant 27: "English is useful... but emotionally it creates pressure when I cannot speak properly."

Participant 22: "My identity changes with language... Mother tongue me is different, English me is different."

These accounts demonstrate that identity is continuously reconfigured across emotional and institutional contexts. However, rather than simple oscillation, identity functions as a layered negotiation between affect, authority, and aspiration.

Synthesis of Findings

Overall, the findings indicate that multilingual identity in SLA is shaped through several interconnected dimensions:

1. Symbolic regulation through institutional norms and authority
2. Affective experience involving anxiety and emotional negotiation
3. Linguistic desire for recognition and legitimacy
4. Semiotic embodiment through rhythm, silence, gesture, and tone
5. Code-switching as adaptive mediation

The findings therefore position SLA as a psycho-semiotic process of subject formation rather than a purely grammatical or cognitive process. This interpretation aligns with Norton's (2013) assertion that language learning involves "identity, investment, and imagined futures" (p. 50), while also extending psychoanalytic perspectives on subjectivity, affect, and symbolic recognition within multilingual contexts.

Discussion

The findings suggest that second language acquisition is not merely a cognitive process but also a psycho-semiotic process shaped by symbolic regulation, affective embodiment, and aspirational identification. The study extends identity-oriented SLA research by may appear to indicating that multilingual learners negotiate language through emotional experience, institutional power, and symbolic aspiration. These findings support poststructuralist perspectives in SLA that conceptualize identity as fluid, socially negotiated, and shaped through discourse and power relations. Bonny Norton emphasizes the relationship among language, identity, and investment, while Claire Kramsch highlights the connection between language, subjectivity, and symbolic meaning. The present study extends these perspectives by demonstrating that multilingual identity is shaped not only through social participation but also through unconscious desire, affective intensity, and psycho-semiotic negotiation.

SLA beyond Cognitive Acquisition

Across interviews, narratives, and classroom interaction, learners experienced language learning as emotionally and symbolically negotiated. English operated simultaneously as a communicative resource, a symbolic authority, an aspirational identity, and a source of anxiety. Learners negotiated legitimacy, confidence, recognition, and belonging through language use rather than merely acquiring grammatical competence.

Kristeva's Semiotic Dimensions of SLA

The findings can be interpreted through Julia Kristeva's psycho-semiotic theory, particularly the concepts of the semiotic chora and subject-in-process. Emotional tension frequently appeared through pauses, repetition, silence, prosody, and embodied gestures rather than explicit verbal content alone.

Expressions such as:

- "fluently... fluently"
- "maybe"
- "actually"

These suggested emotional insecurity and symbolic desire. These findings suggest that multilingual identity cannot be understood solely through cognitive models of syntax and vocabulary, since meaning-making also occurs through embodied and affective dimensions of communication.

Lacanian Desire and Symbolic Recognition

The findings also support Lacanian perspectives on symbolic recognition and desire. Learners associated English fluency with intelligence, professionalism, mobility, and social respect. Their aspiration for English proficiency was therefore shaped not only by communicative necessity but also by institutional and social validation. The desire to become a "fluent" or "native-like" speaker may reflect what Lacan describes as "the desire of the Other." However, this aspiration also generated self-monitoring, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy. Institutional correction practices intensified these tensions by reinforcing distinctions between "correct" and "incorrect" language use.

Psycho-Semiotic Tension in Multilingual Identity

A central finding of the study is the tension between symbolic regulation and semiotic expression. Symbolic structures included grammatical rules, classroom authority, pronunciation norms, and institutional English expectations, while semiotic expression involved emotion, rhythm, silence, gesture, and affective communication. Many learners experienced conflict between spontaneous expression and pressure to conform to institutional language standards. This tension helps explain why participants often remained silent despite understanding classroom content. Code-switching functioned as an important strategy for negotiating this symbolic-semiotic tension. Learners frequently shifted into Mother tongue during emotional expression, humor, or uncertainty because it provided affective comfort unavailable within formal English interaction.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings have several implications for language education in higher education contexts. First, language teaching should move beyond grammar-focused instruction and recognize learners' emotional and identity-related experiences. Many participants experienced anxiety due to institutional language norms and correction practices. Paulo Freire (1970) argues that education should support learner agency rather than reinforce fear and silence.

Second, educators should create supportive classroom environments where multilingual learners can participate without fear of judgment. Reflective activities, collaborative discussion, and narrative writing may help support confidence and identity development.

Third, multilingual practices such as code-switching and translanguaging should be viewed as communicative resources rather than deficiencies. Supportive feedback methods and multilingual flexibility may reduce symbolic pressure and encourage participation. As Suresh Canagarajah (2013) argues, translanguaging may reflect the natural communicative reality of multilingual speakers.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, the sample size was limited to 30 postgraduate learners, which restricts generalizability. Second, the findings are context-specific because participants were drawn from a single higher education institution. Third, the study focused primarily on face-to-face multilingual interaction and did not examine digital or online learning environments.

Future Research

Future research may involve larger comparative samples across diverse educational and cultural contexts. Further studies may also examine multilingual identity formation in digital learning spaces and social media environments. Additional research integrating affective, cognitive, and translanguaging perspectives may further illuminate the relationship among emotion, identity, and multilingual communication.

Conclusion

This study examined multilingual identity formation among 30 postgraduate learners through a psycho-semiotic framework combining Julia Kristeva's semiotics and Jacques Lacan psychoanalytic theory. The findings suggested that multilingual identity is fluid, emotionally negotiated, and shaped through the interaction between symbolic regulation, affective experience, and institutional expectations. The study suggests that second language acquisition extends beyond grammatical competence to involve symbolic recognition, desire, emotional negotiation, and identity formation. By integrating psychoanalytic and semiotic perspectives into identity-focused SLA research, the study offers a psycho-semiotic understanding of multilingual subjectivity and highlights the importance of affect, embodiment, and symbolic processes in language learning.

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