From Yi Language to Mandarin Through Translanguaging: Multilingual Identity Construction Between Actual and Ought-To L1 Selves

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Abstract

In multilingual classrooms where heritage and dominant languages coexist unequally, translanguaging is often promoted as a pedagogical tool, yet its identity-shaping role remains underexplored, especially in contexts of linguistic marginalisation. Contextualised in China, this study investigates how translanguaging involving Yi Language (a heritage language) in a secondary Mandarin classroom mediates multilingual identity construction. We differentiated these languages by considering the former as the actual first language (L1) of the participant teacher and students from an ethnic minority group in China, and the latter as the ought-to L1 that represented the state-sanctioned linguistic norm. By adopting a case study approach and drawing on classroom observations and student interviews, we identified various teacher- and student-initiated translanguaging practices that served pedagogical, relational, epistemic, and identity-affirming functions. Despite receiving the same instructional input, students demonstrated three distinct multilingual identity profiles—resistant, emergent, and reflexive—highlighting that the impact of translanguaging depends on how students perceive the legitimacy of their heritage language and navigate the linguistic hierarchies between their actual L1 and the ought-to L1 within the research context. Findings underscore the need for translanguaging to be framed as an epistemic and ideological act, not merely a pragmatic scaffold.

Keywords

translanguaging, heritage language, L1, multilingual identity, language education

Introduction

In multilingual societies, individuals do not construct their identities through a single linguistic system, but rather through dynamic engagement with multiple languages. This ongoing interplay gives rise to multilingual identity—a sense of self shaped by how speakers perceive, position, and express themselves across their linguistic repertoires (Siebenhütter, 2023). Far from being stable or linear, multilingual identity construction is situated within broader

sociocultural dynamics, including language ideologies, educational systems, and political structures (Ghimire, 2021). These forces often determine which languages are valued, which are marginalised, and which are institutionally expected, particularly in contexts where linguistic hierarchies exist (Aronin & Laoire, 2022) and institutional settings such as education providers (Tavares, 2021).

One prominent example of such a sociolinguistic arrangement is Mainland China (hereinafter referred to as China), where rich linguistic diversity exists alongside a strong state emphasis on Mandarin as the national language. While Mandarin has been central to state-building and education (C. Yang, 2024), many heritage languages spoken by ethnic minority groups are often restricted to home or community domains, resulting in limited formal support for their use in education (Guan & Zhang, 2023). In such settings, particularly for students who speak a heritage language as their first language (L1) (Su & Long, 2022), a tension often emerges between their actual L1 self—the heritage language they use as their primary and emotionally grounded means of communication—and their ought-to L1 self [1,2], which reflects the socially and institutionally imposed expectation that Mandarin should be treated as their normative or ideal L1. This dissonance of language usage situation creates identity tensions that affect students' self-perception, participation, and sense of belonging in classroom spaces, especially within "the essentialist discourses of Chineseness" (Zhou & Liu, 2023, p. 383).

Translanguaging, defined as the process by which multilingual individuals flexibly draw on their full linguistic repertoires to make meaning and construct knowledge (García & Li, 2014), can serve as a pedagogical response to such tensions. In education, translanguaging offers both cognitive and affective benefits and creates inclusive classroom spaces that validate students' multilingual repertoires (Prilutskaya, 2023). Recent scholarship has highlighted its potential not only for facilitating learning but also for empowering minoritised learners by enabling them to assert agency and reconfigure their multilingual identities (Bisai & Singh, 2024; D'Angelo, 2021; Kleemann, 2021). However, in China, most studies to date have focused on high-profile bilingual settings, particularly involving Mandarin and English (Y. Yang, 2024), with far less attention paid to heritage language contexts where students must learn the dominant national language through or alongside their minoritised home language.

As such, in this study, we focus on a group of secondary school students from the Yi ethnic group (*彝族*) in China. These students speak Yi Language (*彝语*, a syllabic script belonging to the Sino-Tibetan language family) as their actual L1, with Mandarin institutionally promoted as their ought-to L1. The classroom setting under investigation is a Mandarin language class where the teacher employs translanguaging practices that draw on students' Yi linguistic resources. Specifically, this study explores:

- How do translanguaging practices involving the Yi Language occur in the teaching and learning of Mandarin?
- How do these translanguaging practices shape students' multilingual identity construction?

These two questions are linked by the understanding that translanguaging is not just a pedagogical strategy but a social act that shapes identity (Li & Lee, 2024). In other words, the identity work students perform and the negotiations of the boundaries between their actual and ought-to L1 selves could be shaped by the translanguaging opportunities or constraints present in the classroom. Taken together, the two questions examine what students *do* with language and who they are *becoming* through those practices in a stratified sociolinguistic order. This inquiry contributes to broader conversations about translanguaging as a pedagogical and social strategy in multilingual contexts.

Literature Review

Heritage languages are typically defined as languages learned at home or within ethnic communities, which represent crucial links to cultural identity and emotional belonging (Beaudrie & Loza, 2023). Research has highlighted the value of heritage languages and emphasised their role in preserving cultural identity (Özkaynak, 2025; Zhou & Liu, 2023) and supporting cognitive and academic development (Su & Long, 2022). However, educational systems often overlook these languages, which can lead students to experience identity tensions and language attrition (Helmer, 2020), particularly in contexts where mastering and using dominant or official languages is the normative expectation—such as in China, where the promotion of Mandarin as the national language and its associated outcomes of linguistic and cultural assimilation have resulted in the systemic marginalisation of heritage languages from formal education (C. Yang, 2024).

Translanguaging offers a promising approach for engaging heritage languages. Originally conceptualised as the intentional pedagogical use of multiple languages to facilitate learning, translanguaging has evolved into a broader sociolinguistic theory emphasising language fluidity, learner agency, and identity construction (García & Li, 2014). Translanguaging research has demonstrated their potential to legitimise marginalised linguistic resources and foster positive multilingual identities by creating space for identity negotiation, cultural affirmation, and the bridging of linguistic and academic demands. For example, Rajendram (2021) found translanguaging involving Tamil in English language teaching in Malaysia enabled students to mobilise their home languages as epistemic resources and foster a sense of ownership. Similarly, in contexts where English is taught as a second or foreign language (L2), Afreen and Norton's (2022) study on the use of Bangla in Canada and Leonet et al.'s (2024) research on the use of Basque in Spain demonstrated that students felt more included, participated more actively, and positioned themselves as legitimate multilinguals. In a related study, Schwartz and Shogen (2024) highlighted how the use of Circassian in an English class in Israel helped students in a racially minoritised community access curriculum content and assert their cultural identities in spaces traditionally governed by monolingual norms. Collectively, these studies underscore the potential of translanguaging in affirming students' multilingual competencies and fostering identity-affirming classroom environments. This stands in contrast to research trends in China, where studies on language transfer dominate inquiries into the academic benefits of heritage languages—as exemplified by Bi's (2020) investigation into Yi Language use and Su and Long's (2022) study on the integration of Dong Language in English teaching.

However, these studies have predominantly examined the use of heritage languages in L2 education, especially in English language classrooms where the target language (TL) is often viewed as a foreign resource. Contrarily, our study shifts the focus to how students' heritage languages (actual L1) are used in the teaching of a dominant national language, which in the Chinese context represents their ought-to L1. This distinction is not merely contextual but ideological. Existing translanguaging research has largely overlooked the power-laden dynamics that emerge when minoritised linguistic resources are mobilised within the very systems marginalising them (Vogel, 2022). Translanguaging in dominant-language classrooms is not simply a pedagogical support mechanism; it becomes a site of linguistic struggle and identity negotiation, where students must reconcile the emotional resonance of their heritage language with the symbolic capital of the imposed national language. The scarcity of studies in such contexts reflects a broader tendency in translanguaging literature to treat linguistic

fluidity as inherently (MacSwan, 2022), without sufficiently interrogating the language hierarchies that condition its practice.

This critique becomes especially urgent when viewed through the lens of multilingual identity. While existing research has shown how translanguaging supports identity affirmation in bilingual or L2 contexts (Bisai & Singh, 2024; D'Angelo, 2021; Kleemann, 2021), far less is known about how students navigate identity in classrooms where the TL is both a tool for social advancement and a vehicle of linguistic assimilation—such as in China, where research indicates students may consider using heritage languages as inappropriate in formal education due to their perceived incompatibility with academic success and institutional norms (Cai, 2022; Sun, 2023). In such environments, translanguaging is not only a communicative practice—it is an identity act that reveals the tensions between who students are and who they are expected to become. Understanding translanguaging through multilingual identity construction allows us to examine how learners respond to these contradictions: whether through compliance, resistance, negotiation, or reinvention.

Recognising multilingual identity refers to the dynamic self-perceptions and presentations that individuals develop through engagement with multiple languages and the complex interplay of personal histories, social expectations, and linguistic ideologies (Forbes et al., 2021; Siebenhütter, 2023), we adopt the 3Es Framework to approach multilingual identity through three dimensions: evaluation, emotion, and experience (Fisher et al., 2024). The evaluation dimension refers to how learners assess different languages, multilingualism, and their linguistic identities—often influenced by societal hierarchies, institutional discourses, and personal beliefs. Rather than merely reflecting attitudes, such evaluations shape learners' positioning of themselves and others in linguistic terms, with research indicating students often internalise dominant ideologies about language legitimacy, which in turn affect their willingness to use certain languages in academic contexts (Cai, 2022; Özkaynak, 2025). The emotion dimension highlights the affect in identity construction and captures how emotional responses (e.g. anxiety, enjoyment) mediate learners' language engagement. These emotions are not limited to isolated learning episodes but extend to self-perceptions tied to language use, as research suggests affective responses often serve as indicators of how learners internalise their linguistic positioning in relation to broader societal values (Beaudrie & Loza, 2023; Özkaynak, 2025). The experience dimension emphasises the role of learners' interactions with languages over time, suggesting identity is also shaped by embodied encounters with multilingual practices in social settings. The focus of the present study on school settings is particularly justified, as researchers argue schools are not merely sites of language learning but also critical arenas where language ideologies are reproduced, contested, and internalised (Bisai & Singh, 2024; Ngarsou, 2022). It is within these structured environments that learners' experiences with languages, classroom interactions, peer dynamics, and teacher expectations contribute to how they come to understand and perform their multilingual selves.

Methodology

Research Design and Participants

With informed consent, this study was conducted in a secondary school in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture (*凉山彝族自治州*), a predominantly Yi ethnic region in Sichuan Province, China (Bi, 2020). The school serves a large population of Yi students, most of whom speak Yi Language at home as their primary means of communication. Mandarin is the official medium of instruction in the school, aligning with national language policy and curriculum

standards. The research focused on a Mandarin language classroom, where the teacher, herself ethnically Yi, adopted translanguaging practices. This context provided a unique opportunity to explore how translanguaging involving students' heritage language was enacted in a setting where Mandarin, as the dominant and institutionally valorised language, represented students' ought-to L1.

A case study design was adopted, which enabled us to capture the depth and complexity of these experiences within a bounded, real-life setting (Hennink et al., 2020) and allowed for a holistic understanding of the linguistic practices and identity negotiations taking place. Among several Mandarin classrooms, one Year-7 classroom was purposefully selected due to its consistent integration of Yi Language during instruction. Unlike other classes where translanguaging was either discouraged or occurred minimally, this class stood out for the teacher's intentional use of Yi Language alongside Mandarin, despite the nationally prescribed curriculum that required students to develop Mandarin literacy and communicative competence (e.g. interpreting textbook passages, composing short essays) through standardised, monolingual textbooks. Preliminary observations and consultations with school leadership confirmed that the selected teacher—a fluent speaker of both Yi Language and Mandarin in her early thirties, with a master's degree in English education and over five years of teaching experience—had long supported students' use of their home language as part of classroom learning. This made the classroom an information-rich case for exploring how heritage language use is pedagogically enacted and experienced by students.

The participants included the teacher and 37 students (20 females and 17 males), aged 12–14 years old, all of Yi ethnic background and enrolled in the selected class. Based on school records, all students identified Yi Language as their actual L1, which they had acquired from childhood and continued to use actively in daily interactions. Mandarin, contrarily, was first introduced to them as a subject in primary school as part of formal education. According to a locally administered placement test, by the time they entered secondary school, their Mandarin proficiency varied but overall remained limited, particularly in academic registers. In contrast, their Yi Language proficiency remained high, especially in oral communication, although literacy skills were more uneven due to limited formal instruction. These profiles positioned the students as heritage language speakers navigating Mandarin as an ought-to L1 in the school where their actual L1 held little formal status. While the selected class was observed, nine students (five females and four males) were additionally recruited through voluntary sampling to participate in extended interview-based data collection. After an invitation was extended to the class, these students expressed willingness to participate in the study. This sample size was deemed sufficient to achieve qualitative saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2020).

Data Collection and Analysis

The classroom was first observed in a non-participant manner, with video recordings capturing classroom interactions. Observations were conducted over eight consecutive weeks during one semester, with each week consisting of four 45-minute lessons. The recordings were transcribed verbatim using Jefferson's (2004) conventions[3] to represent detailed talk features, which enabled analysis of how translanguaging was implemented. Interviews were conducted with the focal students every two weeks, resulting in a total of four interview rounds per participant. The primary aim of these interviews was to explore students' perceptions of their multilingual identity, particularly in relation to their use of Yi Language and Mandarin in the classroom. Interviews were conducted individually on campus, using either Yi Language or Mandarin depending on the students' preferences and comfort levels. Sample questions

included: “How do you feel when speaking Yi Language in class?”, “When do you choose to use Yi Language instead of Mandarin?”, and “Do you think such language use changes how you see yourself?” All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for analysis.

Collected data were analysed thematically, following the steps of familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, theme review, and definition and naming of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Codes for the observation data were generated using a hybrid approach, combining inductive codes emerging from the data and deductive codes (e.g., explaining TL grammar/vocabulary, giving classroom instructions, calling attention) drawn from a codebook developed based on existing literature on the pedagogical roles of translanguaging (Mendoza, 2023; Y. Yang, 2024). Likewise, interview data were also analysed via a hybrid approach. Deductive codes were initially developed based on the 3Es Framework, focusing on evaluation, emotion, and experience as key dimensions of multilingual identity. A codebook was constructed to guide this process, including overarching categories such as language evaluation, emotional positioning, language perceptions, and classroom language experiences. As analysis progressed, inductive refinement was applied. For instance, under emotional positioning, emergent subcodes included ‘anxiety with heritage language use’, ‘pride in heritage language use’, and ‘feelings of inauthenticity’. This layered approach allowed for the identification of recurring patterns across participants while preserving attention to individual variation in identity construction.

Throughout the process, we ensured qualitative trustworthiness, firstly by member checking, where preliminary interpretations were shared with participants to confirm the accuracy of representation and enhance the credibility of the findings. Secondly, data triangulation was achieved by drawing on multiple sources across time and participants—specifically, classroom observations collected over several weeks and interviews conducted with different students at multiple intervals. This allowed for a more corroborated understanding of translanguaging practices and multilingual identity construction. Peer debriefing was also conducted with specialists not involved in the study, which enabled critical reflection on coding decisions, emerging patterns, and potential bias.

Findings

Translanguaging Practices

Classroom observations revealed various translanguaging practices that permeated instructional and interactional moments. Unlike much of the existing research, which emphasised teachers’ roles in orchestrating translanguaging (Kleemann, 2021; Prilutskaya, 2023), this study demonstrates translanguaging could be a mutually negotiated practice, initiated and sustained by both the teacher and students, highlighting their agency in shaping the linguistic ecology of the classroom. Specifically, we observed the language teacher employed translanguaging practices mainly for the following purposes:

- Clarifying Mandarin Vocabulary and Grammar: The teacher regularly used Yi Language to scaffold students’ understanding of new or difficult Mandarin vocabulary and grammatical structures. This often involved offering direct translations, paraphrasing complex terms, or explaining abstract concepts through relevant examples in Yi Language. By anchoring Mandarin content in students’ existing linguistic and

conceptual frameworks, the teacher enabled deeper cognitive processing and reduced cognitive load during language learning.

T: 我们看成语临危不惧。
Let's look at this idiom: facing danger fearlessly.

St1: 是不是跟勇敢差不多？
It's similar to "brave"?

T: (1.0) 对，但更复杂。
Yes, but more complex.

T: ꆹꑌꎧꑭꌠꁱꆹꑭ，ꑭꎿꑚꑟꑌꆹ，ꀋꑱꑚꑭꌠꑌꑟꎧ。
It means, when danger comes, you don't run, you face it calmly.

St2: ꁯ，ꎧꑭꑭꑱꑌꑚꑭꑱ?
Oh, like Zhige A-lu ((a hero in Yi's culture))*?*

T: 对！
Yes!

- Modelling Cross-Linguistic Comparison: Occasionally, the teacher explicitly compared Yi Language and Mandarin structures—pointing out differences in syntax, tone, or morphology. For instance, Mandarin classifiers or word order were contrasted with equivalent Yi Language constructions to draw students' attention to underlying language systems. This helped cultivate students' metalinguistic awareness and equipped them with analytical tools for deeper language learning.

T: 看这个句子，我不喜欢苹果。谁能告诉我哪里是不要的意思？
Look at this sentence: "I don't like apples". Who can tell me where the "not want" part is?

St3: 是不。
It's "not".

T: 对！我不喜欢。彝语里我们怎么说呢？
Yes! "I don't like…". In Yi Language, how do we say that?

T: ꀋꑍꑌꀊꀋꃅꑭ。
I don't like it.

St: ꑚꎿꑭ"ꀋꀊ"ꑍꑋꑷꑜꀊ。
We say "not want" at the end.

T: 对，彝语的不在后面，而汉语相反。
Yes, in Yi Language, "not" is at the end; in Mandarin, it's different.

- Delivering Instructions and Managing Classroom Behaviour: Yi Language was employed for giving procedural directions and managing classroom conduct—especially when swift comprehension was needed to maintain lesson flow. The teacher used Yi Language to issue task instructions, regulate transitions, redirect attention, and occasionally discipline. This practice ensured clarity and immediate compliance, particularly for students who were still developing Mandarin proficiency.

  T: 我们来写一段话，关于最喜欢的季节。
  We'll write a paragraph about your favourite season.

  St4: 写在哪？
  Where do we write?

  T: (.) ꆈꌠꁱꂷꀋꃅꂷꓬꏦꁨ，ꑍꎭꂷꀋꄓꋍꓬꑚꑍ。
  Take your exercise book, open to the new page.

  St4: 好的老师。
  Okay, teacher.

  ((some students are still chatting quietly))

  T: ꁅꑟ！
  Stop talking!

- Eliciting Responses and Encouraging Participation: To mitigate student reluctance and promote participation, the teacher sometimes asked questions or accepted answers in Yi Language. This created a psychologically safe space where students could express themselves without fear of linguistic inadequacy. In doing so, the teacher positioned Yi Language as a legitimate means of communication and helped students actively participate in Mandarin.

  T: 来，阿洛 ((pseudonym))，你来用今天的天气造句。
  Aluo, make a sentence with "today's weather".

  St5 ((Aluo)): ((looks down, silent)) (1.0)

  T: 没事，可以先用彝语。
  It's okay. You can use Yi Language first.

  T: ꑍꐚꉼꎲꉼꀠꀕꀋꉼꁅ。
  Just say what you see outside.

  St5: ꑍꐚꀠꁅꉼ。
  It's raining outside.

  T: 对！那你可以说：*今天的天气是下雨*。
  Great! So you can say: Today's weather is raining.

St5: ˚今天的天气是下雨。˚
Today's weather is raining.

T: ꆈꌠꆈ!
Well done!

- Building Relational and Emotional Connection: Beyond instructional use, Yi Language served as a relational tool that enabled the teacher to foster trust, emotional safety, and interpersonal connection. Through informal expressions and culturally resonant references, the teacher signalled attentiveness to students' backgrounds and emotional needs. These interactions humanised the classroom space and affirmed students' value not just as learners but as culturally situated individuals.

T: 娜几 ((pseudonym))来读下一段。
Naji, you read the next paragraph.

St6 ((Naji)): ((nervous)) ˚老师˚，(.) 我怕读错。
Teacher, I'm afraid of reading it wrong.

T: ꑭꑌꆏꌦ——ꑱꑘꑍꑩꑦꑖꑓꑷꑘꆏꋍꌩ，ꑌꑴꑷꑭꑍꑩꑖꑱꑘꑴꑷ！((a Yi saying))
Don't be afraid—if the rooster crows strangely, it still wakes the village!

T: 大家都在学习，不怕。
Everyone's learning. Don't be afraid.

St6: ((nods)) 我试试。
I'll try.

- Embedding Heritage Knowledge: Yi Language was also used intentionally to embed students' cultural heritage into the curriculum. During reading tasks or thematic discussions, the teacher introduced local customs, idioms, and narratives in Yi to contextualise Mandarin content. This enhanced comprehension and positioned students' cultural knowledge as a legitimate resource in academic learning.

T: 谁知道<u>天文学家</u>？
Who knows what an astronomer is?

((Nobody answers))

T: ꐚꑲꋏꐠꑳꐠꑋꐓꑀꑭꑐꐚꐘꑀꑘꑀꑭꑐꐚꑳꐓꑀꑳꐓꑀꑳꐓꑀ

T: ꆏꂷꃅꀋꌠꆏꌠꃀꌠꀋꀋꉆꁯꂾ？
In Yi tradition, who is best at reading stars?

St7: ((excited)) ꀉꈬ！
The priest!

T: 没错，ꀉꈬ。
Exactly, the priest.

We also documented the following student-initiated translanguaging practices:

- Seeking Clarification: Students used Yi Language to ask the teacher questions when they did not fully understand instructions or linguistic forms in Mandarin. This helped them express uncertainty more confidently and allowed the teacher to respond in a way that acknowledged their linguistic comfort zone.

  T: 明天交作业。先概括一下课文，再写一个观点。
  Submit your homework tomorrow. First, summarise the text, then write a viewpoint.

  St8: ((raises hand)) “概括”ꆏꂷꁌꌠꂾ?
  What does “summarise” mean?

  T: “概括”ꁌꌠꂾꂷꎭꀄꎭꃅꁱꎭꂷꀘ—ꆿꆏꎭꀄ，ꀘꂷꎭꎭꀄꎭꃅꁅꎭꂷꀄꂷ。
  “Summarise” means to tell just the main parts—not all, only the important ones.

  St8: ꀋꎭ。
  Okay.

- Demonstrating Understanding: Some students began their answers in Yi Language, using it as a scaffold, before translating or paraphrasing into Mandarin. This sequential use of languages demonstrated emerging metalinguistic awareness and their ability to bridge heritage knowledge with institutional expectations.

  T: 谁来解释滴水穿石，不是力量大，而是功夫深。
  Who can explain: “Dripping water wears through stone—not because of strength, but because of persistence”?

  St9: ꆿꀋꁦꀋꀘꌅꆏꊂ，ꀊꑭꀘꏦꀋꃔꌠꀋꂰꁨꑭꂰꀘꆏꊂ，ꑌꑐꃔꂷꀄ。
  Even small things, if they keep going, they can succeed.

  St9: (1.0) 就是，不是因为水强，而是它坚持，才把石头滴穿。
  It means it’s not because water is strong, but because it keeps going that it wears through the stone.

  T: 很好！
  Well-done!

- Explaining Mandarin Concepts to Peers: Yi Language was frequently used by students to help peers make sense of Mandarin content during group tasks. These peer explanations reinforced a collaborative classroom environment and revealed how students drew on their heritage language to co-construct academic meaning.

  St10: ꀀ画蛇添足是啥？ꀀ
  What does "drawing legs on a snake" mean?

  St11: ꀀ ꆏꌠꉬꑱꀋꄓꉬꄓꉼꂿꂱꃅꄓꌠꃅꄓꀋꁨꑱꄓ，ꂷꁯꉬꀊꎆꏦꑱꂿꂱꉬꄓꏃꁯꂿꎭ—ꏝꏣꐚꀋꀋꏂꑱꂿꂱꉬꄓꑱ。ꀀ
  When you do something extra that ruins the good part—it becomes worse!

  St10: ꀀ ꑱꀋꉬꏤꑱꄓꂷꁯꉬꀋꎆ？ꀀ
  Does it mean doing too much actually makes it worse?

  St11: ꀀ对。ꀀ
  Yes.

- Expressing Emotions and Reactions: Students often reacted to surprising, confusing, or humorous moments using Yi Language—for example, expressing frustration with a difficult task, laughing at a classmate's comment, or showing excitement. These spontaneous utterances signalled emotional authenticity and reinforced Yi Language as a sign of comfort and connection.

  T: 每组要用两个成语编对话，五分钟后表演给大家。
  Each group needs to create a dialogue using two idioms and perform it in five minutes.

  St12: ꑭꑲꑟ！
  This is too hard!

  St13: ((laughs)) ꑦꑴꑯꑬꑵ！
  We can do it!

  T: ꑴꑞꑴꑞꉼꀋ，ꑯꑘꑴꑶꑴꑷꑘꑶꑬꑮꑯꑬꑲꑴꑶꑀꑋꑴꀋ。
  Take your time—start by choosing the two idioms you understand best.

- Embedding Yi Idioms or Cultural References: Students occasionally injected Yi sayings or cultural metaphors during discussions or presentations. These utterances served rhetorical, humorous, or illustrative purposes, adding emotional depth and cultural nuance to their classroom discourse.

  St14: ((during a presentation)) 我们常说：ꂾꀘꊨꉼꑟ，ꓬꑶꑫꑬꑭꑞꀋꑭꀊ。((a Yi idiom))
  We always say: bees may fly busily, but never forget the flower's scent.

T: 你是说人不能忘本，对吗？
You mean we shouldn't forget our roots, right?

Learners' Multilingual Identity

We identified three types of multilingual identity profiles among the students. These profiles—resistant, emerging, and reflexive—reflect the varied ways students interpreted, responded to, and positioned themselves within the translanguaging practices observed in the classroom. Analysed through the 3Es Framework (evaluation, emotion, and experience), these identity orientations illuminate how learners negotiated the complex sociolinguistic tensions between their heritage language and the dominant language of schooling.

Resistant Multilingual Identity

The first profile was resistant, which was marked by a constrained understanding of multilingualism and a reluctance to identify as multilingual (Aronin & Laoire, 2022), despite evident engagement with Yi Language and Mandarin in classroom contexts. This profile illustrates the limits of translanguaging when dominant language ideologies remain unchallenged. In the *evaluation* dimension, some students framed Mandarin as the only legitimate language for academic achievement and future success. Yi Language, by contrast, was viewed as private and peripheral. These evaluations reflected a deep internalisation of state-sanctioned linguistic hierarchies (Ghimire, 2021), in which Mandarin was constructed not merely as a tool of instruction but as the standard for intellectual legitimacy. Thus, even when translanguaging practices were present in the classroom, they were often interpreted as compensatory or remedial—supporting those who had not yet mastered Mandarin rather than affirming the value of multiple languages. Multilingualism, for these students, was not embraced as a resource or identity position but reduced to a temporary stage to be surpassed on the path to Mandarin monolingualism. Consequently, students struggled to see themselves as legitimate multilinguals, adopting a deficit view of Yi Language and identifying primarily as Mandarin learners.

> *"I don't think I'm multilingual. I'm learning Mandarin, and Yi Language doesn't really count in school. It's just what I speak at home, [but] it can't help me get better in school."*

> *"Mandarin is the real language we need… Yi Language is informal... If I keep using Yi Language, I won't improve, and teachers might think I'm not hardworking."*

Emotional dimensions of language use further reinforced these hierarchies. Students expressed feelings of unease, embarrassment, and even shame when using Yi Language in classroom interactions, particularly during teacher-directed tasks. Far from creating a sense of comfort, translanguaging was often viewed as risky, with students fearing misrecognition, ridicule, or academic penalisation. This emotional dissonance reveals how educational environments structured by assimilationist norms can produce what might be termed affective suppression (Sun, 2023)—where students emotionally disavow their heritage language in order to conform to dominant expectations. These responses signal not only identity insecurity but also emotional labour in managing multiple, often conflicting, linguistic selves.

> *"Sometimes when I speak Yi Language in class, I feel nervous. What if the teacher thinks I'm not serious, or the others laugh? It's safer to just use Mandarin… [though] I don't always know the right words."*

Experientially, students in the resistant profile engaged with translanguaging in limited and often surface-level ways. Although exposed to translanguaging practices in the Mandarin classroom, they frequently interpreted the use of Yi Language as a temporary scaffold rather than a legitimate part of instruction. Their classroom experiences did not appear to disrupt earlier assumptions that only Mandarin belonged in academic spaces, and they rarely saw translanguaging as a meaningful tool for learning or self-expression. Although Yi Language was used for better understanding and engagement, students often described it as something meant for those who were 'behind', rather than as a valued practice in its own right. As such, their engagement with translanguaging was shaped more by compliance than agency (Mendoza, 2023), and the practice itself was not experienced as transformative but as an exception to institutional norms.

> *"When the teacher uses Yi Language, it feels like she's doing us a favour because we're behind. I've never seen anyone succeed by using Yi Language in school, so I think we should rely less on it."*

Emergent Multilingual Identity

The emerging multilingual identity profile was characterised by a developing awareness of multilingualism and a more reflective stance toward the roles of both Yi Language and Mandarin in students' lives. While these students did not fully articulate a cohesive multilingual identity, there were clear signs of movement—particularly in how they began to question rigid language boundaries and recognise their everyday engagement with multiple languages as meaningful (Siebenhütter, 2023). Students in this profile demonstrated a more evolving *evaluation* of both Yi Language and Mandarin. While Mandarin continued to be associated with academic achievement and institutional authority, Yi Language was increasingly recognised not only as a language of the home but also as a source of cultural knowledge, emotional grounding, and social connection. Several students began to resist simplistic hierarchies between the two languages and express appreciation for the familiarity of Yi Language. Their comments suggested a growing awareness of multilingualism as more than just a transitional phase or coping mechanism, but as a valuable capacity with personal and social benefits (Aronin & Laoire, 2022). Some students began to articulate pride in being able to move between languages, describing it as "useful," "clever," or "something others cannot do". However, their self-evaluation as multilinguals remained cautious; while they acknowledged using both languages regularly, some hesitated to label themselves as "good" in either, indicating uncertainties about whether full bilingualism required native-like proficiency (Helmer, 2020). Nonetheless, compared to the resistant group, these students were beginning to frame their linguistic repertoire as a legitimate asset—if not yet fully integrated into their sense of self.

> *"Yi Language is what I use with my families. It's different from Mandarin.. [which] is for school. Both are important in different ways."*

> *"I think it's good to know two languages. Not everyone can switch like that… [though] I'm still not sure if I speak either one very well."*

Affective responses also revealed an evolving *emotional* positioning. While some students still expressed hesitance when using Yi Language in classroom contexts, they also described moments of pride, comfort, and even enjoyment when the language was explicitly validated by

the teacher. These emotions were often tied to particular translanguaging episodes where their Yi Language contributions were not only accepted but acknowledged as legitimate and helpful. Such positive reinforcement appeared to destabilise prior feelings of shame or inadequacy and create emotional space for more complex and affirming associations with their heritage language (D'Angelo, 2021). However, this emotional shift was fragile and context-dependent, shaped by the degree of support and recognition they received in classroom interactions.

> *"When the teacher used Yi Language and said my answer helped others understand, I felt proud… Maybe it's okay to use our language here... But I still wait to see if it's really allowed."*

Regarding *experience*, these students actively engaged with translanguaging practices, often reflecting on how switching between Yi Language and Mandarin helped them understand content, support peers, and participate more fully. Unlike the resistant profile, students in this group did not view translanguaging as remedial. Instead, they began to see it as a strategy (Kleemann, 2021)—albeit one not yet fully institutionalised—for bridging gaps in comprehension and articulating knowledge. Their accounts suggested repeated exposure to translanguaging, when accompanied by teacher scaffolding and peer collaboration, could serve as a meaningful experiential resource for reshaping linguistic identities (Li & Lee, 2024). Yet, their sense of legitimacy as multilinguals remained in progress, highlighting the need for more sustained pedagogical support to consolidate this emerging orientation.

> *"Before, I thought using Yi Language meant I wasn't good at Mandarin. But now I feel like it helps me explain things to classmates, and sometimes I understand better myself… It's not perfect, but it works for me."*

Reflexive Multilingual Identity

The reflexive profile was marked by a thoughtful and self-aware engagement with translanguaging (Leonet et al., 2024), which actively fostered a more affirming sense of multilingual identity. Through *evaluation*, these students articulated clear and critical understandings of the roles played by both Yi Language and Mandarin. They recognised Mandarin's utility for academic success and social mobility but simultaneously rejected the notion that this made Yi Language less legitimate. Instead, they positioned both languages as valuable in different domains of life and embraced multilingualism as a core part of their identity (Tavares, 2021). They frequently described their ability to navigate between languages not just as a skill, but as a unique strength that allowed them to connect across contexts and communities. Moreover, they evaluated themselves as competent multilinguals, often identifying moments of successful language use as affirmations of their evolving linguistic repertoire.

> *"Both Yi Language and Mandarin are important—Mandarin helps with school and exams, but Yi is who I am… I need both."*

> *"Being able to speak both isn't just useful, it's part of me. It means… I can understand more things, explain better, and help others too."*

In the *emotional* dimension, students described language learning as intrinsically enjoyable—an affective shift that extended beyond the acquisition of Mandarin to include the use of both Yi Language and Mandarin in dynamic ways. This enjoyment was not limited to moments of

academic success but emerged particularly through translanguaging episodes where students could express themselves authentically. Rather than feeling constrained by the formal demands of Mandarin or the perceived informality of Yi Language, they reported satisfaction in navigating both languages. For these students, the act of using multiple languages—switching between, combining, and creatively deploying them (Prilutskaya, 2023)—was itself a source of pride and pleasure. Such positive affect signalled both comfort and emotional ownership of their multilingual practices (Su & Long, 2022), suggesting identity affirmation was being experienced as both cognitively and emotionally fulfilling.

> *"When I can use both languages to say what I really mean, it feels good—like I'm not hiding anything, just being myself... I'm proud of speaking two languages."*

Regarding *experience*, these students engaged with translanguaging not only as a learning tool but also as a mode of identity performance and negotiation. They reported using Yi Language and Mandarin strategically, not just to clarify meaning or support peers, but to express complex ideas, signal solidarity, and affirm their cultural selves. For them, translanguaging was no longer about bridging gaps—it was a legitimate and purposeful practice that reflected who they were. Their sustained and agentive use of both languages in classroom suggested a well-established comfort with linguistic hybridity (Beaudrie & Loza, 2023), as well as a critical awareness of the social meanings attached to their language practices (Afreen & Norton, 2022). This experiential depth positioned them as active constructors of multilingual identity.

> *"The experience of using Yi Language and Mandarin together in class not just helps me understand—it shows who I am... It's not switching anymore, it's just speaking as myself."*

Discussion

The study identified various scenarios of translanguaging practices. While some of these—particularly those initiated by the teacher to scaffold TL learning, model cross-linguistic comparisons, provide feedback, and manage the classroom—align with what has been widely documented in the literature (Kleemann, 2021; Prilutskaya, 2023), the study also highlights students' agency in engaging in translanguaging to seek clarification, offer peer support, and demonstrate understanding. More importantly, translanguaging serves as more than a pedagogical scaffold (Mendoza, 2023); in this study, it functioned as a relational, epistemic, and identity-affirming practice—particularly when the intentional use of Yi Language was employed to embed cultural knowledge, elicit student responses, and foster emotional connection. This dynamic language use observed across instructional and interactional moments suggests translanguaging is not a top-down pedagogical intervention but an emergent and collaborative practice (Bisai & Singh, 2024), which is shaped by participants' linguistic needs, cultural affiliations, and evolving identity positions.

In the translanguaging practices involving Yi Language (actual L1) within the Mandarin (ought-to L1) classroom, interestedly, we observed multilingual identity did not consistently evolve in affirming ways. The resistant multilingual identity profile revealed the mere presence of the actual L1 in classroom discourse was not enough to shift students' internalised beliefs about language legitimacy. From the perspective of the 3Es Framework (Fisher et al., 2024) students evaluated Mandarin as the principal academically legitimate language, while viewing Yi Language as informal; emotionally, they associated the use of Yi Language with anxiety, shame, or fear of being judged; and experientially, they engaged with translanguaging in

limited ways, perceiving it as remedial support rather than as an empowering practice. When the ought-to L1 continues to be framed as the principal pathway to academic success and social mobility (Cai, 2022), translanguaging involving the actual L1 risks being perceived as remedial rather than empowering. In such cases, students may devalue their heritage language and internalise dominant ideologies that position Mandarin as the only legitimate language of schooling. This dynamic underscores a critical limitation of translanguaging: without explicit pedagogical efforts to challenge linguistic hierarchies and legitimise the epistemic value of heritage languages, translanguaging may inadvertently reinforce the very norms it seeks to resist (MacSwan, 2022; Vogel, 2022). In the present study, students from the resistant profile perceived Yi Language as merely tolerated—invoked to aid comprehension but rarely framed as equal in cognitive or cultural status to Mandarin. Therefore, the symbolic boundaries (Aronin & Laoire, 2022) between their actual and ought-to L1s remained firmly intact, constraining both their classroom engagement and the development of a confident multilingual identity.

However, the emergent multilingual identity profile illustrates how multilingual identity can begin to develop in the ideological space between students' actual L1 and ought-to L1. When translanguaging was supported by teacher validation and explicit classroom recognition of students' linguistic repertoires, they began to evaluate both Yi Language and Mandarin as holding different but complementary value; emotionally, they described moments of pride and enjoyment—albeit fragile—when Yi Language was legitimised; and experientially, they started to use translanguaging more confidently to support learning and classroom participation This suggests students' re-evaluation of the hierarchical status of their linguistic resources (Özkaynak, 2025) and more reflective engagement with their multilingual selves (Ghimire, 2021). These shifts, though often cautious and context-sensitive (Beaudrie & Loza, 2023), signal the beginning of a reframing process wherein students move from viewing their actual L1 as peripheral to recognising it as part of a valued linguistic repertoire. This emerging identity is negotiated in tension with the institutional discourse that promotes Mandarin as the normative standard (C. Yang, 2024), demonstrating that translanguaging can open space for re-evaluating internalised ideologies. This finding aligns with recent studies emphasising translanguaging's potential to transform learners' self-perceptions by affirming the cultural and cognitive value of multiple languages (D'Angelo, 2021; Kleemann, 2021). Nonetheless, the tentative nature of these shifts underscores the importance of critically oriented pedagogical support that consistently positions students' actual L1 as central to both learning and identity formation.

The reflexive multilingual identity profile offers the most compelling evidence of translanguaging's transformative potential—but also its conditional nature. In classrooms where Yi Language remains structurally subordinated to Mandarin, translanguaging becomes meaningful only when it is accompanied by explicit validation and sustained pedagogical framing. Students in this profile evaluated both languages as legitimate, expressed emotional pride in their linguistic hybridity, and described experiential agency in using language to learn, connect, and represent the self. Yet this outcome was not automatic (Tavares, 2021); it emerged where translanguaging was treated not as a workaround for linguistic deficiency, but as a tool for epistemic empowerment and identity negotiation (D'Angelo, 2021; Rajendram, 2021). Critically, this challenges common pedagogical narratives that assume translanguaging is inherently liberatory (Su & Long, 2022; Y. Yang, 2024). Without deliberate, ideological repositioning of heritage languages within curriculum and assessment, even well-intentioned translanguaging risks becoming tokenistic. The reflexive profile thus underscores that affirming multilingual identities in dominant-language classrooms requires more than

momentary inclusion—it demands structural recognition of actual L1s as co-constructors of knowledge and legitimacy.

Although all students were exposed to the same translanguaging practices, their multilingual identities developed in divergent ways. This variation cannot be attributed to differences in instructional input, but rather to how students perceived and responded to translanguaging based on their positioning within the classroom's sociolinguistic order (Beaudrie & Loza, 2023). Some students interpreted the inclusion of Yi Language as a temporary accommodation, while others embraced it as a tool for expression and learning. Their responses, ranging from resistance to reflexivity, reflected differing levels of recognition, emotional investment, and classroom engagement (Fisher et al., 2024) with translanguaging. This variability highlights two critical points. First, translanguaging is not ideologically neutral; its function is mediated by the symbolic power relations between languages. In this study, Yi Language functioned not only as a linguistic code but as a bearer of marginalised identity—thus its use in classrooms required more than inclusion; it demanded revalorisation. Second, multilingual identity construction is not just cognitive, but affective and experiential. Without positive emotional reinforcement and meaningful engagement across contexts, students may remain caught in the symbolic dissonance between their actual and ought-to L1s.

Implications and Conclusion

This study explored how translanguaging practices involving a heritage language within a Mandarin classroom shaped students' multilingual identity construction. While translanguaging was observed and strategically employed by both teacher and students, students responded to these practices in divergent ways, resulting in three multilingual identity profiles: resistant, emergent, and reflexive. These findings underscore translanguaging does not automatically affirm multilingual identity—it is mediated by how students evaluate language legitimacy, experience classroom practices, and emotionally engage with linguistic hierarchies. Thus, one important implication is that translanguaging must not be reduced to a pragmatic accommodation for linguistic gaps. Instead, it should be deliberately framed as an epistemic and cultural resource that challenges language hierarchies. This requires teachers to move beyond using the minoritised language merely to clarify or simplify content, and instead embed it purposefully to legitimise students' ways of knowing, cultural references, and identity positions.

Moreover, teachers should explicitly address the power dynamics between languages in the classroom. When students perceive their shared or heritage language as inferior—socially, academically, or emotionally—the inclusion of that language in instruction can be misinterpreted as remedial. Teachers should name and critique these dynamics and help students understand using multiple languages is not a sign of deficiency, but of linguistic strength and cultural legitimacy. Curriculum planners and policymakers also need to recognise translanguaging is not ideologically neutral. In education systems where dominant languages are institutionally privileged, allowing—but not institutionally affirming—students' minoritised languages risks reinforcing their subordinate status. Thus, translanguaging must be institutionalised in curriculum design, teacher training, and assessment frameworks, not just tolerated in individual classrooms.

Since this study is limited by its focus on a single classroom, future research should examine how translanguaging involving students' language repertoires plays out across varied institutional contexts, language pairings, and age groups. Comparative studies across contexts

with different policy orientations toward minoritised languages would help determine how institutional culture mediates students' identity responses to translanguaging. Longitudinal research could also capture the temporal dimension of identity construction and reveal how students' multilingual orientations shift over time with sustained exposure to pedagogical translanguaging. Moreover, further investigation with a broader scope could also attend to the perspectives of teachers and administrators, whose ideological framing and institutional roles critically influence whether translanguaging practices are treated as empowering, tolerated, or marginal. Expanding the empirical and theoretical landscape in this way will help build a more nuanced understanding of translanguaging as a socially situated practice with the potential to either reproduce or resist dominant language ideologies in multilingual education.

Note

1. Considering the linguistic complexity in China, we acknowledge the difficulty of determining whether a heritage language should be considered an individual's L1 in ethnic minority groups, or whether Mandarin—promoted through formal education and state policy—should be recognised as their L1. This ambiguity is not unique to China but is also present in other multilingual contexts where dominant and heritage/minority languages coexist (Ngarsou, 2022). Therefore, we adopt an identity-based perspective by viewing L1 not merely as the language first acquired in childhood but as the language most closely associated with a speaker's sense of self, belonging, and lived experience.

2. Based on Baran's (2017) definition of L1 self as a language tied to one's emotions and experiences, this study distinguishes between two dimensions of the L1 self in multilingual minority contexts: the actual L1 self and the ought-to L1 self. These terms are temporarily adopted, drawing inspiration from Higgins's (1989) Self-Discrepancy Theory, which distinguishes between the actual self—the attributes a person believes they possess—and the ought-to self—the attributes they feel they should possess, based on external expectations.

3. The transcript symbols used include: T = Teacher; St = Student; (.) = Silence less than 0.5s; (1.0) = Silence longer than 0.5s; ° ° = Speech quieter than surrounding speech; °° °° = Speech inaudible to the rest; (( )) = Transcriber's commentaries; *word* = English translation; <u>word</u> = Emphasised speech.

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