

LANGUAGE IDENTITY AND CULTURAL INTEGRATION AMONG RURAL-TO-URBAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

**Ryan Muhtadi Agha Situmorang, Ajeng Dilla Maisaroh, Delvi Aulia, Martha
Jenica Br Sitorus, Sri Minda Murni, Anna Riana Tambunan**

Universitas Negeri Medan, Medan, Indonesia

E-mail: ryanmuhtadiagha@gmail.com

Received: 2025-04-25

Accepted: 2025-04-25

Published: 2025-04-25

Abstract

This study examines how university students from rural backgrounds adapt linguistically and culturally after moving to the urban environment of Medan, Indonesia. As these students transition into city-based academic settings, they face the complex task of balancing their cultural roots with the demands of urban life. Guided by Berry's (2001) Acculturation Theory, this research explores how students navigate issues of identity, language use, and cultural integration. Data were gathered through questionnaires completed by 22 students who had spent at least six semesters studying at a public university in Medan. Through thematic analysis, the study uncovered various adaptation strategies. Most students adopted an integration approach, successfully blending their native language and traditions with urban norms. Some displayed assimilation, especially in formal academic settings, while instances of marginalization were rare. These findings underscore the importance of university policies and support systems that are culturally responsive and inclusive—helping students negotiate their identities and adjust more smoothly to diverse academic environments.

Keywords: *acculturation strategies; cultural integration; language identity; rural-to-urban migration; sociolinguistics; translanguaging*

1. Introduction

Rural-to-urban migration is a common phenomenon in Indonesia, particularly among university students who move from their hometowns to major cities in pursuit of higher education. This transition often involves adapting to new social, linguistic, and cultural environments that may differ significantly from their rural upbringing. In a diverse country like Indonesia, characterized by multiple ethnic groups and regional dialects, students must navigate this shift while negotiating their sense of identity.

Language evolves within specific cultural contexts, suggesting that shifts in cultural environments may impact linguistic choices (Denissova & Rudenko, 2019). This dynamic is particularly evident in digital communication, where individuals often begin by using informal, local expressions but gradually adjust their style to align with broader online norms (Suryani, 2018). These linguistic adjustments are influenced by cognitive, social, and

environmental factors, highlighting that language acquisition occurs within complex sociocultural frameworks (Ortega, 2013).

Moreover, language plays a critical role in negotiating identity. It serves not only as a medium of communication but also as a means of expressing belonging, power, and social positioning. Language is closely tied to social power and access, as discussed by Eidse & Sichel (2004) and Gee (2013), indicating that linguistic choices are often strategic and identity-driven. Understanding these dynamics is essential to analyzing how individuals maintain their cultural identity while adapting to new environments.

In the context of Indonesian higher education, understanding how rural students adapt linguistically and culturally is increasingly important. Universities often serve as miniatures of urban culture, where local identities may be overlooked in favor of standardized or metropolitan norms. While many studies focus on international migration or multilingual contexts abroad, relatively few have explored internal migration within Indonesia, particularly among university students who shift from rural to urban settings.

Previous research has explored the relationship between language and identity, particularly among immigrant populations adapting to new cultures. For example, second-generation immigrants often shift their language practices to align with societal norms, which plays a key role in identity management (Duff, 2015). However, there remains a notable gap in research addressing how internal migrants within Indonesia negotiate their identities and linguistic practices in new urban academic environments. As Siebenhütter (2023) points out, even within national borders, individuals modify their language to balance social integration with cultural preservation.

This study aims to address that gap by examining the linguistic and cultural adaptation of rural university students in an urban setting. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do these students balance their cultural practices and native language with the dominant urban culture?
2. What acculturation strategies do they adopt as they adapt to their new environment?

By investigating these questions, this study provides insights into how students negotiate language, identity, and cultural integration during a critical life transition.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Language and Identity

Language is deeply intertwined with cultural identity, serving not only as a medium of communication but also as an expression of belonging, social norms, and power relations. Individuals moving to different cultural contexts often modify their language use to align with local conventions, which aids in social integration and identity negotiation (Fishman, 1991). The interplay between language and identity is especially evident in migration contexts, where people navigate multiple cultural expectations. Blommaert (2010) notes that language practices in globalized settings often evolve into hybrid forms that reflect both local traditions and new cultural influences.

The process of identity development is situated in social experiences and shaped by language use, contextual factors, and social positioning (Hall, 2018; Miller et al., 2019). In line with this, Uriarte (2021) emphasizes that language changes as individuals adapt to new cultural contexts, enabling them to balance conformity with individuality. These shifts reflect not only linguistic adaptation but also broader cultural alignment.

2.2 Acculturation Strategies

To understand how individuals adapt culturally and linguistically, this study draws on Berry's (2001) Acculturation Theory, a widely used framework in intercultural studies. The theory outlines four key acculturation strategies:

- Integration: Maintaining aspects of one's original culture while actively engaging with the dominant culture.
- Assimilation: Fully adopting the dominant culture and letting go of one's cultural heritage.
- Separation: Retaining one's original cultural identity while avoiding interaction with the dominant culture.
- Marginalization: Rejecting both one's native and host cultures, often resulting in social alienation.

Berry and Sabatier (2010) argue that integration tends to result in the most favorable psychological and social outcomes, as individuals feel a sense of belonging while preserving cultural identity. In contrast, marginalization is often associated with the greatest psychological stress and social disconnection. Although acculturation research has extensively addressed international migrants, limited attention has been given to internal migration, particularly among students transitioning from rural to urban environments. These individuals must adjust not only linguistically but also socially, often confronting different communication norms, dialects, and cultural expectations (Atobatele, 2024; Siebenhütter, 2023). Cultural adaptation, in these cases, involves navigating new social spaces without losing one's original identity.

2.3 Translanguaging in Urban Settings

Translanguaging is a concept that captures the fluid linguistic practices of multilingual individuals as they draw on their full linguistic repertoire to communicate and construct meaning (García & Wei, 2014). For rural-to-urban migrants, translanguaging allows them to merge their native language features with those of the urban dominant language, facilitating both communication and identity expression. In urban university settings, students often use translanguaging as a strategy to bridge cultural and linguistic gaps, allowing them to participate fully in academic and social life while maintaining ties to their cultural heritage. According to García (2014), this approach supports flexible identity development, offering students the tools to navigate different cultural spaces without abandoning their roots. Translanguaging also reflects broader global and social changes, where language practices have become increasingly hybrid and context-dependent (Blommaert, 2010). For internal migrants, this form of communication is not merely practical, it is also a way of resisting cultural erasure and asserting one's identity in complex social environments.

3. Research Method

This study used a qualitative research design, employing a case study approach to explore the linguistic and cultural adaptation of rural students in an urban university setting. A case study is appropriate for examining contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts, particularly when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly distinguishable (Yin, 2014; Creswell, 2014).

A purposive sampling method was applied to recruit participants who could provide rich, relevant insights into the adaptation experience (Merriam, 2009). The sample consisted of 22 undergraduate students from the University of Medan, aged 18 to 25, who had migrated from various rural areas across North Sumatra. All participants had completed at least six semesters, ensuring adequate exposure to urban academic and social life. The sample included both male and female students from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, though most were speakers of regional languages such as Javanese, Batak, or Minangkabau.

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire containing both closed and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was developed based on Berry's (2001) four acculturation strategies (integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization). To enhance its validity, the instrument was piloted with five students not included in the final sample. Feedback from the pilot helped revise unclear items, ensuring clarity and relevance. Content validity was ensured by consulting with two linguistics lecturers familiar with acculturation theory.

We used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to analyze the responses, which involves identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns or themes across the dataset. Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and its capacity to generate detailed insights into participants' lived experiences.

All procedures in this study followed ethical research standards. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and students were assured that their identities would remain anonymous and that their responses would be kept confidential. No identifying information was collected, and ethical approval was granted by the research committee of the university.

4. Results and Discussion

The data analyzed in this study were obtained from a survey conducted by the researchers. To interpret the findings, we applied Berry's (2001) acculturation framework to examine how students navigate the balance between their hometown culture and urban environments. The analysis also aims to identify which acculturation strategies are most commonly adopted by the students based on the survey results.

4.1 Language Practices

In analyzing students' linguistic behaviors following their relocation to an urban environment, it becomes essential to explore how language choices reflect deeper processes of identity negotiation, cultural adaptation, and communicative strategies. Language serves not only as a medium of interaction but also as a marker of cultural affiliation and personal history. The patterns that emerge from these language practices reveal the extent to which students maintain, blend, or replace their native linguistic identities in favor of the dominant urban language. The following chart illustrates these preferences, offering insights into the sociolinguistic shifts and acculturation strategies employed by students as they navigate new educational and social landscapes.

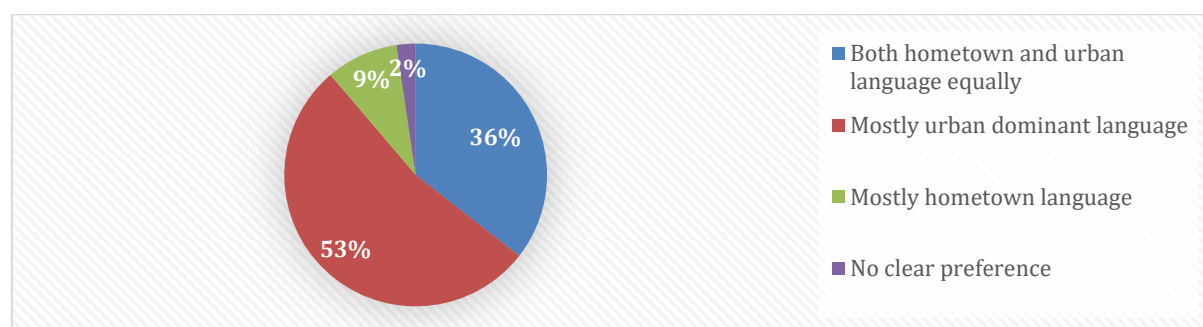


Chart 1. Language Use Preferences Among Students

The analysis uncovered diverse trends in students' linguistic habits after their relocation to an urban setting. A considerable percentage (53%) indicated mostly utilizing the city's major language while diminishing their utilization of their own language. This corresponds with Berry's (2001) integration method, wherein individuals assimilate components of the prevailing culture while preserving facets of their own identity. These students exhibited a significant level of bicultural competence, adeptly managing dual linguistic and cultural requirements.

Simultaneously, 36% of participants reported utilizing both urban and hometown languages with equal frequency. This exemplifies balanced bilingualism, which promotes cultural hybridity and situational adaptability. Their methodology closely corresponds with translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014), as students utilized their complete linguistic repertoire to communicate successfully and preserve cultural identity across various social contexts.

9% of participants indicated that they predominantly relied on their native language. This illustrates Berry's separation strategy, when individuals preserve their ancestral language while minimizing interaction with the mainstream culture. Although this may bolster cultural preservation, it can hinder social and academic integration, particularly at metropolitan institutions where the use of the prevailing language is standard.

Instances of total absorption into urban languages and subsequent marginalization from both languages were infrequent. This indicates that the majority of students cultivated context-sensitive methods instead of forsaking their linguistic origins or experiencing exclusion, demonstrating an enhanced ability for adaptive identity negotiation.

4.2 Cultural Practices and Communication Norms

Communication is deeply rooted in cultural expectations, and as students transition from rural to urban environments, they often encounter challenges that go beyond vocabulary and grammar. The subtleties of local dialects, pragmatic conventions, and culturally embedded interactional norms can significantly influence their ability to integrate both socially and academically. Understanding these challenges is essential in examining the broader scope of acculturation and adaptation processes. The following chart sheds light on specific communication barriers encountered by students, particularly in adjusting to urban dialects, and reveals how these linguistic nuances can create cultural friction and influence their overall educational experience.

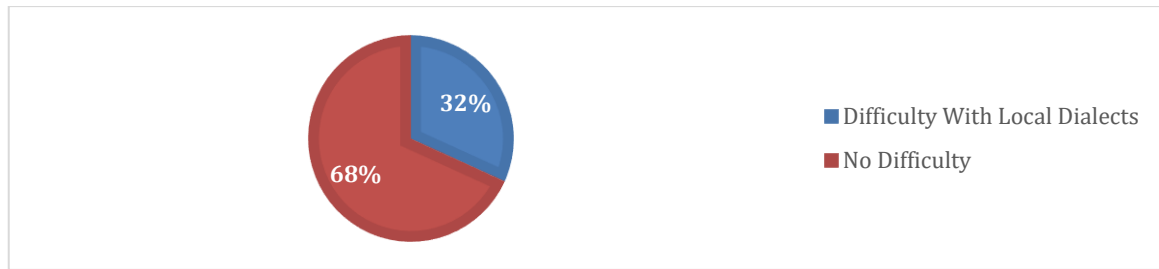


Chart 2. Communication Challenges in Adapting to Urban Dialects

A significant number of participants (32%) recognized unfamiliar local communication methods as a major obstacle to adapting to urban life. Dialectal idioms and intonation patterns unique to Medan, such as *bah*, *kelen*, *aku*, and *kau*, were unknown to students from other regions, especially those from Java, who are accustomed to more indirect and submissive speech modalities. This linguistic difference illustrates pragmatic variance, potentially resulting in communication failures and discomfort during classroom discussions or peer interactions (Holmes, 2013).

These issues underscore the presence of cultural dissonance, when students' ingrained communicative standards clash with the expectations of their new surroundings. This not only impacts social interaction but can also impede complete academic participation. According to Berry's (2001) approach, successful acculturation encompasses more than just language acquisition; it necessitates cultural competence, especially in the intricate practices of interpersonal communication. For rural students assimilating into urban academic environments, comprehending and adjusting to local linguistic norms is crucial for establishing social relationships and fostering a sense of belonging within the university setting.

4.3 Identity Negotiation and Acculturation Strategies

The transition from rural to urban settings often prompts complex negotiations of cultural identity, as individuals are confronted with new values, behaviors, and expectations. For university students, this negotiation process becomes especially pronounced as they attempt to maintain continuity with their cultural roots while adapting to the demands of urban academic and social life. Cultural identity, therefore, is neither static nor singular—it evolves through constant interaction with one's environment. The following chart explores how students perceive and position their cultural identity in an urban context, reflecting a range of acculturation strategies from integration to marginalization. These varied responses illuminate the emotional and cognitive processes students engage in as they strive to find a balance between continuity and change, tradition and adaptation.

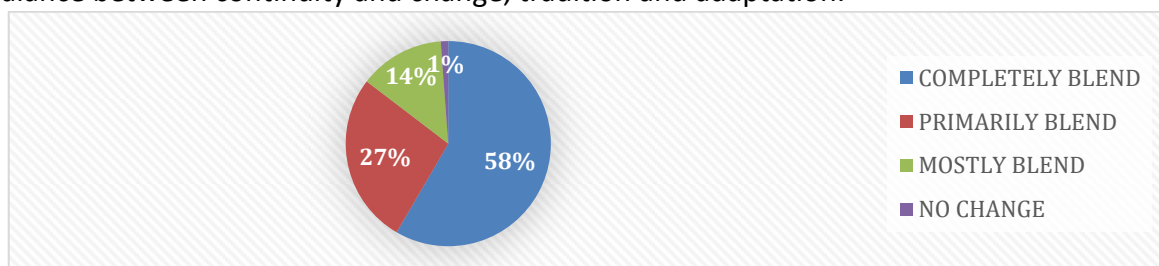


Chart 3 . Student's Cultural Identity

When questioned about their cultural identity in the urban environment, 58% of students indicated the integration of aspects of their hometown culture with urban conventions. This exemplifies Berry's (2001) integration technique, which entails preserving fundamental cultural values while actively interacting with the host culture. These students demonstrated adaptive flexibility, managing various cultural demands while maintaining their rural identity.

Simultaneously, 27% expressed a heightened affinity for their rural origins while recognizing the impact of urban existence. This reaction indicates a separation-oriented integration, wherein students emphasize cultural preservation while selectively assimilating new cultural aspects. On the other hand, 14% of respondents indicated a primary alignment with urban cultural norms, signifying a transition toward partial assimilation characterized by notable adaptation without complete integration.

A minor percentage (1%) indicated a detachment from both cultural frames, signifying marginalization. This group may lack the requisite support mechanisms for effective transition, leading to feelings of exclusion or identity uncertainty.

These identification positions were additionally manifested in students' behavioral responses. Individuals who classified as integrative frequently modified their behavior to align with urban norms in academic and public spheres, while preserving cultural customs in private environments. In contrast, students utilizing separation methods demonstrated resistance to urban influence, potentially arising from a robust feeling of cultural pride or the belief that urban standards jeopardize their identity stability.

4.4 Social Interaction and Value Integration

The process of acculturation is not limited to linguistic or identity transformation—it also profoundly influences how individuals form relationships and internalize social values. For students transitioning from rural areas to urban academic settings, social interactions become a critical space where cultural negotiation occurs daily. These interactions reveal how students navigate new social codes, adapt to differing value systems, and seek belonging within unfamiliar environments. The chart below presents a closer look at the acculturation strategies students employ in their interpersonal relationships, illustrating varied approaches ranging from integration to marginalization. By examining these patterns, we gain deeper insight into the nuanced ways students reconcile personal heritage with the demands and expectations of urban university life.

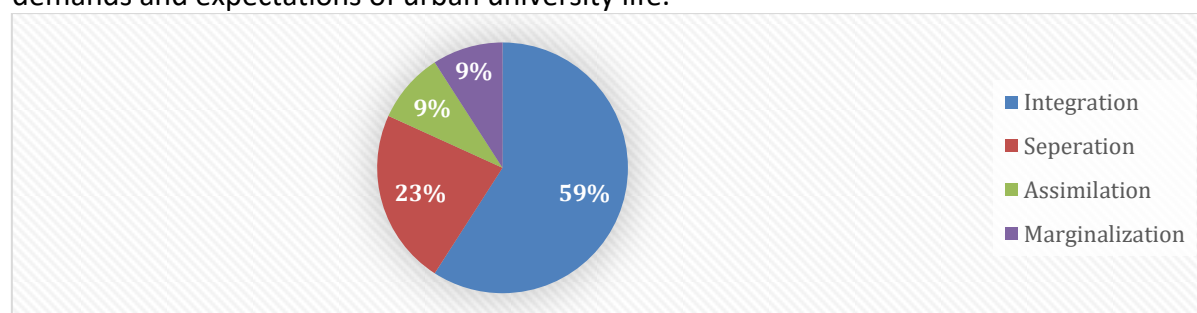


Chart 4. Student's Acculturation Strategies in Social Interactions

Regarding social connections, 59% of participants indicated the incorporation of both hometown and urban cultural values into their interpersonal relationships. This suggests that integration, as articulated by Berry (2001), transcends language and identity,

encompassing social interaction and value orientation as well. These children exhibited the capacity to adjust to diverse social circumstances while preserving core cultural ideas, illustrating a flexible and contextually aware kind of adaptation.

In contrast, 23% of respondents indicated sustained devotion to their original cultural values, reflecting a separation strategy. This group exhibited a constrained readiness to interact with novel norms, perhaps hindering wider social integration within the urban university setting.

Furthermore, 9% of students employed an assimilation technique, signifying a transition towards metropolitan attitudes and practices. Nonetheless, an equivalent percentage (9%) indicated a sense of disconnection from both their rural and urban cultural identities, reflecting indications of marginalization. The absence of attachment may result in social alienation and emotional distress, especially in academic environments that emphasize prevailing cultural standards.

The data indicate that students do not employ a consistent method for cultural adaptation. They practice selective integration, modifying their techniques according to situational requirements (e.g., academic versus familial contexts), personal ideals, and the extent to which the urban environment is regarded as welcoming and supportive of cultural diversity.

4.5 Student's Personal Perspectives on Culture practices

Cultural adaptation is not a uniform or automatic process; rather, it reflects individual agency shaped by personal values, lived experiences, and contextual demands. When students migrate to urban environments, their daily encounters with differing cultural norms prompt them to evaluate, accept, modify, or resist these influences in ways that align with their sense of self and identity. Their perspectives on cultural integration reveal how adaptation is experienced not just socially or linguistically, but internally—as an ongoing negotiation of belonging and authenticity. The following chart highlights students' self-reflections on their integration into urban cultural life, offering insight into how they manage cultural continuity and change in their everyday practices.

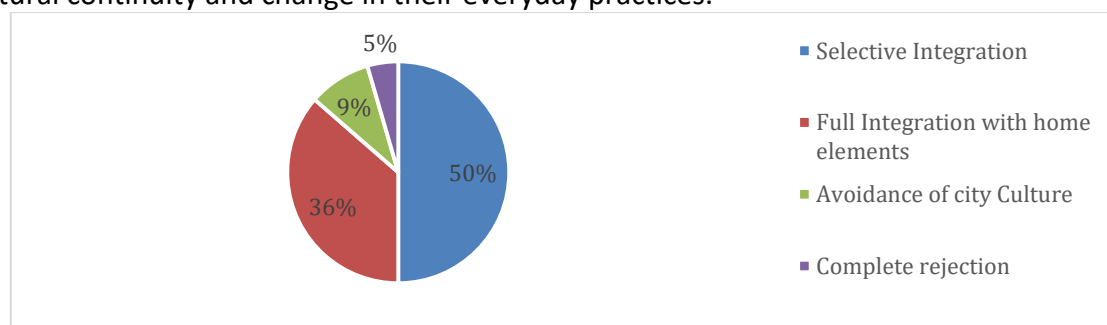


Chart 5. Student Perspectives on Cultural Integration in Daily Life

Upon reflecting on their cultural integration in urban life, 50% of the students indicated that they selectively adopted aspects of metropolitan culture in particular contexts, such as academic settings. This strategic integration of urban standards demonstrates a flexible implementation of Berry's (2001) integration technique, wherein adaptation is not absolute but customized to the requirements of specific contexts.

A further 36% of respondents indicated a complete adoption of urban cultural standards while preserving elements of their rural origin. These students operate as adaptable cultural negotiators, adeptly merging urban and rural behaviors to create hybrid

cultural identities. Their conduct corresponds with modern interpretations of identity as dynamic, contextual, and reactive to external influences (Hall, 2018).

Nine percent of interviewees intentionally dismissed urban cultural influences. This separationist perspective may arise from perceived discord between rural values and urban life or adverse experiences in metropolitan settings. For these students, upholding rural traditions functions both as cultural preservation and as a means of resisting assimilation. These findings emphasize the contextual and individual aspects of cultural adaptation, demonstrating how students choose to select which elements of urban society to embrace or reject based on their personal beliefs and experiences.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated how rural-to-urban university students in Medan navigate the complexities of linguistic and cultural adaptation, using Berry's (2001) Acculturation Theory as a conceptual framework. The findings consistently highlight integration as the dominant strategy, wherein students maintain their rural cultural identity while engaging with urban norms across language use, social interaction, and cultural practices. In contrast, separation and assimilation emerged in specific domains—particularly within familial and academic contexts—while marginalization was identified by only a small minority. These results substantiate Berry's assertion that integration yields the most beneficial psychological and social outcomes, allowing individuals to preserve cultural continuity while adapting meaningfully to their new environment. Moreover, students demonstrated adaptive flexibility, applying different strategies across contexts, which underscores the dynamic and context-dependent nature of acculturation. The findings also align with García and Wei's (2014) theory of translanguaging, wherein multilingual individuals draw upon their full linguistic repertoire to construct identity and communicate effectively. The implications of these findings extend across several domains:

1. For universities:

Institutions of higher learning should implement culturally responsive orientation programs that acknowledge linguistic diversity and introduce students to local communication norms. Initiatives such as intercultural competence workshops and peer-mentoring schemes can facilitate smoother academic and social integration.

2. For students:

Understanding acculturation strategies can empower students to reflect on their own adaptation processes and adopt approaches that support both cultural preservation and meaningful engagement. Promoting open dialogue on cultural identity can foster confidence in navigating bicultural environments.

3. For policymakers:

Educational policy must support inclusive campus climates, especially in contexts characterized by significant internal migration. This includes promoting research and policy initiatives that recognize cultural and linguistic diversity as assets, rather than obstacles, to academic achievement.

Overall, while integration emerged as the most prevalent adaptation strategy, this study reveals that cultural adaptation is neither monolithic nor linear. Instead, students engage in selective, context-sensitive negotiations of identity and language, shaped by

personal, societal, and institutional factors. Acknowledging and supporting these nuanced processes is essential for fostering equitable and inclusive learning environments.

References

- Atobatele, F. A. (2024). The dynamics of language shifts in migrant communities: Implications for social integration and cultural preservation. *International Journal of Applied Research in Social Sciences*, 6(5), 844–860. <https://doi.org/10.51594/ijarss.v6i5.1106>
- Berry, J. W. (2001). Acculturation: When individuals and groups of different cultural backgrounds meet. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 5(4), 472–481. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691610373075>
- Berry, J. W., & Sabatier, C. (2010). Acculturation, discrimination, and adaptation among second-generation immigrant youth in Montreal and Paris. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 34(3), 191–207. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2009.11.007>
- Blommaert, J. (2010). *The sociolinguistics of globalization*. Cambridge University Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). New York: Sage Publications.
- Denissova, G. V., & Rudenko, E. (2019). Developing secondary language identity in context. *Psychology in Russia: State of the Art*, 21–30. <https://doi.org/10.11621/pir.2019.0102>
- Duff, P. A. (2015). Transnationalism, multilingualism, and identity. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 35, 57–80. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026719051400018X>
- Eidse, F., & Sichel, N. (2004). *Unrooted childhoods: Memoirs of growing up global*. Nicholas Brealey Publishing.
- Fishman, J. A. (1991). *Reversing language shift: Theoretical and empirical foundations of assistance to threatened languages*. Multilingual Matters.
- García, O., & Wei, L. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gee, J. P. (2013). Games for Learning. *Educational Horizons*, 91(4), 16–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013175X1309100406>
- Hall, S. (2018). *Essential essays (Vol. 2)*. Duke University Press.
- Holmes, J. (2013). *An introduction to sociolinguistics* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). John Wiley & Sons.
- Miller, R. L., & Collette, T. (2019). Multicultural identity development: Theory and research. In K. D. Keith (Ed.), *Cross-cultural psychology: Contemporary themes and perspectives* (2nd ed., pp. 509–523). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Ortega, L. (2008). *Understanding second language acquisition* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Suryani, A. (2018). Language and identity: Promoting Dolly's community identity through language use. In *Prasasti 2018: Proceedings* (pp. 318–321). Atlantis Press. <https://doi.org/10.2991/prasasti-18.2018.42>
- Siebenhütter, S. (2023). The multilingual profile and its impact on identity: Approaching the difference between multilingualism and multilingual identity or linguistic identity. *Ampersand*, 10, 100123. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amper.2023.100123>

Uriarte, J. R. (2021). A behavioural model of minority language shift: Theory and empirical evidence. *PLOS ONE*, 16, e0252453. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0252453>

Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.