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## Multilingual Identity Construction in an English Medium Instruction (EMI) Program: An Exploration of a Chinese Student in Thailand

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### ABSTRACT

English Medium Instruction (EMI) programs have been implemented in Thai higher education for decades, where English is used within a multilingual context, attracting numerous international students. However, limited research has investigated multilingual identity through an intercultural lens. This study employed a multilingual identity approach to explore intercultural stance and examine how multilingual identities are constructed within the EMI context in Thailand. Utilizing a narrative inquiry design, data were collected from a Chinese student, Anny, who aimed to enhance her English skills by enrolling in an EMI program at a university in eastern Thailand. Using the theme-weaving technique and the coding method for data analysis, the findings revealed that Anny constructed her multilingual identity by actively engaging with both English and Thai during her time in the EMI program. The study highlighted the importance of intercultural understanding for international students in forging their multilingual identities. It was argued that succeeding in an EMI program requires more than just advancing English proficiency; developing a multilingual identity is crucial for successfully navigating the EMI program. This study implied the practical implication for educators and administrators for EMI program in Thai context, and suggested that the intercultural curriculum should be considering in EMI programs for adaptation; Additionally, reassess the relationship between English proficiency and professional knowledge within the EMI classroom, prioritizing intelligibility as a fundamental objective in EMI teaching is essential.

**Keywords:** Multilingual Identity; English Medium Instruction (EMI); Global Education

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# 1. Introduction

English Medium Instruction (EMI) is defined as the use of English to teach academic subjects in regions where the majority language is not English<sup>[1]</sup>. EMI programs have been developed in higher education institutions worldwide to enhance internationalization outlook and attract international students<sup>[1]</sup>. Therefore, many scholars have been exploring this field among teachers and learners. However, there is a scarcity of studies on the influence of multilingual identity within the EMI context<sup>[2-4]</sup>. Previous studies have revealed that constructing a multilingual identity is a complex process related to the local environment and languages. However, considering the mobility of international students, there is a need to consider both the heritage culture and local culture in a specific context to examine the role of multilingualism in the EMI program among international students.

From an intercultural perspective, multilingual identity “involves multiple languages and the associated social connections about those languages”<sup>[5]</sup>. Intercultural communication involves two or more cultures<sup>[6]</sup> and requires individuals to understand complex, dynamic, and ever-changing contexts<sup>[7]</sup>. The majority of multilingual identity studies among international students has investigated the languages, including L2 and L3, from a poststructuralist perspective, which found that multilingual identity could be affected by both psychological and sociological issues, such as ideology, motivation, and learning environment in non-native speaking countries<sup>[2, 3, 8]</sup>. They believed that the formation of ideology is due to social activities that promote the construction and negotiation of multilingual identities. In non-native English-speaking countries, international students studying in EMI programs that use English and other languages are a common phenomenon. The relevance of English proficiency in EMI learning has recently become a topic of considerable debate<sup>[9, 10]</sup>. A significant trend is that many students allocate more time to learning English than to subject content, which warrants further investigation into the application of English learning to professional knowledge in EMI programs within a multilingual context.

This paper explored the learning experiences of a Chinese student enrolled in an EMI program at a university in Thailand through narrative inquiry. This study was underpinned by the theory<sup>[5]</sup> of multilingual identity from an intercultural stance, comparing the Chinese and Thai cul-

tures to find the similarities and differences in this student’s language learning experiences. The research question addressed in this study was: *How is the multilingual identity of a Chinese international student constructed by studying in the EMI program in Thailand from an intercultural lens?*

# 2. Methods

## 2.1. EMI in Thailand

The government of Thailand has actively promoted the EMI programs in Thai universities to improve the quality of higher education and enhance the global competitiveness<sup>[11]</sup>. As a result, there has been a significant increase in EMI programs designed for international students in Thailand. However, by 2019, the number of international students had climbed to 25110, the highest number of international students came from China<sup>[12]</sup>. This surge has prompted researchers to examine the impact of EMI on language acquisition and professional development in Thai universities. Educators in Thai universities prioritize intelligibility over adherence to ‘standard’ English when engaging with students<sup>[13]</sup>. While English is predominantly utilized, Thai is often employed to enhance students’ understanding. The EMI program in Thailand distinguishes itself from traditional Thai programs by integrating English and the local language<sup>[14-16]</sup>. International students participating in this program have ample opportunities to communicate in Thai and English within the classroom setting<sup>[17]</sup>.

Numerous studies on EMI in Thailand have explored both the opportunities and challenges that arise in this context<sup>[18, 19]</sup>. The Thai government actively encourages universities to implement the EMI initiative in Thailand, which incorporates the Thai language, presenting a valuable opportunity for students to become multilingual speakers<sup>[20]</sup>. Nevertheless, the most significant challenge lies in the language proficiency of both Thai teachers and students<sup>[18, 19]</sup>. Many researchers have identified that EMI students struggle to comprehend their lecturers’ English<sup>[21]</sup>, particularly students with low English proficiency<sup>[22]</sup>, and students enrolled in lower-level English courses<sup>[23]</sup>. Consequently, English proficiency has become a crucial factor in achieving academic success. However, institutions and stakeholders must address the role of Thai as the official language used by international students in their everyday interactions. Some researchers<sup>[9, 10]</sup> from

other non-native English-speaking countries have suggested that the dominant focus on native English and grammar, as part of English as a global language, can demotivate learners and detract from their engagement with diverse languages and academic content. Consequently, the significance of standard English remains a vital topic of discussion within the field of EMI research.

## 2.2. Multilingual Identity

In this study, the concept of multilingual identity highlighted the international interrelationship among psychological, sociocultural, and poststructuralist perspectives<sup>[5]</sup>, as well as intercultural competence<sup>[24]</sup>. Five interrelated concepts are fundamental to understanding multilingual identity from an intercultural stance. First, learning a new language and culture is an inseparable experience; this synergy can significantly aid learners in developing both identities and language proficiency. Second, learners build their imagined communities through access to language learning, thereby establishing imagined connections to language. Third, a clear understanding of one's self-concept is essential, involving reflecting on one's feelings while adapting to a new environment. Fourth, learners should assess their sense of belonging within new communities to feel a sense of belonging, which necessitates a re-evaluation of their identities and an understanding of the languages and cultures that surround them. Finally, is the consideration of self and others, which is the process of reflexivity. This idea emphasizes the importance of reflexivity, urging individuals to consider both their languages and emotions and those of others in their social environment.<sup>[25]</sup> Those five concepts intersect with an intercultural perspective and multilingual identity, enriching intercultural interactions. This framework can be utilized to explore the construction of multilingual identity among Chinese international students in Thailand by comparing their language learning experiences in both China and Thailand.

## 2.3. Multilingual Identity Construction of International Students

To investigate the complexity of multilingual identity, most studies have employed theoretical frameworks that incorporate psychological, sociocultural, and poststructuralist perspectives. Those approaches are essential for under-

standing how individuals navigate their identity<sup>[26–28]</sup>. In the multilingual context, where multiple languages coexist, international students engage with each language to shape their identities. Research has demonstrated that this engagement enhances awareness of one's multilingual repertoire and affects how others perceive learners' identity through languages<sup>[24]</sup>. Current studies on multilingual identity have often highlighted a multi-theoretical framework to explore how international students develop their multilingual identity in the context of language learning<sup>[24, 29, 30]</sup>. However, there is a notable gap in research that examines multilingual identity from an intercultural perspective, which could further enrich our understanding of the language learning experience for international students in non-native English-speaking countries by considering cultural differences.

Language and culture are profoundly interconnected from an intercultural stance. The study examined the relationship between language, culture, and learning as a unified concept<sup>[31]</sup>, emphasizing the importance of both English and local languages for international students. The assessment of culture and language can be framed through communicative competence, which encompasses intercultural competence<sup>[32]</sup>. Numerous studies on multilingual identity have shown that international students recognize the crucial role of intercultural communication skills<sup>[29, 33, 34]</sup> and how these skills contribute to the evolution of their identities, particularly in relation to their sense of difference and understanding of the symbolic other<sup>[35]</sup>. Nevertheless, in the context of EMI within multilingual environments, it is essential for researchers in non-native English-speaking countries to further explore the distinctions between students' first cultures and the local culture, given the rich diversity that exists.

Previous researchers have investigated the motivation for language learning within the framework of identity<sup>[2–4, 36]</sup>. The findings indicated that constructing a multilingual identity is complex and context-dependent, particularly in relation to the language learning experiences of international students in both their L2 and L3 languages. The investment of international students in language acquisition has been shaped by social motivations, such as aspirations for further education and career advancement, as well as personal inclinations, including a passion for languages and cultural exploration. These studies have highlighted the importance of ideological discourse in elucidating the complexity of mul-

lingual identity, particularly in non-native English-speaking countries. However, a contradiction arises between those two motivating factors when it comes to language investment. It is crucial to recognize that striking a balance between instrumental and humanistic approaches to language learning can foster the construction of a multilingual identity.

### 3. Methodology

This paper was part of a larger research project investigating the lived intercultural experiences of Chinese students studying abroad in Thailand. The data presented here were gathered through narrative inquiry, specifically employing collage self-portraits and semi-structured interviews with a Chinese student named Anny. These data illustrate her construction of a multilingual identity within an EMI program.

#### 3.1. Context and Participant

This study was conducted at a university in eastern Thailand. According to the university's statistics, the institution enrolled approximately 463 international students from various countries; 347 students, representing approximately 75%, were Chinese nationals. Only 22 were enrolled in EMI programs, while the remainder were in Thai programs. A narrative inquiry approach was employed, focusing on individuals with compelling stories<sup>[37]</sup>. A voluntary sampling technique was adopted to ensure the selective recruitment process. Initially, I contacted all 22 Chinese students through the Chinese Student Association at this university, utilizing an existing WeChat group for communication. A recruitment advertisement was posted on WeChat, outlining the objectives of the study and providing a brief overview of the research protocol. Ultimately, five students expressed their willingness to participate in this research project. However, among those participants, only one was enrolled in an EMI program, while the others were pursuing degrees in English Language Teaching (ELT), thus excluding them from the scope of this paper. Anny, a 22-year-old student pursuing a bachelor's degree in hospitality and tourism management, has been studying in Thailand for four years, having arrived at the age of 18. During her academic journey in Thailand, Anny has achieved fluency in Thai and English, with her multilingual experiences substantially enriching the narratives collected in this study.

#### 3.2. Data Collection

Before collecting the data, ethical approval for this study was secured from the university. Data were gathered primarily through collage self-portraits and supplemented by semi-structured interviews. The collage self-portrait provided valuable insights into the informants' perspectives, illustrating the intricate complexities of their feelings, values, and experiences from individual viewpoints<sup>[38]</sup>. This method allowed us to describe the participant's multilingual identity construction through the language learning experience. First, the participant created two collage self-portraits, one depicting her English learning experiences in China and the other representing her learning in the EMI program in Thailand. I provided A4 paper, permanent markers, glue, magazines, cards, and wrapping paper to support the creation of these collage self-portraits. Before beginning the collage self-portraits, the following question was posed: "What was your experience studying English in China?" The participant expressed her response through her collage self-portrait, which took approximately 20 to 40 minutes to complete. Additionally, informal discussions were held to explore her experiences and emotions during the creation process, which were recorded for later analysis. After a two-week interval, the author replicated the procedure, and the participant repeated the procedure, and produced her second collage self-portrait in response to the question: "What was your experience studying EMI in Thailand?" These two collage self-portraits from China and Thailand are significant as they reflect the participant's perspectives on language learning across these contexts and contribute to the exploration of her multilingual identity construction.

Secondly, semi-structured interviews were conducted on three occasions, each lasting approximately 40–60 min. The interview questions were developed based on Fielding's theory of multilingual identity from an intercultural stance<sup>[5]</sup>, specifically exploring the nuanced distinctions between China and Thailand (see **Appendix A**). The interview questions focused on five key concepts to illuminate the narratives surrounding the participant's academic experiences and daily life, facilitating self-understanding. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Chinese. Following the interviews, analytic memos were written, highlighting spontaneous thoughts or questions that arose from the data. These memos capture insights, document compar-

isons and connections, and clarify questions and potential directions<sup>[39]</sup>. Each interview was recorded and transcribed accordingly.

### 3.3. Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Once the data were collected, the audio recordings were transcribed for analysis, and the collage self-portraits were analyzed using the theme-weaving technique<sup>[40]</sup>. The weaving together of the parts of the whole exemplifies the ongoing portraiture dialectic between process and product<sup>[41]</sup>. This analysis involved identifying symbolic items in the collage self-portraits, representing the participant's feelings and values derived from significant events. These items and informal discussions about the collage self-portraits helped uncover themes that the participant found challenging to articulate in words, particularly in the context of two brief paragraphs from China and Thailand. I utilized the coding method to analyze the transcriptions, informal conversations, and semi-structured interviews. While the interview questions were designed based on Fielding's theory<sup>[5]</sup>, I chose not to apply this framework as a pre-determined analytical framework, opting for open coding in this study. Initially, open coding facilitated the generation of preliminary codes. Meanwhile, in vivo coding, motion coding, and value coding were employed to analyze the participants' detailed information, including events, feelings, and thoughts related to language learning in China and Thailand. In the next phase, axial coding was applied to gain a broader understanding of the participant's responses. Finally, selective coding helped distill the categories into key themes. These steps were repeated several times until the themes formed the participants' narratives.

Using Clandinin and Connelly's Three-Dimensional Space Framework, I conducted data analysis through three essential components: interaction (encompassing both personal and social elements), continuity (spanning past, present, and future), and situation (referring to the physical environment or the storyteller's context). Adhering to this framework, her narrative was restructured in chronological order. Various narratives were interwoven to exemplify the participant's multilingual identity evolution through the experience of studying abroad. The narratives highlight the significance of social interaction and the classroom environment in language acquisition, which can influence the development of multi-

lingual identity. Her journey was recounted, from language learning experiences in China to Thailand and to her future aspirations. To ensure trustworthiness, the description of collage self-portraits, the interview data, and stories were sent to the participant, and she provided comments and further explanations during the data analysis for member validation.

### 3.4. Ethical Considerations

Before collecting the data, consent forms were provided for the participant to sign. First, assigning a pseudonym (Anny) to ensure anonymity. Second, the purpose of the study was clearly communicated to the participant before data collection. Third, the participant expressed feelings of nervousness and uncertainty, particularly concerning her painting skills, which hindered her ability to create collage self-portraits. I shared my own experiences while creating collage self-portraits to alleviate her discomfort and offered guidance by demonstrating the process. Finally, any sensitive issues that emerged during data collection was not recorded. Additionally, I informed the participant about the benefits and potential risks associated with the study. I assured her that she was free to ask questions at any time or withdraw at any time.

## 4. Results

Informed by the narrative inquiry design<sup>[42]</sup>, Anny's story was narrated to illustrate how she constructed a multilingual identity during her four years of study in Thailand. The themes that underpin her story include navigating multiple languages and cultures within a Thai-dominant culture, the realities of English usage in the classroom, and exercising agency to achieve prospective goals. Readers are encouraged to keep these themes in mind while engaging with Anny's narrative, as they are "shown" rather than "told"<sup>[42]</sup>. Next, Anne's narrative account will be presented.

Anny was eager to pursue higher education abroad following her brief study experience in the United States. Immersed in a monolingual environment in China, she focused on enhancing her English skills, particularly her speaking proficiency. During this time, she discovered an effective approach to learning English and recognized its practical value in communication. After experiencing a native English-speaking environment, she found that learning English in a

Chinese classroom was less effective. Consequently, she became convinced that authentic English learning occurs only in a native-speaker setting, where one can engage in numerous interactions with native speakers to improve speaking skills. From that moment on, she aspired to study in a native-speaking country for her advanced education. However, this perspective ultimately limited her ability to become a multilingual speaker.

*“I used English frequently after studying in the United States, staying with a host family, and studying high school with native speakers, which improved my speaking ability. The American learning style fit me; I was happy studying in this environment”.*

Driven by her goal of studying in an English-speaking country, she strengthened her test-oriented language skills by enrolling in an IELTS course at a private language school after completing high school. However, this focus on exams limited her ability to become a multilingual speaker. Despite her teachers concentrating on exam strategies, she found joy in the speaking classes. An instructor with an American accent advised her that using either an American or British accent could help her achieve a score of at least 6 in the speaking section of the IELTS. Inspired by this guidance, she began to imitate speakers from American TV shows and movies, making native pronunciation standards an integral part of her English learning process. Fortunately, she experienced less pressure, as her teacher designed various activities that motivated her while reducing anxiety (see **Figure 1**).

*“It was hard to take the IELTS; I thought this test was beyond my English ability. Because I needed a high score to apply to universities in other countries, I learned some skills to improve my IELTS score; but I thought I had not learned the English I needed. However, this private school gave me strong faith in studying abroad, and I liked it.”*

She shared the photo of an assistant, welcoming the American teachers who had taught her during her studies in the United States. She felt excited about the opportunity to speak English. While creating this collage self-portrait, a rush of admiration, excitement, and joy flooded her mind. Rosey and Timing’s event motivated her to seriously pursue

IELTS preparation for studying abroad. She believed that adopting a test-oriented approach to learning English would help her achieve her goal of studying abroad. She envisioned her future study life as one filled with travel, which would enhance her focus on effective communication and English learning acquisition. At that time, mastering a native-like accent became a standard for practicing her speaking and listening skills.



**Figure 1.** Anny’s English learning experiences in China.

When her parents informed her that financial constraints would prevent her from visiting native English-speaking countries, she felt disheartened. However, she took a moment to reassess her perspective and reignite her motivation to study English, realizing she could learn the language in a Thai context. She had little interest in exploring the Thai language or immersing herself in Thai culture, believing that mastering English would equip her to navigate life anywhere, much like studying in the US would. After several months of dedication, she received an acceptance email.

*“I wanted to study abroad, not in China. Because of financial problems, I decided to go to Thailand. The dream of going to a native-speaking country to learn English could not come true, which disappointed me. However, I wanted to learn English in another country, so I compromised on the destination because I*

*could speak English in Thailand anyway.”*

Initially, she viewed English merely as a tool for communication, commonly used everywhere except in her hometown. Excited about her first visit to Thailand with her family, she felt a sense of pride in her ability to communicate in English and successfully interact with the locals. However, she became disheartened upon enrolling at the university as it was far from tourist areas. The challenges of daily life, exacerbated by her limited proficiency in Thai, made her experience quite challenging. Relying exclusively on English proved insufficient for navigating life in Thailand. This realization prompted her to reevaluate her motivations, leading her to plan to learn Thai, which ultimately helped her cultivate a multilingual identity.

*“When I arrived in Thailand for the first time, I was disappointed by the university’s location, which was unlike Bangkok. I did not know where to go in this unfamiliar place. The weather was hot, and I couldn’t speak Thai; my parents thought I couldn’t live in such an environment. I felt I could not survive if I spoke only English here. It was my first time coming to Thailand at a young age; English was less important than I had thought.”*

After arriving at the university, she quickly realized that her expectations about the use of English in Thailand were far from the reality she encountered. In contrast, Thai was the predominant language spoken; only a few individuals communicated in English daily. A wave of disappointment washed over her when she recognized that English was not as integral to daily life there as she had assumed. To her surprise, the EMI program at the university provided her with opportunities to engage with English more, and she hoped to converse with native-speaker instructors. However, her first day of classes left her feeling disheartened; most instructors came from non-native English-speaking backgrounds, and their proficiency did not meet her expectations. She struggled particularly with one Thai teacher’s heavily accented English, which was overwhelming and left her yearning to return home, convinced she was falling short of her goal to learn English. After that experience, her interactions with both teachers and classmates dwindled. This multilingual community was markedly different from an immersive na-

tive context, which diminished her motivation to improve her English-speaking skills and inhibiting her ability to cultivate a multilingual identity.

*“When I came to university for the first time, I thought I would fit into this community because I had short study abroad experiences. However, when I took the course, it was beyond my expectations at that moment; most of the teachers spoke English, unlike American or British English. I could not bear the Thai accent, which made me misunderstand.”*

Studying in China offered a distinctive learning experience. In urban areas, teachers often used Mandarin to teach English, which limited opportunities for students to practice English in class. Outside of school, daily life predominantly involved the use of Chinese. However, the EMI program highlighted English as an essential tool for gaining professional knowledge and improving communication, providing her with ample opportunities to practice her English skills. The relationships between teachers and students also motivated her to learn Thai. One of her goals was to achieve proficiency in Thai to better integrate into the EMI program, especially since half of her classmates were Thai, many of whom spoken English with a noticeable Thai accent. Additionally, some Thai teachers taught complex subjects in Thai, as those topics were challenging to express in English. This community inspired her to pursue her goal: she wishes to cultivate a multilingual identity that will enhance her studies in Thailand by investing time in learning Thai language.

*“I did not like studying English in China because there were fewer opportunities to practice my speaking skills. I have been learning English since I was 10, but teachers used Mandarin in class instead of English. Also, the school ignored my speaking ability, so I could not practice my English.”*

*“When I came here to study, I wanted to learn professional knowledge, but I needed to understand what they said; it was hard for me. Most teachers with strong Thai accents affected my learning of professional knowledge.”*

As she progressed in her Thai language studies, her



understanding of the importance of learning the language within its cultural context deepened and led her to reevaluate her multilingual identity. She began distancing herself from the Chinese community and immersed herself in interactions with locals. Furthermore, her internship at a hotel offered numerous opportunities to practice Thai; after three years, she has achieved fluency (See **Figure 2**).



**Figure 2.** Anny's English learning experiences in Thailand.

*"I did not want to stay in the Chinese circle; I needed to change to a new one. I tried to find new things that were different from those in China. So, I made Thai friends intentionally and wanted to learn about local people's lives and cultures. I would not have learned Thai fluently if I had stayed in a Chinese circle and always spoken Chinese."*

Anny felt excited upon being accepted into a Thai university, viewing it as a new chapter in her academic journey. Although she experienced some initial disappointment, her joy blossomed as she learned the Thai language, which instilled a sense of pride as a multilingual speaker while studying in Thailand. She was particularly impressed with her ability to order food fluently in Thai and navigate her travels throughout the country without any difficulties. Anny highlighted that her preferred language learning method involves traveling and engaging with people, rather than traditional

classroom settings, which shapes a unique approach to mastering languages. Additionally, she discovered the diverse accents of English speakers, realizing that native accents were not always practical in her context. This experience helped her embrace the richness of various English accents and improve her communication skills.

*"Before I spoke Thai, I needed to understand people who spoke English with a Thai accent. However, I conquered these problems by speaking Thai fluently. Now, I often speak English with people from different backgrounds using English; I understand many accents and accept those accents."*

Despite her strong desire to speak English fluently, she struggled with her accent, convinced that sounding like a native speaker was the only proficiency measurement. This mindset impeded the development of her multilingual identity. She felt that her surroundings did not support enhancing her English-speaking skills; the more she communicated in Thai, the less her English ability seemed to improve. She sometimes found it difficult to express her thoughts in English during class, leading to frustration and sadness.

*"Thai accent affected my speaking. I would speak Thai and English when communicating with locals, but I could not speak native English in such an environment, and local people significantly affected my speaking."*

*"After speaking Thai, I could not express myself in English; I could only say simple English words. I cannot express complex ideas using English now."*

EMI Teachers prioritized content over English proficiency, leading her to conclude that intelligibility is crucial for acquiring professional knowledge. However, she felt perplexed because her extensive reading and writing experiences had underscored the importance of writing skills and vocabulary for academic success. These competencies enabled her to read and write effectively in the classroom, reinforcing her belief that English proficiency is essential for professional learning. The objectives of writing papers and reading fluently influenced her perspective on English proficiency within the realm of academic knowledge, prompting



a re-evaluation of her multilingual identity.

*"My English score affected my writing and reading ability. I spent a lot of time on my papers because I needed to learn grammar, vocabulary, and professional knowledge. Besides, I needed to learn to write, especially organizing ideas on paper. I could have done better on IELTS before applying to this university; high-score students would have had it easier than I did."*

Translanguaging significantly enhanced her social life. By adapting her use of two languages depending on her conversation partners, she realized that becoming a multilingual speaker made her social interactions more engaging. Although she lacked proficiency in written Thai, she relied primarily on English to interact with locals. However, many locals had limited English skills, making translation apps and images particularly useful for communication, especially in online contexts. In many cases, signs were displayed in English and Thai when ordering food or using public transportation. This environment led her to feel discouraged about learning to write in Thai, as she believed that mere speaking proficiency was sufficient for navigating life in Thailand effectively.

*"I can speak Thai fluently but lack writing skills, and I cannot entirely agree that writing affects communication. I use many strategies to make my interlocutor understand, such as translation applications and images. Also, when I go outside, most public places have English that I can understand."*

She made a concerted effort to engage with locals to embrace a comfortable life in Thailand. However, since she began her English studies at the age of 10, her dream has been to speak like a native. She longed to grasp the intricacies of native cultures and to communicate fluently in English. Although she had learned Thai and embraced the diverse accents of her interlocutors, her desire to achieve native-like proficiency in English drove her to reflect on her identity as a multilingual speaker.

*"When learning English, I thought I needed a native speaker to teach me. The learning*

*environment is essential. If I want to learn Japanese, I need to go to Japan. It is an efficient way to learn a language".*

Her goal in learning English was to gain new knowledge. As a hobby, she aspired to pursue a career beyond just being an English professor. To achieve this, she strongly emphasized improving her speaking skills and focusing on effective communication. This strategy enriches her multilingual identity and reinforced her belief that fluent speaking English enables her to learn from others.

*"I like English, and I learn it as a hobby. I hope to speak English like a native speaker and express myself freely. I also want to use English to gain professional knowledge."*

*"I need to learn English because it is important for communication, adjusting to a new environment, and experiencing different things. I want to learn English in my own way."*

She intended to pursue a master's degree in the EMI program because the Thai program lacked English teaching ability. The EMI environment motivated her to formulate a long-term plan and to invest in her English skills. She believed that both English and Thai were crucial for living in Thailand. Furthermore, she preferred to reside in a culturally diverse country that would allow her to learn languages, noting that the monolingual environment in China did not fulfil her practical needs for learning English. Her future aspirations encouraged her to remain in a multilingual setting, inspiring her ambition to become a multilingual speaker.

*"I want to study for a master's degree in Thailand in the EMI program because using English could make my studies go smoothly, unlike in the Thai program. Also, this environment could help me practice English; I want to learn English."*

During the last interview, she expressed a desire to remain in Thailand for career growth. The English and Thai languages continued to play a significant role in her life. The relaxed atmosphere fostered an enjoyable learning experience, while the multilingual setting provided numerous opportunities to practice English. She took great pride in being a multilingual speaker studying in Thailand.

## 5. Discussion

The findings primarily highlighted the similarities and differences in the language-learning experiences of a Chinese international student who had enrolled in an EMI program after studying in Thailand. The study emphasized cultural differences to capture the development of a multilingual identity from an intercultural lens. Utilizing the multilingual identity approach to intercultural stance<sup>[5]</sup>, this approach demonstrated that multilingual identity is both an individual and a social process that can be negotiated. The research revealed that intercultural understanding reflects the negotiation process of multilingual identity, which is interconnected with multiple language-learning experiences in the Thai EMI context. Additionally, this study acknowledged that intercultural understanding could be cultivated through constructing and renegotiating a multilingual identity. It posited that fostering a multilingual identity is essential for achieving intercultural understanding and adaptation in non-English-speaking countries while participating in an EMI program. This understanding was vital for international students as they navigated the relationship between cultural differences and language learning after studying abroad in such settings. Furthermore, the study affirmed that the inter-relationship of language and culture, imagined connections to language, self-concept, feelings of belonging, and reflexivity could be considered to explore international students' multilingual identity in the classroom and social interactions from an individual perspective.

In terms of the inter-relationship of language and culture, this study reinforced the idea that language and culture are interrelated and inseparable<sup>[43]</sup>, and cannot be isolated from language learning and identity development<sup>[5]</sup>. The participant expressed a critical perspective on the prevalent test-oriented pedagogy in China. Furthermore, the Chinese policy regarding English education, which focuses heavily on testing, has led society to prioritize native standard and English proficiency. This language ideology influenced Anny's aspiration to study in a native-speaking country, overshadowing other potential avenues for language acquisition. This study illustrated how English language policies shape the language ideology of language learners in China. Notably, these ideologies had evolved in response to a changing multilingual context. The finding indicated that language ideology is a social process influenced by various social factors,

including policy and the learning environment. Moreover, this study supported the idea that language ideology plays a significant role in constructing multilingual identity<sup>[29, 36]</sup>.

Regarding imagined connections to language, this study provided insights into the intricate interplay of imagined community, imagined identity, and investment, highlighting their collective influence on the development of multilingual identities. It recognized that multilingual identities evolved over time<sup>[24]</sup> and were closely tied to the present and future<sup>[27]</sup>. The findings suggested that the disparity between reality and imagination could positively and negatively affect language learning, as self-perceived cultural connections significantly shaped multilingual identity<sup>[5]</sup>. The policy's emphasis on English over other languages led to an inflated perception of English, reduced the viability of other languages and cultures, and created a disconnect between their imagined community and reality. A related study by Wu<sup>[44]</sup> confirmed that imagined identity possessed dual facets regarding language investment. This research bolstered the notion that a learner's imagined community profoundly impacts their imagined identity and investment in the target language, a dynamic that must be contextualized<sup>[45]</sup>.

In terms of self-concept, Anny's engagement with intercultural communication and academic learning has prompted her to invest in learning Thai and to utilize language resources effectively during her studies. This research demonstrated that language learners continually renegotiate their identities within various contexts and tapped into social networks<sup>[27]</sup>, potentially evolving into multilingual speakers in diverse environments and strengthening adaptation in the EMI context. Furthermore, the study confirmed that intercultural experiences significantly aided international students in adapting to new surroundings<sup>[46]</sup>. These findings suggested that self-understanding was intricately tied to learning experiences, particularly with translanguaging practices across different contexts. Ultimately, the results proved that multilingual identities could be fostered in multilingual settings, aligning with Barkhuizen's<sup>[37]</sup> research. Regarding feelings of belonging, Anny began to accept the diverse accents and invest in the Thai language, which shifted due to social values, such as community, relationships, and culture, thereby affecting language choice and reshaping identity. It was implied that host community and agency acceptance were essential for international students to construct a multilingual

identity in a diverse context<sup>[5]</sup>. This proved the previous studies that developing other languages to adapt to target countries<sup>[36, 47, 48]</sup>.

In terms of reflexivity, it was essential to highlight that enhancing multilingual identity contributes significantly to the reflexivity of language learning and the adaptation to new cultures, particularly following a study abroad experience in a non-native-speaking country. Research has demonstrated that reflexivity positively influences language acquisition<sup>[49, 50]</sup>. Anny's experience revealed that fluency in Thai served as a crucial foundation for living in Thailand. This finding supported the idea that a shift in identity is closely linked to developing linguistic competence and is self-reflective<sup>[5]</sup>. Furthermore, these results suggested that effective intercultural communication and language proficiency facilitated international students' adaptation, enabling them to reconceptualize themselves as confident multilingual speakers.

In summary, consistent with the findings of studies<sup>[2, 36]</sup>, the exploration of multilingual identity construction was framed through psychological perspectives such as language ideology, motivation, and social dynamics. It could be inferred that a multilingual identity might emerge when international students engage with multiple languages and participate in a diverse linguistic community, supporting assertions made in various studies on multilingual identity formation<sup>[4, 51, 52]</sup>. Moreover, this research confirmed that intercultural understanding significantly shaped multilingual identity within non-native speaking EMI contexts. This result highlighted how the interplay of language and culture, imagined connections to language, self-concept, feelings of belonging, and reflexivity collectively influence the development of multilingual identity and intercultural understanding from individual perspectives.

## 6. Conclusions

This study aimed to explore the language-learning journey of a Chinese student and how she cultivated a multilingual identity to adapt to the EMI program in Thailand. In contrast to the traditional Thai programs, the EMI program is conducted in a small group and primarily utilizes English. However, effective communication in Thai is becoming increasingly important as the program expands in

Thailand. Furthermore, the study suggested that developing a multilingual identity can facilitate adaptation to the EMI program within an English-as-a-lingua-franca (ELF) setting. It highlights that succeeding in an EMI program requires more than just enhancing English skills; intercultural understanding is essential in shaping a multilingual identity in an EMI environment where English serves as a lingua franca.

This narrative inquiry explored the experiences of a Chinese international student enrolled in an EMI program at a Thai university, focusing on her language learning stories to examine the construction of multilingual identity from an intercultural perspective. A notable limitation of this study is that it primarily tracked Anny's life story during her bachelor's program at a single university in Thailand, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Nevertheless, the study offered valuable insights into the language-learning process inside and outside the classroom. To gain a deeper understanding of multilingual identity construction, it would be beneficial to provide different contexts, as identities are fluid and context-dependent, shaped by social structures and interactions with others<sup>[27]</sup>. Thus, future research should engage participants over extended periods and in diverse contexts, involving multiple universities and countries. Additionally, future studies should consider factors such as institutional policies, students' language requirements, academic courses, and university mandates, which can influence identity construction and warrant consideration in subsequent research.

This study provides valuable implications for educators involved in English Medium Instruction (EMI) programs in the Thai context. It emphasizes the importance of incorporating an intercultural curriculum in EMI programs, encouraging international students to reflect on cultural differences and reevaluate their cultural backgrounds for improved adaptation. Additionally, university administrators should reassess the balance between English proficiency and professional knowledge within the EMI classroom. Prioritizing intelligibility as a fundamental objective in EMI teaching is essential.

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## Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

## Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

## Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon request.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

#### Part 1: The inter-relationship of language and culture

- 1) Do you think the English language is important today? Why and how?
- 2) When you were in China, did you think Chinese culture affected your learning of English? Why or why not?
- 3) How did you learn English when you were in China?
- 4) Do you think culture is an essential factor in English learning?

#### Part 2: Imagined connections to language.

- 1) What were your experiences when communicating with Thai teachers and classmates?
- 2) What do you think or expect about English before coming to Thailand?
- 3) Before coming to Thailand, did you try to learn or know some Thai language and culture?
- 4) What are the differences between studying English in China and Thailand?

#### Part 3: Self-concept

- 1) What significant experiences shaped who you are?
- 2) Studying in Thailand for one semester can help you integrate your social life, classmates, and teachers. And how?

3) Why did you decide to come to Thailand to learn English?

4) What was the most challenging thing for you when interacting with teachers and other students?

5) What was the most challenging thing for you when you communicated outside the campus?

#### Part 4: Feelings of belonging

1) Were you satisfied with your life in Thailand? Why or why not?

2) How did you learn English in academics and daily life when the Thai language came into your social life?

#### Part 5: The consideration of self and others

1) Please describe your social life in Thailand. Do you think your English proficiency affects your social life and academic learning?

2) Have you changed your ways of learning English after coming to Thailand?

3) What suggestions would you give new Chinese students studying in Thailand?

4) What are your expectations after going to Thailand?

5) What do you want to improve during studying in Thailand?

6) What are the experiences of cross-cultural learning to develop your competence in English?

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