

*Language Retention and Identity Dynamics:
Assessing First Language Attrition in Bilingual Adolescents*

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Abstract

This study investigates first language (L1) attrition and identity shifts among bilingual adolescents, with a focus on the role of second language (L2) dominance in shaping both linguistic and cultural identity. A qualitative approach was used to explore the experiences of 250 bilingual students from international schools in Azerbaijan. These students participated in focus group interviews that examined their experiences of L1 erosion and the sociocultural factors influencing these shifts. The study is framed within the Language Dominance Framework and Social Identity Theory, which together explain how L2 dominance in academic and social settings accelerates the attrition of L1 and drives identity transformation. Findings revealed that adolescents in formal academic contexts increasingly prioritize L2 as it is associated with academic success, social prestige, and future opportunities. This preference leads to a decline in L1 proficiency, especially in formal academic contexts, and redefines adolescents' social identities. The study highlights how educational policies and other sociolinguistic factors that prioritize L2, peer pressures, and family language practices contribute to L1 attrition. The paper also discusses the implications for educational systems, suggesting the need for policies that support balanced bilingualism and preserve cultural identities.

Keywords: L2 Dominance, Language Attrition, Identity Shift

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Introduction

In today's increasingly globalized world, language attrition—characterized by the gradual erosion of proficiency in a first language (L1)—has become a complex issue. Language attrition is shaped by numerous sociocultural and educational factors and has significant implications for identity, cultural continuity, and cognitive development (Köpke & Schmid, 2004; Schmid, 2011). As bilingual adolescents adopt a dominant second language (L2), often English, in academic settings, they may begin to prioritize L2 over their native language, raising concerns about the factors that drive L1 attrition and its effect on linguistic identity and cultural connection.

To understand these dynamics, this study applied the Language Dominance Framework and Social Identity Theory. The Language Dominance Framework examines how the balance between L1 and L2 shifts according to exposure, usage patterns, and perceived utility, highlighting that dominance reflects functional adaptations individuals make to meet social and academic demands (Grosjean, 2008; Kupisch & van de Weijer, 2015; Montrul, 2015). Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2001) clarifies how language choices are influenced by group affiliations and the social prestige of each language. In bilingual contexts, individuals may prioritize L2, seeing it as essential for social acceptance and academic success (Alasgarova, 2024; Pavlenko, 2000). Together, these frameworks suggest that language attrition is influenced not only by linguistic demands but also by social utility, identity formation, and environmental pressures.

Educational settings, where L2 is often used as the medium of instruction, further compound this process by reinforcing the perceived utility of L2 for future opportunities (Alasgarova et al., 2024; Gallo et al., 2021). In such environments, the prominence of L2 may prompt students to internalize its norms and values, reshaping their linguistic identity and diminishing motivation to maintain L1. The sociocultural prestige associated with L2 frequently reshapes adolescents' sense of belonging, making it more difficult to maintain L1, as they begin to view L2 as the gateway to future success.

This study employed a qualitative approach and thematic analysis of focus group interviews to provide insights into the factors influencing language attrition and identity shifts among bilingual adolescents. By examining the sociocultural and educational dimensions contributing to L1 attrition, this study aimed to inform strategies that foster balanced bilingualism and preserve linguistic diversity in multicultural learning environments.

Literature Review

Bilingualism, Language Dominance, and First Language Attrition

Understanding the dynamics of language dominance in bilingual individuals involves analyzing the interactive influences between L1 and L2. Language dominance is typically characterized by greater proficiency or usage in one language compared to another and can shift due to factors including the age of acquisition, frequency of use, emotional resonance, and social contexts. Montrul (2015) defines language dominance as a dynamic relationship influenced by social expectations and personal aspirations, challenging simplistic views by emphasizing how bilinguals adapt to different contexts and use both languages flexibly. Kupisch and van de Weijer (2015) highlight that limited exposure to L1 leads to incomplete acquisition, fostering L1 erosion as L2 becomes dominant in academic and social settings.

This shift in language dominance is closely linked to language attrition. As L2 becomes the dominant language, bilingual individuals may experience a decline in their L1 proficiency, including the loss of lexical items, grammatical structures, and pragmatic elements. According to Köpke (2004a), language attrition is influenced by both the reduced use of L1 and the bilingual's attitudes toward their languages, as well as their proactive management of language skills. As L2 continues to dominate, the decline in L1 proficiency becomes inevitable, reinforcing the shift in language use.

Moreover, daily communication demands in specific linguistic environments necessitate and reinforce the dominance of one language over another. This necessity for proficiency in a dominant language is often accelerated by the need to integrate into the dominant language community socially and economically, influencing linguistic preferences and behaviors across all domains of language use. The Complementarity Principle (Grosjean, 2008) posits that bilinguals use languages based on context, but increased L2 exposure can lead to a shift in dominance, favoring L2 structures. Schmid (2011) found that long-term immigrants often experience language attrition in their first language primarily in informal language domains, which gradually affects more formal language use over time, indicating a domain-specific onset of attrition.

This process may result in permanent changes to how L1 is used, making some elements of L1 less accessible or being replaced by L2 structures. These changes are crucial not only at the individual level but also affect intergenerational language transmission, where children in bilingual families may adopt an L1 version heavily influenced by L2 (Köpke & Genevska-Hanke, 2018; Köpke & Schmid, 2004; Schmid, 2002; Schmid, 2011).

Such external factors as societal attitudes and the prestige of languages significantly influence the attrition process. The prestige of English in global communication and higher education can make English proficiency seem more valuable than maintaining the native language. This perceived value influences bilinguals' linguistic choices, prioritizing English use not only out of necessity but also for its higher social capital (Pavlenko, 2000). In international school settings, where English typically dominates both instruction and social interaction, this pervasive use of English leads to native languages being limited to informal settings or specific subjects, often insufficient to maintain language proficiency. Students might find their ability to express complex ideas in their native language gradually decreasing, showcasing a shift in linguistic competence from L1 to L2 (Alasgarova, 2024; Alasgarova et al., 2024). The limited exposure to robust native language content, combined with the overwhelming presence of English, creates a linguistic imbalance conducive to language attrition, as cognitive and linguistic efforts heavily favor English.

To effectively capture and understand these dynamic shifts in language dominance and the subsequent attrition of certain aspects of L1, researchers require robust tools that can track these changes over time and across different contexts. The Bilingual Language Profile (BLP), developed by Gertken and colleagues (2014), offers a significant methodological advancement in bilingualism studies. This tool enhances understanding of how bilingual individuals manage and utilize their linguistic resources, supporting educational strategies tailored to bilingual students' linguistic profiles.

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory provides a valuable framework for examining language retention and attrition (Tajfel & Turner, 2001). The theory posits that individuals categorize themselves and others into specific social groups, which impacts self-esteem and intergroup relations. In bilingual contexts, adolescents frequently gravitate towards the language group that holds greater social or economic value. This alignment process is especially relevant in environments where L2 is associated with high prestige, thereby reinforcing its role in identity formation while potentially reducing the prominence of L1 (Gallo et al., 2021; Köpke, 2004b; Köpke & Genevska-Hanke, 2018; Köpke & Schmid, 2004; Schmid, 2002; Schmid, 2011; Yilmaz, 2019). For instance, Cavallaro and Serwe (2010) found that Malay bilingual speakers in Singapore increasingly aligned with English, which they perceived as having higher social status and economic value, while Malay was primarily maintained in interactions with older family members, reflecting its diminishing prestige in younger and more socioeconomically mobile groups (Cavallaro & Serwe, 2010).

According to Social Identity Theory, the process begins with social categorization, where individuals classify themselves and others into groups (Figure 1). This classification influences their social identity and is often based on language, culture, or ethnicity. Schmid (2004) emphasizes that in contexts of forced migration or trauma, individuals may distance themselves from their native language, aligning instead with the dominant language to redefine their social identity. Expanding on these dynamics, Schmid and Dusseldorp (2010) found that attitudes toward one's native community strongly influence language maintenance. In such contexts, individuals may categorize themselves according to linguistic proficiency or cultural affiliation, leading to distinct in-groups ("us") and out-groups ("them").

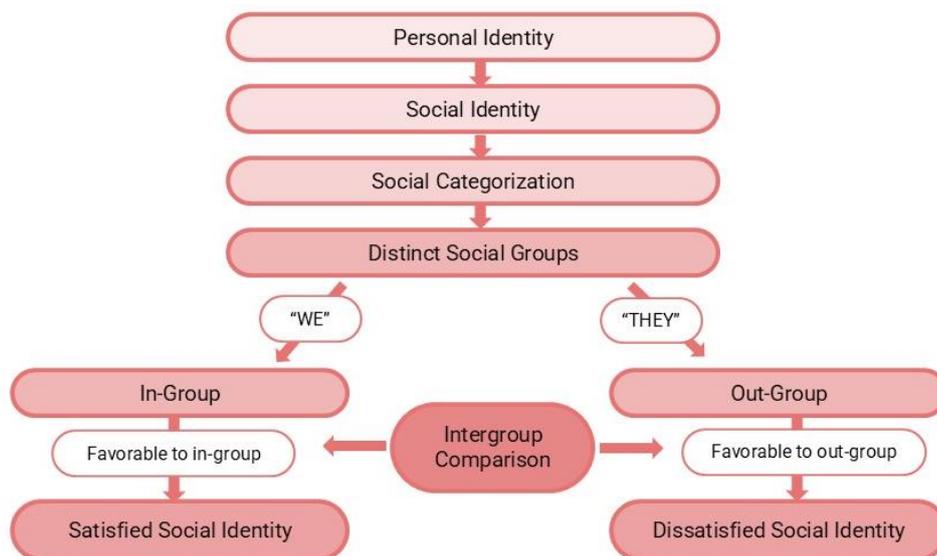


Figure 1: Social Identity Theory (Adapted from [Social Identity Theory], n.d.)

The theory further posits that once individuals have identified with a group, they engage in social comparison, evaluating their group in relation to others. Schmitt and Sorokina (2024) describe how cultural and social identity factors significantly influence language attrition, observing that bilinguals often adjust their language usage patterns based on the perceived social and economic benefits associated with the dominant language. In international schools, this may occur as students compare their linguistic abilities and cultural backgrounds with

those of their peers. Positive comparisons can enhance self-image and satisfaction within one's social identity, fostering a stronger alignment with the in-group. Conversely, negative comparisons may lead to dissatisfaction with one's group, potentially motivating individuals to shift their linguistic behavior or social affiliations.

As long as the dominant language of the school (typically English in international settings) is associated with higher status or more opportunities, students might increasingly identify with this language, diminishing the use and proficiency of their native languages. According to Alasgarova and colleagues (2024), culture attrition refers to a gradual degradation of native cultural values and reshaping of cultural identity perception, influenced by sociolinguistic and societal contexts. This shift impacts not only language attrition but also students' cultural identities and intergenerational language transmission, as they may adopt the cultural norms and language of the dominant group in the educational setting.

These insights suggest that schools should implement strategies that promote a positive valuation of all cultural and linguistic groups to prevent L1 attrition. This could involve creating programs that celebrate linguistic diversity, establishing language support groups that foster peer connections across different linguistic backgrounds, and integrating multilingual resources into the curriculum to ensure that all languages are represented and valued equally (Peltokorpi & Vaara, 2012).

Current research has extensively explored language dominance and attrition but has not sufficiently addressed such specific sociocultural contexts as international school settings, where L2 dominance significantly influences language choices, identity formation, and L1 attrition. This study aimed to bridge this contextual gap by examining how second language dominance and sociocultural factors contribute to L1 attrition and shape linguistic and social identity among bilingual adolescents. By doing so, it sought to provide a deeper understanding of the pressures and dynamics underlying language shift and attrition in these unique environments. Building on this, the study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do sociocultural contexts and L2 dominance contribute to L1 attrition among bilingual adolescents?
2. How does L2 dominance impact social and linguistic identity among bilingual adolescents in international school settings?

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing focus group interviews to explore experiences of bilingual adolescents with L1 attrition and the sociocultural factors influencing linguistic identity. A qualitative approach, employing a Grounded Theory methodology, was chosen for its ability to capture the subtle personal and social dimensions of language use and identity shifts, aligning closely with the study's objectives (Dörnyei, 2007).

The sample consisted of 250 bilingual adolescents aged 15 to 17 from international schools in Baku, Azerbaijan, selected through purposive sampling to meet the study's criteria. All participants were native Azerbaijani speakers who have been studying in international English-taught schools that maintained an English-only policy in Azerbaijan since Grade 1. This setting provided a unique context to assess the impact of sustained L2 exposure on L1 attrition.

The 23 focus groups, each with 10-11 participants, lasted 45-60 minutes and were audio-recorded in school settings with consent for transcription accuracy. The researcher facilitated each session to encourage open responses in a comfortable environment. Ethical protocols were followed for the protection of minors (McCabe & Pao 2021). Approval was obtained through school principals, with consent forms distributed to parents to inform them of the study's voluntary nature and confidentiality.

The focus group discussions were structured around key themes from the BLP, covering aspects such as language history, frequency of language use, perceived proficiency, and attitudes toward each language (Gertken et al., 2014). In discussing language history, participants reflected on their initial experiences with L1 and L2, while questions about language use revealed the contexts in which each language was employed, including home, school, and peer interactions. To measure proficiency, participants considered their comfort with L1 and L2 across speaking, writing, and comprehension. Lastly, discussions around attitudes and identity explored participants' personal connections to each language, including the perceived value and social prestige of L1 and L2 within their communities and academic settings.

Findings

By breaking down the data into manageable segments, core themes and concepts related to language attrition, identity shifts, and the influence of L2 dominance in shaping adolescents' language behaviors and cultural identities were identified. Through an iterative coding process, key patterns emerged, and a theoretical model was developed based on participants' lived experiences, emphasizing the context-sensitive and identity-driven nature of language attrition. All coding was conducted manually, allowing for a close, iterative examination of the data (Dörnyei, 2007). The following flowchart outlines the step-by-step coding process, illustrating how initial codes were refined and connected to develop the core categories and final theory (Figure 2).

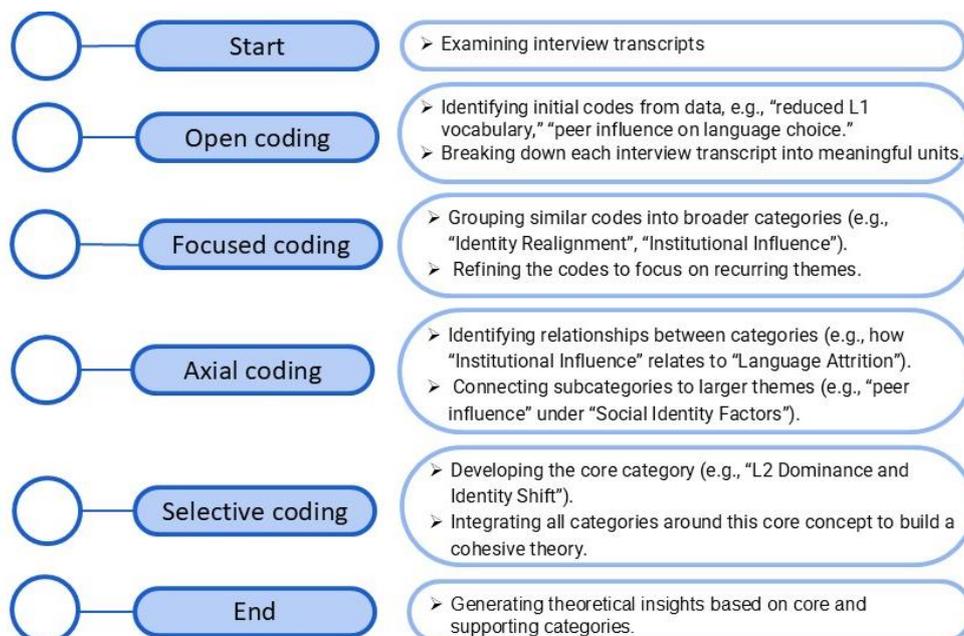


Figure 2: Thematic Coding Process

Open Coding

The open coding phase revealed key themes related to language attrition and its impact on bilingual adolescents' use of L1 (Figure 3). Many participants described a noticeable decline in their L1 proficiency, particularly in vocabulary retrieval and conversational fluency. In informal settings, where L1 was used less frequently due to the predominance of English in academic and social contexts, participants reported struggles with recalling words in L1 and maintaining smooth conversations with family members or peers. The use of L1 in these informal settings became increasingly constrained, reflecting the growing dominance of L2 in their daily lives. This shift in language preference was particularly evident in the participants' ability to express more complex ideas as reflected in current research (e.g., Alasgarova, 2024; Gallo et al., 2021; Köpke, 2004b; Köpke & Genevska-Hanke, 2018; Köpke & Schmid, 2004; Schmid, 2002; Schmid, 2011). English, increasingly seen as the language of success, began to displace L1 in both formal and informal interactions.

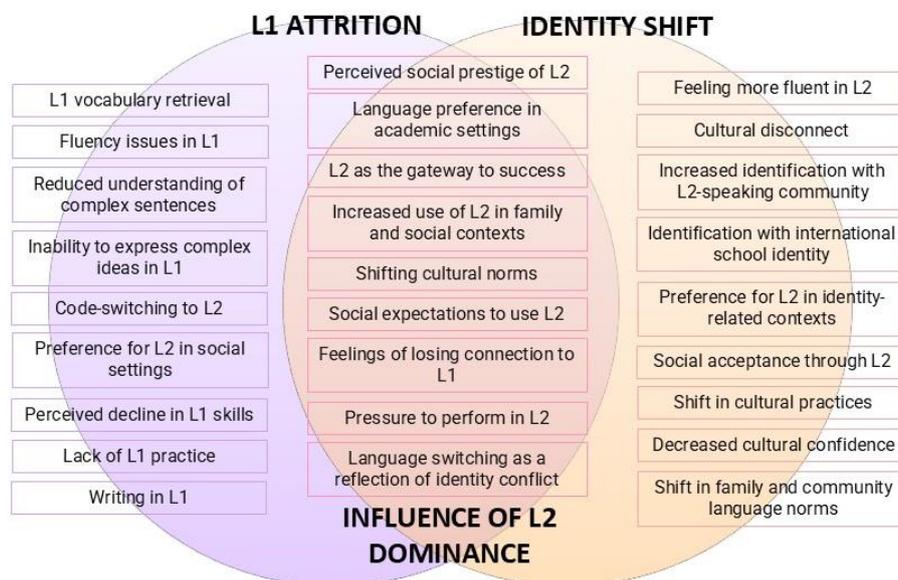


Figure 3: Open Coding Categories

The overlap between language attrition and identity shift became evident as the dominance of L2 shaped both linguistic and cultural self-perceptions. As participants' L2 proficiency increased, they expressed a stronger sense of connection to the L2-speaking community, while feeling increasingly distanced from their native cultural roots. This disconnect was particularly noticeable in interactions with family, peers, and broader cultural practices, where English was increasingly seen as a marker of social success and academic achievement (Cavallaro & Serwe, 2010; Köpke, 2004a; Köpke & Schmid, 2004; Schmitt and Sorokina, 2024; Yilmaz, 2019). As L2 became the preferred language in academic and social contexts, participants reported a growing sense of alienation from their heritage culture, especially when using L1 (Alasgarova et al., 2024). The sociocultural pressures of adapting to L2 norms, driven by school policies and peer expectations, reinforced the perceived prestige of English and made L1 seem less relevant, further deepening the cultural divide. The shift in identity, marked by a redefinition of belonging to the L2 community, not only reflected changes in language use but also underscored the broader societal forces shaping adolescents' linguistic and cultural trajectories.

Focused Coding

In the next phase, focused coding was used to refine the initial codes and identify recurring patterns. The two primary themes that emerged were L2 social prestige and L1 functional limitations in academic settings. The prestige of L2 was cited repeatedly as a powerful force in shaping participants' language behaviors (Pavlenko, 2000). Many adolescents described English as the language necessary for academic success and social integration. This view was reflected in participants' survey responses, where English was frequently associated with prestige and opportunity, while L1 was often relegated to informal, familial contexts. One participant remarked, "At school, everyone speaks in English, and if you want to fit in or even just do well in class, you need to speak English". This quote underscores how L2 social prestige directly influences language choices, shaping both the participants' social interactions and their self-identity.

The functional limitations of L1 in academic settings were also evident. Several participants noted that their ability to use L1 in formal contexts, such as academic discussions or written assignments, had diminished significantly. English became the default language for academic tasks like essay writing and classroom participation, whereas L1 was reserved, though limited, for more personal, informal contexts. One participant shared, "When I have to write something serious, like an essay, I use English. But at home, I only speak in my mother tongue, but even that feels weird sometimes". This quote highlights the growing divide between L1 and L2, with L1 becoming less functional in academic settings and restricted to the home environment. The following table provides selected participant quotes that reflect key aspects of language attrition and identity shifts to illustrate how sociocultural and institutional factors influence bilingual students' language choices and self-perception (Table 1).

Table 1: Participant Quotes and Thematic Interpretation

<i>Participant Quote</i>	<i>Theme/Code</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
"I only use Azerbaijani at home; at school, everything is in English."	Institutional influence	The school's emphasis on English limits the use of L1 in formal educational contexts.
"Speaking English helps me fit in with friends and succeed in classes."	L2 social prestige	Peer pressure and academic success elevate L2 as a central part of students' social identity.
"Sometimes, I can't find the right words in Azerbaijani anymore."	Language attrition indicators	A sign of reduced proficiency in L1, particularly in terms of vocabulary retrieval.
"At home, I still speak Azerbaijani, but I feel more confident in English."	Language dominance	The shift towards English as the dominant language reflects a growing preference and fluency in L2.
"I don't talk much in class because I feel insecure about my English."	Identity conflict	The tension between cultural and linguistic identity is expressed through discomfort with English in academic settings.
"Everyone around me just speaks English, even when we're hanging out. It's hard to keep up with Azerbaijani when everyone is always using English."	Community language norms	The surrounding community's preference for English influences individuals to adopt L2, reinforcing L2 dominance and contributing to language attrition.

“My parents still talk to me in Azerbaijani, but I usually answer in English.”	Family language practices	Increased use of English over Azerbaijani suggests a disconnect from native cultural practices and language.
“I speak English to my teachers but Azerbaijani to my grandparents.”	Code-switching	Participants code-switch based on the context, using L2 in formal and academic contexts and L1 in family settings.
“I’ve noticed that I make more grammar mistakes in Azerbaijani than before.”	Language attrition indicators	The decline in proficiency is evident through grammatical mistakes in L1.
“At school, I have to speak English to participate in class discussions.”	Academic pressure	The requirement to speak English in academic settings is an external pressure influencing language use.

Axial Coding

During axial coding, these categories were connected to better understand their relationships and how they contribute to the broader phenomena of language attrition and identity shifts. The category “Institutional Influence on Language Attrition” linked codes like school policies discouraging L1, peer preference for L2, and reduced L1 engagement in academic and social contexts. This relationship illustrates how the institutional environment contributes to both language attrition and identity shifts, with L2 often being favored in educational settings.

Another significant category that emerged was “Identity Realignment and Language Preference”. As students adjusted to their changing linguistic landscape, many reported gravitating toward L2 as a way to align with high-status social groups. This finding supports previous research by Pavlenko (2000), which indicates that L2 adoption is often driven by the desire for social aspiration and the perceived benefits of aligning with the cultural capital associated with L2 communities.

Selective Coding and Theory Development

The selective coding process synthesized participant-reported patterns into a cohesive framework, showing how institutional, societal, and familial factors interconnect to shape L2 dominance, L1 attrition, and identity shifts among bilingual adolescents. Participants consistently highlighted institutional policies as a central force driving L2 dominance. English-only practices in schools restricted opportunities for L1 use, particularly in academic settings. This limitation led to noticeable declines in L1 proficiency, with participants struggling to recall vocabulary and express complex ideas in their native language (Gallo et al., 2021; Köpke, 2004a; Köpke & Genevska-Hanke, 2018). Social pressures from peers further reinforced these institutional influences, as participants described feeling obligated to use English to succeed academically and integrate socially. As a result, L1 was relegated to informal or limited-use contexts, diminishing its practical value over time.

Societal perceptions of English as a marker of success and opportunity exacerbated these patterns (Köpke & Schmid, 2004; Schmitt and Sorokina, 2024; Yilmaz, 2019). Participants frequently associated English with higher social status, academic achievement, and career prospects, often prioritizing it over their native language. This shift contributed to a sense of cultural and linguistic detachment, as reliance on English weakened participants’ connections to their L1-speaking communities and heritage.

Family and community practices moderated these dynamics to varying degrees. Households that consistently encouraged L1 use helped participants maintain stronger linguistic and cultural ties. However, inconsistent reinforcement of L1 within families often left participants more susceptible to the dominance of English in educational and social settings. Several participants noted how external pressures, particularly the institutional prioritization of English, undermined familial efforts to preserve L1, accelerating its decline.

The diagram captures these interconnected processes by illustrating the relationships among institutional policies, societal pressures, and family practices. It highlights how institutional and societal factors promote L2 dominance, which accelerates L1 attrition and reshapes identity (Figure 4). The reciprocal interaction in the diagram emphasizes the cyclical nature of these processes, showing how shifts in language use and identity perpetuate the marginalization of L1. While family practices may buffer against these forces, they often struggle to counteract the pervasive external influences favoring English.

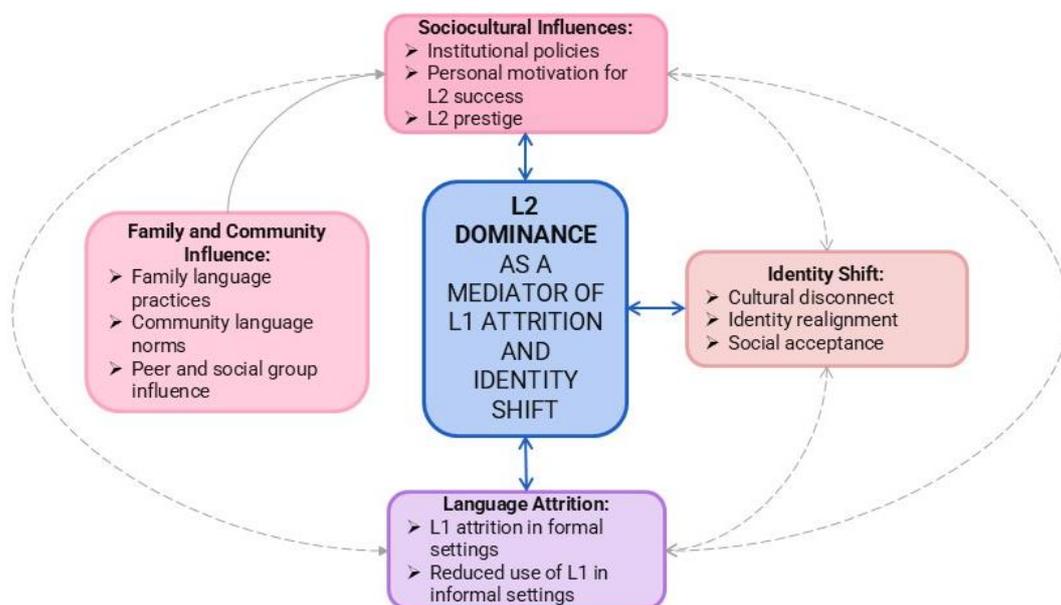


Figure 4: Factors Shaping L2 Dominance and Identity Shift

Discussion

This study explored language attrition and identity dynamics among bilingual adolescents in Azerbaijan, focusing on how social, institutional, and personal factors shape language use in L2-dominant environments. Grounded in the Language Dominance Framework and Social Identity Theory, the findings offer insights into how bilingual adolescents navigate their linguistic identities in contexts where English serves as both the language of instruction and a symbol of social prestige and academic success.

Language Dominance Framework: Sociocultural and Institutional Influences on L1 Attrition

The Language Dominance Framework underscores the adaptability of language use in response to sociocultural contexts, exposure, and perceived utility. L2 dominance is influenced by a combination of peer influence, academic requirements, and institutional policies that prioritize English as the primary language of communication and instruction

(Schmid, 2011; Yilmaz, 2019). Bilingual adolescents increasingly favor English over Azerbaijani, driven by its association with academic success, social integration, and perceived prestige. This shift is particularly evident in educational settings, where English is not only the language of instruction but also the key to social acceptance and academic achievement.

Building on the Complementarity Principle (Grosjean, 2008), the findings reveal that participants allocate English to academic and social domains while relegating L1 to informal family contexts. However, participants also reported struggles with L1 fluency, as their proficiency in the language diminished. This decline in L1 proficiency is consistent with Kupisch and van de Weijer's (2015) observation that limited exposure to L1, especially in academic settings, leads to incomplete acquisition and eventual attrition of advanced language structures. In the present study, participants demonstrated a significant functional limitation of L1 in school-related tasks and academic discussions.

Family language practices and community norms play a critical role in these dynamics. The findings reveal that adolescents often experienced external pressures to use English in familial and community contexts, where previously Azerbaijani had been the dominant language. One participant remarked, "I use Azerbaijani with my parents, but it is often more comfortable in English since most of my friends do too," illustrating how the shift to English is not confined to academic or school contexts but permeates the home environment as well. This reflects Pavlenko's (2000) assertion that societal attitudes and the prestige of a language can significantly influence bilingual language behavior, particularly in environments where the dominant language is associated with higher social and economic value. In the case of Azerbaijani adolescents in international schools, the prestige associated with English leads to a reduction in L1 use in both informal and formal contexts, reinforcing the dominance of L2.

In line with the work of Schmid (2011), the findings underscore how the increased use of English for academic and social purposes leads to a gradual erosion of L1 proficiency, which starts in formal domains but can extend to more informal language use over time. This shift suggests that bilingual adolescents are increasingly unable to express complex ideas in their L1, as their cognitive and linguistic efforts are predominantly directed toward English. The social and academic benefits of L2 proficiency, combined with the institutional policies of English-medium education, push L1 to the periphery of adolescents' daily lives, leading to a reordering of linguistic priorities where L2 becomes the dominant mode of communication.

As adolescents align more with their English-speaking peers and experience the social and academic benefits of using English, their connection to L1 weakens, creating a growing divide between their native language and the language they use for social mobility and academic success. These shifts in language use and identity are deeply influenced by the link between institutional policies, peer expectations, and family practices, which together shape adolescents' linguistic behavior and cultural affiliation.

Social Identity Theory: Identity Realignment and Linguistic Group Affiliation

The findings of this study revealed the critical role of identity realignment in understanding the shift in language use among bilingual adolescents. According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2001), adolescents' identities are shaped by their affiliation with linguistic and cultural groups.

As adolescents in this study adopted more English-speaking practices, their sense of belonging to the L2 group became tied to their linguistic identity. Participants expressed feeling more connected to the international community and increasingly distanced from their native Azerbaijani culture. This shift emphasizes the idea that the prestige of L2, particularly in academic and social domains, plays a central role in shaping adolescents' identities. The use of English became a symbol of social mobility and global integration, a phenomenon noted in earlier studies (e.g., Cavallaro & Serwe, 2010), where bilingual speakers of Malay increasingly aligned with English for social and economic benefits, relegating their native language to family interactions. As Schmid (2004) observed in contexts of migration, individuals often realign with the dominant language group as part of redefining their social identity. This finding was echoed in Schmid and Dusseldorp's (2010) work, which suggested that the social pressure to conform to the dominant language of the group often leads individuals to distance themselves from their native language, as it is perceived as limiting social mobility.

The adolescents in this study reported that their decision to adopt English was also influenced by the comparative dynamics within their peer groups. Social Identity Theory posits that once individuals align with a group, they engage in social comparison, evaluating their group relative to others (Tajfel & Turner, 2001). Schmitt and Sorokina (2024) suggest that bilinguals often adjust their language use based on the perceived advantages associated with the dominant language. In this study, bilingual adolescents compared their proficiency in English with their peers, reinforcing the notion that L2 use signals social success.

In educational contexts where English is regarded as a key to enhanced social mobility and prospects, the students in this study progressively aligned themselves with English. This shift contributed to a decline in their proficiency in Azerbaijani. According to Alasgarova et al. (2024), this cultural attrition results in the erosion of native cultural values and alters the transmission of cultural norms and practices. As participants in this study adopted the behaviors and norms associated with the dominant English-speaking group, they also distanced themselves from their Azerbaijani identity. This process not only impacted language retention but also the intergenerational transmission of cultural values, which is crucial in bilingual contexts where both linguistic and cultural heritage are at risk of being lost.

Emergent Theory: L2 Dominance as a Mediator of L1 Attrition and Identity Shift

The selective coding process led to the development of a core theoretical model: L2 dominance as a mediator of L1 attrition and identity shift. This emergent theory posits that L2 dominance is not merely a byproduct of reduced L1 exposure but a mediating force in the process of identity transformation (Figure 5). As L2 gains prestige and functional utility in academic and social contexts, it increasingly becomes the language of social integration, pushing L1 to the periphery of everyday use, especially in informal, familial contexts.

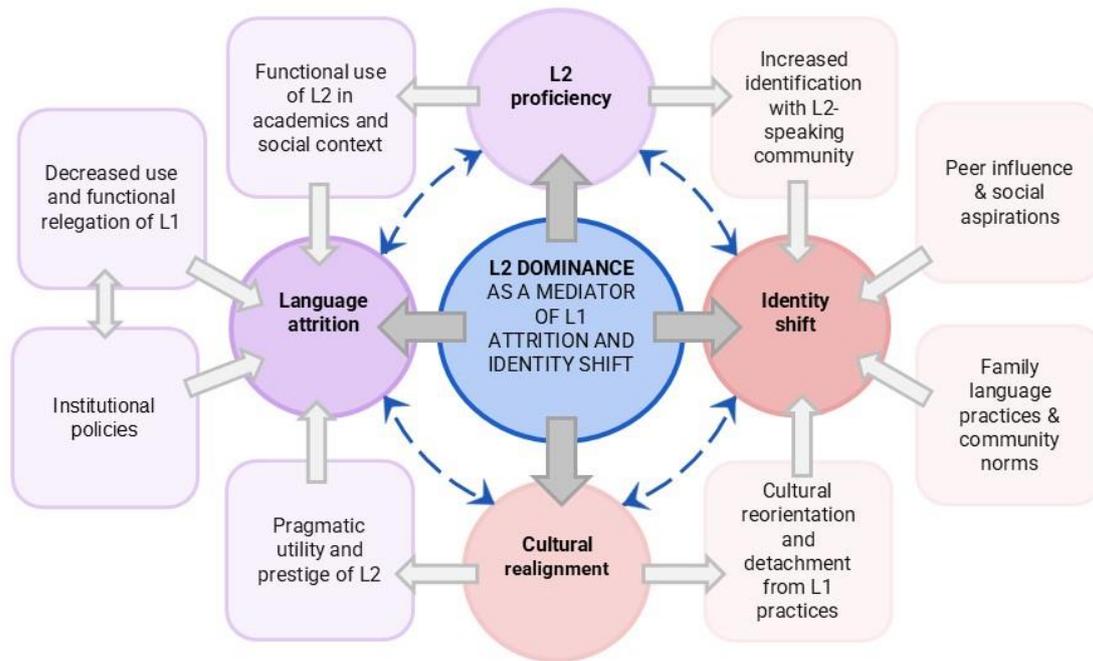


Figure 5: L2 Dominance as a Mediator of L1 Attrition and Identity Shift

As adolescents adapt their linguistic identities to meet the functional and social demands of their environment, L2 use becomes further entrenched, reinforcing both the attrition of L1 and the realignment of identity. The increasing reliance on English for communication leads to gaps in L1 proficiency, which is often filled by code-switching or the hybrid use of both languages, a phenomenon observed in the findings as adolescents balance linguistic identities in response to their changing social worlds.

Implications for Educational Policy and Practice

The findings highlight the urgent need for educational policies that foster balanced bilingualism and support the maintenance of both L1 and L2. The emphasis on English-only policies in schools, while beneficial for academic success in international settings, poses a risk for L1 attrition and the erosion of cultural identities. As such, educational systems should consider incorporating strategies that integrate native languages into the curriculum, ensuring that L1 remains a functional and valued tool in both academic and social contexts (Peltokorpi & Vaara, 2012).

Furthermore, educators should be mindful of the role of peer influence and social identity dynamics in shaping adolescents' language use. Promoting an inclusive environment that values both L1 and L2 equally could reduce the sociocultural pressures that drive L1 attrition, thus allowing bilingual students to retain their cultural identity while benefiting from the social prestige of L2.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the valuable insights offered by this study, limitations should be acknowledged. The study's cross-sectional design captures a snapshot of participants' experiences, but longitudinal research would be valuable to understand how language dominance and identity shifts evolve over time (Dörnyei, 2007). Additionally, the focus on bilingual adolescents in a

specific context limits the generalizability of the findings to other cultural or educational settings.

Future research should explore how these dynamics unfold in different sociocultural contexts, considering the role of family and community influences more broadly, and whether similar patterns of language attrition and identity shifts occur across diverse educational systems.

Conclusion

This study examines language attrition and identity shifts among bilingual adolescents in Azerbaijan, focusing on L2 dominance as a mediator. The findings reveal that L2 dominance, driven by institutional policies, peer influence, and the prestige of English, contributes significantly to the erosion of L1 proficiency and the redefinition of social identities. As L2 becomes more prominent, L1 is relegated to informal settings, leading to both linguistic and cultural shifts. The developed theoretical model highlights the dynamic relationship between language attrition and identity shift, showing how sociocultural pressures reinforce L2 dominance and accelerate both processes.

These findings underscore the need for educational systems to support balanced bilingualism by integrating L1 into curricula and fostering environments that value both L1 and L2. By promoting bilingualism and mitigating sociocultural pressures, schools can help preserve cultural identity while enabling students to succeed in a globalized world.

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