

Language Repertoire and Identity Construction Among Secondary School Students in Sabatia Subcounty, Vihiga County, Kenya

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Abstract: *The concept of language repertoire has become a vital tool in the field of multilingual education, representing the broad range of linguistic abilities that language users bring to their communication, engagement, and identity building. Although there is growing focus on multilingualism, very little empirical literature examines the link between language repertoire and identity construction in Kenyan secondary schools. The purpose of this study was to examine how students' language repertoire impacts identity construction of secondary school students in Sabatia Sub-County, Vihiga County, Kenya. The study used a descriptive case study design as part of a mixed-methods approach, in accordance with Norton's theory of Language, Identity, and Investment. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from Form Three and Four students and language teachers. Descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation were used to analyse quantitative data, and thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative data. These results showed a significant positive correlation between language repertoire and sense of identity. As students' language repertoire increased, their sense of belonging and symbolic language use also increased. The overall study findings show that language repertoire is considered a valuable educational resource that merits recognition in multilingual teaching and learning environments.*

Keywords: Language repertoire, identity construction, multilingualism, secondary school students, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

Language is a social resource not just for communication; it is also a means by which people build identities and create relationships and memberships in various communities. In multilingual societies, people have complex language repertoires that can help them express themselves in a variety of social, cultural, and educational settings. In contrast to the monolingual model of language, modern sociolinguistic theories view multilingual speakers as drawing on a flexible assemblage of linguistic resources to meet their communicative objectives and manage their social identities (Busch, 2021; Li Wei, 2020). Thus, language repertoire is a term that has gained significance in applied linguistics because it explains how multilingual individuals use their linguistic resources to demonstrate belonging, identity, and participation.

English is the official language of Kenya and the main language used for instruction in schools. Kiswahili is the national language, while local languages are still very much alive and play an important role in local communities. Multilingualism is evident in the daily lives of learners in Vihiga County, who are frequently seen using English, Kiswahili, Luhya, and other linguistic varieties at school, at home, in peer groups, and in other spaces. These multi-lingual experiences impact the learners' identities in terms of what they do and how others perceive them through the experience. While scholarly research has examined multilingualism, most studies have focused on language policies and bilingual education, with less attention to the effects of students' language repertoires on identity construction in secondary schools in Kenya. This study thus aimed to investigate the effect of students' language repertoire on identity construction of the secondary school students in Sabatia subcounty, Vihiga county.

The study is grounded on Norton's theory of Language, Identity and Investment, which posits that language learning and language use are intimately tied to identity formation and access to social and symbolic resources (Darvin & Norton, 2015). The theory assumes that learners invest linguistic resources to gain recognition, build social relations, and negotiate multiple identities across contexts. The study of language repertoire and identity construction contributes to the knowledge base of applied linguistics by providing empirical evidence from a multilingual Kenyan context. The results will contribute to language education policy, the promotion of multilingual pedagogical practices, and language education teachers' awareness of the value of the language repertoire as an asset for the educational process, not an impediment to it.

LITERATURE REVIEW/THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

Language Repertoire and Identity Construction

The notion of language repertoire has changed significantly in the field of applied linguistics. Early views on multilingual speakers saw them as having different language systems that were used separately depending on the situation. In contrast, modern research on language repertoire has defined it as the total set of linguistic tools and resources that one can access and use to perform communicative and social functions strategically, including languages, dialects, registers, and styles (Busch, 2021). This view acknowledges that multilingual speakers are dynamic language users who draw on their linguistic resources rather than treating them as discrete systems.

Identity construction is a process of developing and negotiating one's identity in social interaction. Language is a key component in this process, as people can show that they belong to a social group, a culture, and their own values. Darvin and Norton (2015) state that identity is not static and is not the same, but "is continually constructed through the various social contexts in which we participate. Multilingual learners thus develop multiple identities through the choice of linguistic resources that are relevant to specific audiences, purposes, and environments. Thus, the use of the language repertoire is an important means for learners to negotiate their personal and social identities.

Research findings from all lines of empirical inquiry support the view that multilingual language use is associated with positive identity development. Li Wei (2020) suggests that a multilingual speaker would draw on the full range of his linguistic toolkit when interacting across a range of social contexts. This process enables him to communicate multiple and complex identities. Likewise, Busch (2021) argues that the concept of repertoire of languages must be interpreted as a lived experience of language in which speakers participate by constructing a sense of belonging. In African multilingual settings, Wawire et al. (2026) noted that Kenyan learners used English, Kiswahili, and indigenous languages to communicate with one another in the classroom to achieve the goals of the activity and preserve their cultural identity. Together, these studies indicate that having wider language repertoires affords learners more opportunities to negotiate identity in educational and community contexts.

While these contributions exist, relatively few empirical studies have examined students' language repertoire and how it influences the construction of students' identities in Kenyan secondary schools. Most of the research literature has been devoted to bilingual education, translanguaging, language policy, or classroom interaction. However, there is little quantitative research that focuses on the measurable effect of learners' multilingual repertoires on identity construction. This study attempts to fill this gap by exploring the interplay between students' language repertoire and the identity construction of secondary school learners in Sabatia Subcounty, thereby generating context-specific evidence for multilingual education studies.

Theoretical Underpinning

The use of Norton's Theory of Language, Identity, and Investment serves as the foundation for this study. This theory suggests that there is a close relationship between identity and language learning and use, since a person invests effort in acquiring language to access other symbolic and material resources, including social recognition, membership in a community, and opportunities for education. Identities are seen as multiple, dynamic, and continually negotiated rather than as a fixed personal attribute.

This theory is especially relevant to this study, as it explains how multilingual learners employ various linguistic resources across academic, social, and cultural settings. Students with broader language repertoires have more opportunities to negotiate their sense of belonging, their relationships, and different aspects of their identities. In multilingual secondary schools, language repertoire thus becomes a symbol of capital that helps learners participate in classroom learning and interact with peers.

Based on Norton's theoretical analysis, this study formulated the following hypothesis: students with broader multilingual repertoires would construct a stronger identity than those with narrower linguistic

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 repertoires. The theory thus gave the conceptual basis for studying the relationship between language repertoire and identity construction of secondary school students in Sabatia Subcounty.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study used a descriptive case study within a mixed-methods research design to investigate the impact of students' language repertoire on the identity construction of secondary school students in Sabatia Subcounty of Vihiga County, Kenya. The mixed-methods approach synthesized quantitative and qualitative data, yielding a rich understanding of how language repertoire and identity construction were related. The magnitude and direction of the relationship between the study variables were determined using quantitative data, and the context of learners' multilingual experiences was obtained from qualitative data.

Study Area and Participants

The study was done in Sabatia Subcounty in Vihiga County, which is a linguistically diverse area where English, Kiswahili, Luhya, and other language varieties are used in educational and community contexts. The subjects of the study were selected from Form Three and Four pupils and language teachers in some public Secondary Schools. The participants were composed of students in Form Three and Form Four who were considered suitable, as they had been exposed to interaction in multilingual school settings.

A stratified random sampling method was used to select a sample of 120 students, ensuring representation from the different schools and classes. Four language teachers were also purposively selected for their experience in language teaching and their knowledge of students' language practices.

Data Collection

Structured questionnaires were used for students, and semi-structured interview guides for language teachers. Students' language repertoire and identity construction were measured using the questionnaire, and the interviews addressed how multilingual language practices affected students' participation, social interaction, and identity development. The research instruments were pretested prior to the study to ensure clarity, validity, and reliability.

Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed quantitatively using the IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27). Language repertoire was summarised using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations). Pearson's product-moment correlation was conducted to analyze the correlation between language repertoire and identity construction. The 0.05 level was used to establish statistical significance.

The data from the qualitative interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically. Themes emerged, were coded, and were combined with the quantitative results, yielding an overall interpretation of the effect of language repertoire on students' identity construction.

Ethical Considerations

The data collection was followed by ethical approval from the relevant university research committee and the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI). Permission to do

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the study was also granted by the County Director of Education and principals at all participating schools. Everyone participated voluntarily, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained during the study.

RESULTS/FINDINGS

This study focused on how the language repertoire of secondary school students in Sabatia Subcounty, Vihiga County, affects identity construction. The findings are presented by descriptive data and Pearson's product-moment correlation analysis.

Students' Language Repertoire

Students were asked to respond to statements representing different levels of language proficiency and to explain how each level helps them interact with others. Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Students' Language Repertoire

Statement	Mean	SD	Interpretation
I can communicate effectively in more than two languages.	3.62	0.58	High
My languages strengthen my connection with my community.	3.58	0.63	High
Knowing several languages helps me interact with different social groups.	3.49	0.61	High
Using my languages with classmates strengthens my sense of belonging.	3.41	0.55	High
Composite Mean	3.47	0.59	High

Table 1 shows generally wide multilingual repertoires for the respondents. The highest rated was that students were able to communicate effectively in more than two languages ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.58$), and the composite mean ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 0.59$) indicated high multilingual competence and the use of multiple languages in everyday life.

Relationship between Language Repertoire and Identity Construction

Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was performed to see if there was a correlation between students' language repertoire and identity construction. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation between Language Repertoire and Identity Construction

Variable	1	2
1. Language Repertoire	1	
2. Identity Construction	.61**	1

A statistically significant positive correlation was found between students' language repertoire and identity construction ($r = .61$, $p < .01$) as indicated in Table 2. The results suggest that the more extensive the learners' multilingual repertoire, the more successful their construction of linguistic identity is. A relationship between Language Repertoire and Identity Construction was established.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative results from the interviews corroborated the quantitative data and revealed that the language teachers had seen students using various languages in different communicative situations. English was used mainly during classroom teaching and formal academic exchanges; Kiswahili was used to express ideas among learners with different linguistic backgrounds; and Luhya was used to deepen cultural identity and social connection within the school community. Teachers also noted that more students with a wider language repertoire engaged more confidently in classroom discussions and interacted more readily with peers from a variety of language backgrounds. In general, the quantitative and qualitative results showed a positive relationship between students' language repertoire and identity construction among secondary school learners in Sabatia Subcounty.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how the language repertoire of secondary school students in Sabatia Subcounty, Vihiga County, affects their identity construction. The results showed that students' language repertoire had a strong positive correlation with the processes of identity construction, indicating that students with a wider multilingual repertoire have stronger social belonging and better use of language as a symbol to express their identity. These results suggest that multilingual competence is not only a communicative competence but also a crucial social competence for addressing identity issues in multilingual school settings.

The relationship between language repertoire and identity construction lends support to Norton's Theory of Language, Identity, and Investment, which suggests that language is symbolic capital that is used to negotiate participation, recognition, and membership in various communities/identities. Students with a wider language repertoire had a greater chance of engaging in academic and social interactions, as they had more language tools to communicate in various settings. This discovery further strengthens the link between language learning and language usage, and with the development of personal and social identities.

The results are also in line with Busch (2021), who views language repertoire as a web of linguistic resources deployed in the service of a particular context rather than as independent language systems. It was from the present study that students were found to be competent in the use of English, Kiswahili, Luhya, and other language varieties to serve various communicative purposes. This flexibility allowed learners to maintain their cultural identity and function effectively in multilingual educational environments. This brings the argument for the role of multilingual repertoires for social inclusion and identity construction to a conclusion.

Likewise, the results support Li Wei's (2020) view that identities are developed by multilingual speakers who flexibly use their full linguistic toolkit. The qualitative results indicated that students used different languages strategically according to the interaction and audience. English was mainly linked to the academic arena, Kiswahili to interaction among different linguistic groups, and Luhya to the consolidation of cultural affiliation and community belonging. The language choices reflect the learners' negotiation of multiple identities in school and community settings.

The results also align with those of studies conducted in multilingual classrooms in Africa. According to Wawire et al. (2026), school-going learners in Kenya use multiple languages to smooth their

learning processes, affirm their cultural identity, and bond with peers. The present study contributes to this body of evidence by providing quantitative evidence that broader language repertoires are significantly associated with robust identity construction among secondary school learners. The use of both quantitative and qualitative evidence lends empirical support to the proposition that multilingual language practices positively impact learners' identity development.

In general, these results indicate that language repertoire can be considered an educational resource rather than a problem in multilingual schools. Teaching that acknowledges and utilizes learners' multilingual resources will likely foster an inclusive learning context, foster students' sense of belonging, and advance students' identity development. The study, therefore, contributes to applied linguistics through its empirical results, which enhance understanding of the relationship between language repertoire and identity construction in secondary schools in Kenya.

IMPLICATIONS TO RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The results of this study have implications for applied linguistics research and for education in general. Research-wise, the study provides empirical evidence that adds to the literature on multilingualism, as it shows that students' language repertoire has a significant relationship with identity construction in Kenyan secondary schools. This study builds on previous research on multilingual classroom interaction, translanguaging, and language policy by demonstrating that the range of learners' language repertoires is related to learners' sense of belonging and symbolic language use. The results further support Norton's Theory of Language, Identity, and Investment in a multilingual secondary school classroom setting.

In practice, the results indicate that it is important for schools to acknowledge multilingualism as a resource for learning, which can foster inclusion, participation, and the identities of multilingual students. Teachers should apply pedagogical strategies that recognize learners' linguistic diversity and provide opportunities for meaningful multilingual interaction in the classroom. School administrators and curriculum developers should also help to promote language policies that foster positive multilingualism practices and ensure competence in the school language(s) of instruction. These strategies can support students' self-efficacy, socialization, and learning in multilingual settings.

CONCLUSION

The study focused on the relationship between language repertoire and the identity construction of secondary school students in Sabatia Subcounty, Vihiga County, Kenya. The results identified students' multiple language repertoires, and that having a stronger language repertoire was positively related to identity construction. Learners who were generally able to use more than one language well were more socially included and stronger in expressing their identities in various educational and social settings.

The study indicates that language repertoire is not only a means of communication but also a social and educational tool that aids in the development of learners' identities. The results underscore the importance of multilingual educational methods that promote linguistic diversity and inclusive

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learning. The study offers empirical evidence from a multilingual context in Kenya and practical implications for language education policy and classroom practice in terms of applied linguistics.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The study was restricted to students' language repertoire and the construction of students' identities among secondary school students in Sabatia Subcounty. Further research could examine other aspects of multilingualism, such as code-switching, language proficiency, and domain-based language choice, and how they affect identity construction in various educational environments. The comparative study of schools from diverse counties or regions in Kenya would also help to understand how the sociolinguistic context influences the construction of multilingual identity in schools. In addition, longitudinal research could explore students' language repertoire and identity changes across time as they move from secondary to tertiary education and/or to employment.

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