Journal of Education for Multilingualism

2024 | volume 1 | issue 2
pp. 225–257
ISSN 3064-6995

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Agency and Self-Concept in Switzerland's Multilingual Classrooms

Anna Becker [a*]

[a] Polish Academy of Sciences

[*] Contact Info: ul. Jaracza 1, 00-378 Warsaw, Poland, anna.becker@ispan.edu.pl

Article Info

Received: May 23, 2024
Accepted: September 29, 2024
Published: December 25, 2024

Abstract

This qualitative study investigates learners' agency and self-concepts in Swiss secondary classrooms, showcasing perspectives from students in the German-speaking majority language region and the Romansh-speaking minority language region. It draws on in-depth interviews and open-ended questions to examine the relationship among learners' lived experiences of language, biographies, and multilingual identities. The data reveal that learners consciously engage in agentic behavior to defy restrictive educational practices. Socially constructed categories such as language and dialect and perceptions of the different symbolic values had a negative impact on students' self-concept. Students also received little recognition for their heritage languages in the local context. Yet, their self-concept was improved when they could employ their linguistic resources meaningfully (e.g., using English intra- and internationally). To increase learner agency and strengthen their self-concepts, this study proposes a change in curricula and the integration of heritage languages and multilingual education into language instruction.

Keywords

agency; identity; linguistic categorizations; multilingualism; self-concept

INTRODUCTION

Switzerland's linguistic landscape is comprised of four national languages–German (62.3%), French (22.8%), Italian (8.0%), and Romansh (0.5%) (Federal Statistical Office, 2022)–whereas only the first three count as federal official languages. In addition to the large differences regarding language distribution, Romansh is *not* a federal official language and is restricted to the canton of Grisons. Next to these four languages protected by law and an elaborate educational policy framework implemented to varying degrees in schools across the country, a plethora of regional varieties of German exist, creating a diglossic situation between what is typically considered a high (Standard German) and a low variety (Swiss German).[1] In fact, there are opposing views among scholars as to whether Switzerland's linguistic situation can be described as diglossic as suggested by Ferguson (1959) or rather as 'medial diglossia'

[1] Although regional linguistic variation and dialects also exists for French, Romansh, and Italian (to a significantly lower extent), the focus here is on German. The terminology employed here labeling Standard German as the high and Swiss German as the low variety is arguably simplistic and does not entirely capture the sociolinguistic complexity.

(Kolde, 1981), or whether 'regular bilingualism' (Ris, 1990) or 'asymmetrical bilingualism' (Werlen, 1998) would be the more appropriate classification. It is, however, widely established that Swiss German, here used as an umbrella term for all the different regional or local varieties thereof, is crucial for many speakers' linguistic and national identity[2] (Becker, 2023; Berthele, 2010; Christen et al., 2010).

As Ruoss (2019) remarks, Swiss Germans are 'proud' to speak their distinct variety of German and, therefore, distinguish themselves not only from their Austrian and German neighbors but also among themselves. According to Ruoss (2019), Swiss German effectively creates not only one's own linguistic identity but also a collective one. As he put it, Swiss German is used as a means of "distinction from…the others, the foreigners" (Ruoss, 2019, p. 1). Bucholtz and Hall (2005) define distinction as "the mechanism whereby salient difference is produced" (p. 384) which simultaneously creates (artificial) homogeneity of certain groups to be socially accepted as distinct from others. This specific markedness of different groups based on linguistic elements, for instance, leads individuals to "gain a special, default status that contrasts with the identities of other groups, which are usually highly recognizable" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 372). Being 'recognized' as such can significantly contribute to one's agency and self-concept (Oyserman et al., 2012), as will be explored in this study.

More specifically, the present study aims to answer the following research question: How do the concepts of *agency* and *self* manifest in students' identities and lived experiences of language? By exploring this question, the study aims to 1) understand how such perceptions of 'otherness,' 'foreignness,' and 'superiority' based on language can have a detrimental impact on students' (linguistic) identity, agency, and self-concept who, due to migration and different socialization processes, are in some way excluded from the local speech community. It will 2) examine how being marked as 'distinct' or 'other' (Motha, 2014) shapes not only linguistic but also academic and personal choices in their last years of schooling. It will 3) investigate how these perceptions are reproduced in the education system and thus legitimized, on the one hand, while also showcasing students who, as argued by Apple (2012), are not all "passive internalizers of pregiven social messages" (p. 33).

[2] This study employs a multi-theoretical definition of a participative multilingual identity (Fischer et al., 2020), combining post-structuralist, psychosocial, and sociocultural perspectives. As the authors argue, "…a person's different linguistic identities…differ in their expression, not only through language, but across a range of semiotic resources in different contexts and at different times. Each language in one's multilingual repertoire is subject to adaptation and movement…depending on a range of factors including migration or social networks…therefore, while identities associated with different languages…might change spatio-temporally, an identity as a multilingual might remain 'core' (Fischer et al., 2020, p. 454).

The study is embedded in critical theories of language and education and understands language to be "linguistic resources which are organized in ways that make sense under specific social conditions" (Heller, 2007, p. 1). It thus attempts to contribute to a better understanding of students' linguistic and educational practices, especially minoritized ones, since they are increasingly shaping Switzerland's education system with rarely any representation in or adjustment to the existing policy framework.

AGENCY AND SELF-CONCEPT

Agency

In her definition of agency, Ahearn (2001) highlights its embeddedness in complex sociocultural relations by postulating that "agency refers to the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (p. 112). At approximately the same time, Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001) similarly argued that "agency is never a property of the individual but a relationship that is constantly constructed and renegotiated with those around the individual and with society at large" (p. 148). Mercer (2012) applies a complexity-oriented approach to learner agency and, with regard to the multifaceted nature of every individual, points out convincingly that agency "needs to be understood in terms of a person's physical, cognitive, affective, and motivational capacities to act" (p. 42). More specifically, focusing on the multilayeredness of the concept of agency and the intertwined relationships of contributing sub-concepts, she differentiates between the 'visible' (behavior) and 'non-visible' (feelings, beliefs, and thoughts) components thereof. They both need to be taken into account to determine an individual's agency empirically, although it is clearly more challenging methodologically to observe and adequately capture the 'non-observable.' Thus, according to Mercer (2012), agency is:

> composed of two main dimensions that cannot meaningfully be separated…a learner's sense of agency, which concerns how agentic an individual feels both generally and in respect to particular contexts…a learner's agentic behaviour in which an individual chooses to exercise their agency through participation and action, or indeed through deliberate non-participation or non-action (p. 42)

It is important to point out that both the notions of "how an agentic individual feels" and "a learner's agentic behaviour" (Mercer, 2012, p. 42) are nevertheless embedded in ecological, sociohistorical, geopolitical, and economic factors that may or may not impede actual agentic practices. Further, students' beliefs about their agentic capacities and their 'visible' agentic behavior are often analyzed in classroom settings (van Lier, 2008), made up of multilayered, complex dynamics and relations among organisms contributing to an ecological understanding of agency, 'situated language,' and ultimately learning. Adopting a linguistic-ecological

perspective for the English language classroom, Jiang and Zhang's (2019), for example, showed that learners' agency can be (incidentally) triggered through input and a conducive learning environment. Gkonou's (2014) study of English language learners in Greece examined the link between language anxiety and agency and found that the former is positively and negatively influenced by the latter, concluding that these constructs are "ecologically and dynamically influenced by [learners'] personal histories and by the range of settings in which they interact" (Gkonou, 2014, p. 195).

Knoll and Becker (2023) investigated how the use of multiple languages by children contributes to Swiss daycare centers' language ecology and their agency. The study found that children's agency develops as they learn and learn how to use multiple languages in multilingual educational contexts. As recent studies (e.g., Räsänen, 2024; Ferrada et al., 2020; Dalziel & Piazzoli, 2019; Lyrigkou, 2019) indicate, though, ecological or ethnographic approaches examining agency in language in informal/out-of-class language learning contexts are also crucial and reveal meaningful findings. The literature review conducted for this study has also found that most studies examine agency in English language learning contexts, making the present one especially relevant given its focus on multilingual Switzerland.

Moreover, Butler (2016), problematizing agency and the power of discourse and categorizations, argues that:

> we are invariably acted on and acting, and this is one reason performativity cannot be reduced to the idea of free, individual performance. We are called names and find ourselves living in a world of categories and descriptions way before we start to sort them critically and endeavor to change or make them on our own. In this way we are, quite in spite of ourselves, vulnerable to, and affected by, discourses that we never chose. (p. 24)

This is especially relevant when adopting an ecological approach to understanding agency since individuals, their beliefs, and actions are always embedded in contextual dynamics both shaping and shaped by external forces. Finally, agency is also about "embracing an ethics of responsibility, so that we become aware of our own agency, and we can make choices about how we value and relate to others" (Larsen-Freeman, 2019, p. 74). This study combines these various facets of agency and fills the gap in literature on the intersection of non-institutionalized languages in formal classroom contexts by highlighting situations and linguistic resources conducive to increased learner agency.

Self-Concept

Self-concept is sometimes used to interchangeably refer to self-esteem, (self-)beliefs, identity, self-efficacy, etc., with certain overlap and differences given its inherent complexity and multidimensionality and its varying meanings attributed to different disciplines. This article adopts the definition of self-concept established by Mercer (2011) for the field of foreign language learning: "an individual's self-descriptions of competence and evaluative feelings about themselves as a Foreign Language (FL) learner" (p. 14). It is applied here to Switzerland's complex (diglossic/multilingual) linguistic landscape as elaborated in the introduction. This is considered necessary due to the lack of literature taking multilingualism into account. As one recent quantitative study conducted by Hascher and Hagenauer (2020) reported, Swiss students seem to have a positive attitude and a good academic self-concept. However, little is known about how their language biographies impact students' self-concept.

Self-concept, as a psychological construct, captures beliefs, understandings, and perceptions about oneself related to a particular area, such as one's L1, L2, and Lx, and is interrelated with "motivational and affective dimensions of learning" (Mercer, 2011, p. 13). Viewing linguistic skills as always evolving, in flux, and adapting to social developments, academic requirements, and ongoing identification processes, "a neurogenerative view, in which individuals continuously generate new impressions of the self" (Rubio, 2014, p. 41) is further highly suitable. Yoshida's (2013) study examines the development of Japanese language learners' self-concept in the FL classroom in connection to producing spontaneous speech. It was found that, for three out of four participants, their self-concept was influenced negatively by their fear of speaking Japanese. Through exposure over time and continuing to speak Japanese to other learners, they were able to influence their self-concept more positively and overcome embarrassment or fear.

Roiha and Mäntylä's (2022) study found that English-based CLIL (content and language integrated learning) classes significantly helped Finnish learners' positive English language self-concept and reduced language anxiety. At the same time, the participants reported having a more negative self-concept in other non-CLIL-based FLs, suggesting that (especially early) CLIL can be beneficial for learners' self-concept as it increases exposure to and practice of the target language. Another recent study conducted by Udry and Berthele (2024) in the context of Switzerland investigated young learners' academic self-concept for the FLs French and English. Similar to Roiha and Mäntylä's (2022) study, they found that learners have different self-concepts for each of the (foreign) languages. Furthermore, internal affective variables,

intrinsic motivation and anxiety, indicated a stronger correlation with learners' self-concept than external variables, such as perceived encouragement from teachers and parents or comparison with peers.

In their research on identity construction in language education through plurilingualism and multiliteracies, Abendroth-Timmer and Hennig (2014) characterize the self-concept as a key component of individuals' identity. According to the authors, the following questions determine self-concept:

- What languages does the individual speak in which contexts and in which situations?
- How does the individual define [themselves] as a linguistic and cultural person?
- How does the individual describe and define [their] (plurilingual) communication practices?
- In which social contexts does the individual live?
- What is [their] (socioeconomic/linguistic etc.) status in society? (Abendroth-Timmer & Hennig, 2014, p. 28)

Delpit's (2006) conceptualization of the 'culture of power' takes into account these underlying power relations and social norms and how they are enacted in the classroom. Students internalize the value that is attributed to their way of speaking and as is often the case, they are penalized if it does not correspond to the standard/academic, monolingual norm imposed and reproduced by the educational system. Identifying as a member of the 'culture of power,' accessible through the right 'code,' that is, way of speaking, is linked to learners' self-concept and where they position themselves and *vis-à-vis* others. Also, as argued poignantly by Bourdieu (1991) a long time ago in his theorization of language as symbolic power,

> Linguistic exchange…is also an economic exchange which is established within a particular symbolic relation of power between a producer, endowed with a certain linguistic capital, and a consumer…capable of procuring a certain material or symbolic profit. In other words, utterances are not only…signs to be understood and deciphered; they are also signs of wealth, intended to be evaluated and appreciated, and signs of authority, intended to be believed and obeyed. (p. 66 [emphasis in original])

Thus, certain varieties ostensibly have more symbolic capital than others, although, importantly, these assessments are put forth by linguists and others and thus socially constructed. Those individuals possessing the highly valued variety dominate those who do not speak the same way and can exert control and power over those seemingly effortlessly. Thus, being a member of the dominated group based merely on one's linguistic repertoire can impact one's perception and understanding of the self and one's identity and create a division among those included versus those who are excluded from certain areas of social life.

Finally, an interesting adaptation of the self-concept within the SLA context is proposed by Ryan and Irie (2014). They draw on Pavlenko and Norton's (2007) conceptualization of language learners' identification processes within multiple (*imagined*) communities. They,

> argue that the notion of *imagination* as a way to appropriate meanings and create new identities…allows us to transcend the focus on the learners' immediate environment, as the learning of another language, perhaps more than any other educational activity, reflects the desire of learners to expand their range of identities and to reach out to wider worlds." (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007, p. 670 [emphasis in original])

Similarly, imagining and creating a story of ourselves, Ryan and Irie (2014) posit that "this story affects how we interpret our pasts, how we see ourselves now, and the paths we envision for our futures" (p. 109). Especially for multilingual individuals living in restrictively monolingual contexts, in which their L1s are undervalued, or for language learners unable to employ the FL in their current environment, imagined communities might be the only choice (Becker, 2024). Accessing these imagined communities requires agency and imagination in the construction of the self (actual, ideal, ought, Higgins, 1987), which, for instance, may be successfully achieved through cognitive migration (Becker & Magno, 2022).

METHODS

The present study is embedded in a qualitative, phenomenological research design focusing on learners' lived experiences of language, biographies, identities, as well as societal and self-perceptions. To analyze these phenomena, it draws on a double hermeneutic interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) developed by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), intending to uncover "what happens when the everyday flow of lived experience takes on a particular significance for people" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 1). The study presents data from a larger data set (Becker, 2023) gathered during my doctoral studies and applies them to different theoretical concepts and thematic analyses.

Researcher Positionality

As a teacher, researcher, and continuous (language) learner, I am intrinsically motivated to understand more about multilingual education, individuals' self-concepts impacted thereby, and agency provided through equitable policies and practices in social and especially educational contexts. I believe that if educational settings could adopt a more inclusive understanding of multilingualism and showcase students' rich linguistic diversity and not limit it to a few prestigious FLs to be learned, marginalized students, especially, would feel more like they belong. This study aims to normalize multilingualism and raise awareness of the

potentially negative influences restrictive, monolingual language policies can have on individuals.

Participants

Given the study's focus on learner agency and self-concept, its participants were 74 upper-secondary students (aged 16-19 years), 38 from the canton of Grisons and 36 from the canton of Zurich in Switzerland. These two contexts were chosen since Grisons is the only Swiss canton in which Romansh is an official language and taught as a medium of instruction. The canton of Zurich was chosen as Switzerland's biggest canton, with a great urban population and a great linguistic and cultural diversity. Their first languages are listed in Table 1 below. The medium of instruction was Romansh for the students in Grisons and Standard German for those in Zurich. They all also learned English as a compulsory foreign language and had done so for 6+ years. Other additional languages available were French and Spanish. Participation was voluntary and informed verbal and/or written consent was provided by all participants. This study was approved by the respective cantonal authorities responsible for upper secondary education as well as school leaders of the respective schools. All participants provided verbal informed consent recorded before the interview started and written informed consent for the questionnaires collected.

Table 1. Participants' Pseudonyms, Canton of Origin, and L1s

Participants' Pseudonyms	Canton of Origin	First Language(s)
Adya	ZH	Urdu
André	GR	Romansh, (Swiss) German
Arthur	ZH	Macedonian, (Swiss) German
Christine	GR	Romansh
Hanna	GR	Romansh
Jana	GR	Romansh
Jessica	GR	Romansh
Jovin	GR	Romansh, (Swiss) German

Lina	ZH	(Swiss) German
Melina	GR	Romansh
Nicolas	ZH	(Swiss) German
Pedro	ZH	(Swiss) German
Samira	ZH	(Swiss) German
Sebastian	GR	Romansh
Timo	GR	Romansh
Yasmin	ZH	Turkish

Data Collection

The data were collected in two upper secondary schools in the German-speaking canton of Zurich and the trilingual (Romansh, German, and Italian) canton of Grisons from October 2019 to October 2020. Permission from the cantonal authorities was obtained to conduct field research at exactly those two public secondary schools, which required an in-person presentation of the proposed research project and a Q&A session with teachers and students. Including other schools in the same local regions and similar populations was therefore not possible. The data presented here consists of 36 student questionnaires and 5 interviews in Zurich and 38 student questionnaires and 9 interviews in Grisons (representing 78.7% of the larger sample, see Becker, 2023). The in-depth, semi-structured interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed by me using MaxQDA (see Appendix A for the semi-structured interview guide and Appendix B for questionnaire items).

The online questionnaire was sent out first to specifically recruit students with a diverse linguistic/migration background for follow-up interviews. Both instruments were developed based on the larger theoretical framework of education, language, and power (Becker, 2023). Agency and self-concept were derived as a combination thereof. That is, by focusing on students' agency and self-concept, the questions asked in the questionnaire and interview aimed at revealing the power of language as a marker of in- and exclusion in educational settings. The interviews were conducted online (due to the COVID-19 pandemic) using Skype, Zoom, or over the phone in (Swiss) German, French, or Italian (depending on the student's choice), audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English by myself for the dissemination of the results.

Data Analysis

The open-ended questions of the questionnaire, as well as the transcripts, were analyzed using IPA. As a hermeneutic method, it follows the steps of reading and re-reading, initial noting with descriptive and linguistic comments, deconstruction, developing emergent themes, searching for connections among those, abstraction, subsumption, and obtaining an overview of patterns within the entire dataset (Smith et al., 2009). The following themes were identified:

- language biographies with a migration background
- agency through English
- agency through Switzerland's national languages
- self-concept and categorizations
- self-concept and minority language speakers

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting school closures during data collection, larger datasets that had originally been planned to further triangulate the data could not be collected. Ethnographic classroom observations manifesting learners' agentic behavior and institutional practices, as well as visual representations of linguistic biographies through drawings and linguistic landscaping, could not be included. These data could have generated more authentic and multifaceted results, contributing to a greater validity of the data and a better holistic representation of the phenomena (Flick, 2004).

That said, a researcher's written reproduction of participants' perceptions, feelings, and practices can only ever be partial and includes their own subjectivities. To be as transparent and consistent as possible, I listened to the audio-recorded interviews once before, during, and after transcription to ensure their accuracy. I repeated my data analysis first on screen using MaxQDA and then on paper using thematic coding techniques. I re-read all transcripts again and cross-checked them with highlighted sections and preliminary interpretations collected in an Excel sheet.

FINDINGS

Before presenting findings specifically on agency and self-concept in the following two subsections, the graphs below (Figures 1 and 2) summarize learners' self-evaluations in non-L1 national language and English as well as their grades.

Figure 1. Learners' Self-Evaluations of Proficiency in Non-L1 National Languages and English

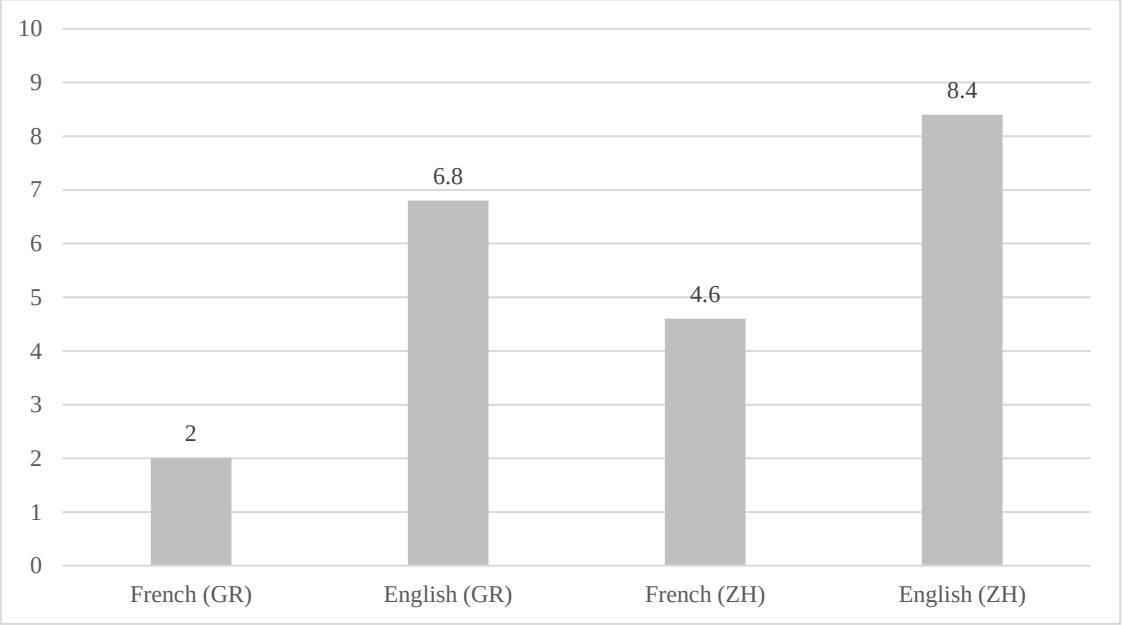
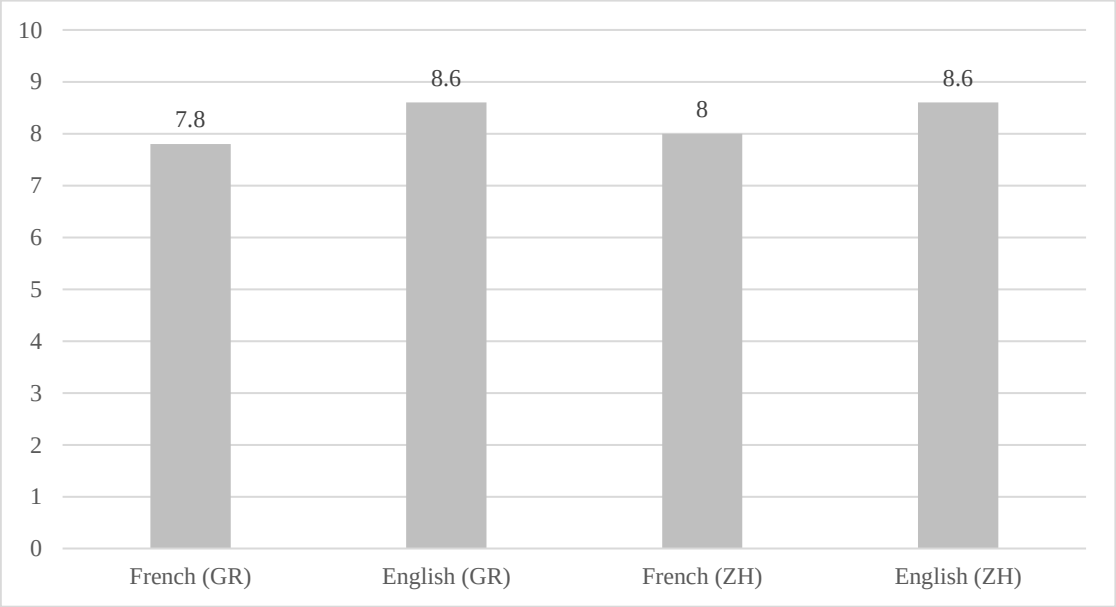


Figure 2. Grades in Non-L1 National Languages and English



The two figures displayed above show that there is a discrepancy between students' self-evaluations and the grades received for their academic performances in the two language subjects. Importantly, given that students were asked for their self-evaluations, these are necessarily subjective. The difference between students' self-evaluation of their proficiency and the grades is higher for French, although it needs to be highlighted that many Grisons

students do not learn French. Nevertheless, it is surprising that those Grisons students who take French in specialization classes, for instance, evaluate their competence much lower than their teachers based on grades. Even for Zurich students, who mandatorily learn French in school, the difference between their own self-described evaluations and those by their teachers is substantial.

Arguably, this is due, first, to the little actual exposure students have to the other national languages and, second, to students' understanding of assessing primarily productive language skills rather than receptive. Their grades, on the other hand, represent their academic achievements in the national languages in an educational setting, which oftentimes neglects language use in real-life scenarios. For English, this is less the case in both groups of learners. With scores of 8.4 and 8.6 (out of 10) for Zurich students' self-descriptions of English competence and grades and Grisons students' identic score regarding their grades in English, their language proficiency attested is very high.

Agency in Learners' Identities and Lived Experiences of Language

Language Biographies with a Migration Background

The data analysis indicates that learners' lived experiences of language are generally impacted by their own perception of agency, i.e., how agentic they believe themselves to be and their agentic choices, actions, and behavior. The findings demonstrate that students' agency increases with the diversity of their linguistic repertoires. That is, the more languages students speak–and, crucially, were able to apply in real-life situations with other speakers of those languages–they not only felt more agentic but also behaved accordingly by employing their language skills in meaningful communication. That said, certain monolingual and dominant-language-oriented institutional policies, their implementation by teachers, and societal ideologies and traditions reproduce a status quo that impedes certain learners' agency as speakers of multiple languages. Interestingly, not all learners, however, perceive such practices or ideologies as impeding their agency, but rather adapt their behavior and thus increase their agency and autonomy. This complex entanglement of policies, practices, and beliefs becomes clear in Adya's linguistic profile and behavior.

As an effectively bilingual speaker of Urdu and standard German (although she identifies Urdu as her sole L1), Adya is 'forced' to speak Swiss German by her teacher, taking away the agency she would typically have given her proficiency in standard German as the school's official language. During the interview, she contradicted her answers provided in the

questionnaire, in which she stated that Swiss German was the most relevant language in her life. She explained that she believed it would be considered appropriate–in the local context and, arguably, as an attempt to 'officially' fit in–to characterize Swiss German as the most relevant language in her life. During the interview, however, she was able to reflect more on the different languages that have meaning in her life and elaborate in more detail why her associations with Swiss German were, in fact, complicated. She justified her answers given in the questionnaire by saying that she "had to change my habits...because Swiss German would have been better for the applications [and] when I was at the job interview and during trial weeks." Her different answers from the questionnaire and interview seem to reveal that she is aware of the social and symbolic power of Swiss German and that by openly adopting the status quo opinion and switching in public spaces, "now I speak Swiss with my friends and at home and at school" (Adya), she can benefit from that power.

She thus engages in agentic behavior, although the context in which her actions are embedded simultaneously restricts and dictates her language choices due to monolingual ideologies and policies. She rationalizes this and argues that "it's simply good when people know that...I did grow up here, but you probably don't see that when you see me for the first time." She even goes one step further and truly appropriates Swiss German also in settings where her interlocutors speak standard German to her, manifesting her agency and willingness to communicate in a certain way: "My hip-hop teacher was always confused, and he would always talk to me in standard German while I would speak to him in Swiss German" (Adya).

Arguably, Adya might have insisted on Swiss German in conversations with her hip-hop teacher to avoid standing out from others and not to inconvenience him by having to speak a language with which many Swiss German speakers are less comfortable (Becker, 2021). However, the language providing her with a sense of belonging and 'meaningful agency' since she can employ these linguistic resources with her relatives is Urdu, as she stated in the interview when talking about lived experiences with extended family. Interestingly, she does not know how to read or write in Urdu (although her oral language skills are high), implying that an individual's agency may not only be dependent on highly proficient language skills but is intertwined with other (invisible) factors as well.

Adya's classmate, Arthur, can also be said to have a complex linguistic biography and identity linked to migration processes and different belongings, which are also expressed through language. He says, "Macedonian connects me with my roots, so to say...I love English...[it] is not my native language but...I learned all of these [songs by Kanye West,

Whitney Houston, and Michael Jackson] by heart" (Arthur). He goes on to say that "if someone is really interested in a language, then they will find their way to speak like a native" (Arthur), indicating that with the right feeling of agency, high (native-like) proficiency can be achieved. As he decided for himself, since English is not his L1 and he finds using Swiss German "more personal" (Arthur), he is not willing "to put my entire focus on this" (Arthur). Yet, "if I want to Americanize myself and want everyone to know that I'm American" (Arthur), Arthur believes it to be possible to adopt a different identity through linguistic agentic behavior. By doing so, he can oscillate between different identities associated with different advantages for him and employ his multilingual skills to his advantage. This indicates that students have already internalized the different symbolic value (Bourdieu, 1991) attributed to languages, especially when it comes to English and its universal prestige and popularity.

Agency through English

As for Arthur, Melina, too, attributes "speak[ing] British English as well as possible" to her agency since she connects it to a high-level proficiency and a specific group of speakers who she perceives to have high agency. As well, Yasmin is convinced that higher English language skills will prepare her for encounters with speakers of other languages with whom she would then feel more comfortable using English: "When I'm abroad, English is the first language in which I talk to people" (Yasmin). Her English language skills thus contribute to her feeling of agency, of linguistic security, and her agentic behavior since she uses the language to speak to other people in intercultural contexts. Furthermore, she is personally committed to achieving a higher proficiency level (and thus agency) through additional, non-mandatory English classes: "So just when others are on lunch break, I have two hours of English...they simply prepare us for this advanced exam, the Cambridge exam" (Yasmin). For Sebastian, who "later want[s] to go into research and there everything is relatively English-based," academic English skills are crucial. Knowing that and working toward proficiency in English to become a researcher is yet another manifestation of learner agency.

That said, Christine criticizes the one-sided emphasis on purely linguistic phenomena when learning a language in instructional contexts. As she explains, "in the foreign language [classroom, I want] to learn more about culture and not only focus on grammar. That you also learn, for instance, how to behave or so" (Christine). 'Behaving' in a new language requires different metalinguistic skills and is essential for practicing agency. Being aware of this, however, indicates a form of agentive feeling. Christine further demonstrates her sense of

agency linked to particular communicative contexts since she consciously switches from British English in the classroom to show her language skills and receive recognition of English as a *lingua franca* (ELF) outside of school. For Hanna, on the other hand, American English is more suitable and increases her agency since, as she says, "I have been [to the US] twice already...and I adopted [the language]. I think I can identify more with [Americans]."

Finally, ELF provides agency to all students since it increases communication between students from different linguistic backgrounds such as Romansh- and French-speakers, who otherwise might not be able to engage in meaningful conversation. It also enables students to adopt a different linguistic identity, which contributes to a positive self-concept based on the participants' relatively high language skills. In line with other studies, as reported above, English in- and outside of classroom contexts can be a valuable asset for individuals to become more agentic and improve the concepts they have of themselves, especially as learners.

Agency through Switzerland's National Languages

A good command–and the self-perceived feeling thereof–of Switzerland's national languages also seems to contribute to students' agentic behavior in multilingual situations. As Hanna pointed out regarding navigating multilingual contexts in different language regions in Switzerland, "If I could speak French, I would speak French, of course, but it usually ends up being English." German, as the majority language in Switzerland, was sometimes perceived as a *lingua franca* as well, limiting especially Romansh speakers' agency to express themselves and act in their L1 in their own local context. As André put it, "worst case you can still speak German," or Hanna, "when my dad is around, then [we speak] primarily German." Timo reported that "to use Romansh outside of Grisons [is] difficult. Even in Chur [capital of Grisons] itself, I don't expect to be addressed in Romansh." Christine describes the situation as follows, "when there are German speakers, then you automatically speak German. Also, with people that...would be able to speak Romansh because it would somehow be impolite...everybody always understands German...then you just adapt automatically."

Finally, Sebastian believes that "it's a pity that you are not allowed or able to speak Romansh in your own canton because not everyone understands it." This implies that the agency to use one's proper linguistic resources is heavily context-dependent, and when the conditions are not met to do so, speakers such as Sebastian develop frustration since they perceive it as their right to speak their L1 in their 'own canton.'

Additionally, Hanna, for instance, also indicated that the heavy emphasis on Romansh especially in school was too forced and artificial:

> My best friend and I...went to elementary school together, and there we normally spoke German with each other, and then last year we went to the Romansh class [and] it was very, very strange to speak Romansh with her because I never really spoke Romansh with her in such a personal way. So, at the beginning we couldn't really get used to it even if our teacher told us like, speak Romansh now and so on. (Hanna)

She reported yet another negative experience of a conversation with a French-speaking peer who discredited the utility and validity of Romansh: "then he said, you can't use [Romansh] anyway. I was a bit...hmmmm....ok." Her experiences show that others' perceptions of how useful and applicable Romansh is can have an impact on its speakers' sense of agency since it is being questioned and limited through such behavior. Such ideologies about the 'value' of certain languages are pernicious for speakers of minority languages and require a constant justification and effort on the part of the speakers to legitimately speak their L1. At the same time, language revitalization and maintenance cannot be forced upon speakers since language use is contextual and linked to speakers' emotions, well-being, and identities.

That said, in contrast to those rather agency-limiting experiences for Romansh speakers due to its minority language status, Romansh also provides its speakers with agency exactly because of this. Jovin pointed this out very concretely and said that, "with Romansh, I have better chances to find a job up here as an ETH [Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich] student than an ETH student who doesn't speak Romansh," implying material benefits based on minority language skills. Timo, for instance, also reported that "we had fun when I could speak Romansh and nobody else understood it, and you could easily gossip about others [laughs]...I find Romansh...on holiday or even generally in Switzerland like a secret language to communicate." Christine shares this impression and says, "sometimes Romansh is like a secret language."

Also, Sebastian has similar experiences as Jovin: "When we are...in Zurich and somebody annoys us..., then we gossip in Romansh [laughs]...when we think that nobody around us speaks Romansh, then we also speak about private things in Romansh." Conceiving of Romansh as 'a secret language' and using it in situations where others do not have the same language skills demonstrates that they can and do maximize their power and potential through minority language use and thereby exercise their agency. Timo reported a positive experience he had with his family on vacation in Scotland, where Romansh made them start talking to other

Romansh speakers and meeting again, indicating that language not only provides agency and confidence but also connects people and creates common ground.

All of the Romansh speakers further believed that it is important to maintain and transmit their L1 due to the traditions and advantages associated with it. As Sebastian put it, "when I have children...I will raise awareness and teach them so they can communicate in Romansh because I find that important personally that you maintain that." Melina even "want[s] to study Romansh as a minor" at university, while Jana believes it to be "primarily the schools' task to [promote Romansh]." Samira, on the other hand, says, "I don't think I can actively contribute to [the revitalization of Romansh]," believing to be powerless against societal trends as a single speaker of the language.

In addition to this, Christine, for instance, reported that speaking multiple languages, e.g., Romansh, contributes to facilitated language learning. As she put it, "you automatically understand other languages more easily. For instance, we were in Italy on a school excursion and then I simply spoke Romansh...and I always understood [Italian]." Similarly, Jana reported that "we were once on a school excursion in Italy and there, already after a few days, I was able to communicate a bit with the people there...it was helpful that I could express myself a little." These experiences show that L1 competence and the associated agency can be transferred to other languages as well as communicative contexts and successful interaction contributes to the construction of a multilingual identity. At the same time, learners such as Jessica consciously choose the languages they want to include in their linguistic repertoire depending on their interests and the benefits they associate with them, which is another sign of their agency: "[French or Italian], that's not so important for me and I could have chosen it."

Self-Concept in Learners' Identities in Their Lived Experiences of Language

Self-Concept and Categorizations

Given the complex linguistic situation in Switzerland, participants' self-concepts in their lived experiences of language were also multilayered and influenced by migration experiences and globalization processes. The data also revealed that fixed categorizations such as *language, dialect, L1, L2*, etc., are inadequate in a linguistic context as highly dynamic as Switzerland. As Lina asked poignantly in the comment section of the questionnaire, "what is the difference between language and dialect?" or as Pedro pointed out, "I don't know the difference between Swiss German and German for me." Sebastian also raised the question of whether the "South Tyrolean dialect even counts as language (but Swiss German is also listed)." Arthur further

explained that "...I started speaking Swiss German [at 12, 13 with] lots of grammatical mistakes...you're a foreigner here and then also in Macedonia...of course, I make grammatical mistakes," showing that linguistic (or grammatical) accuracy is perceived as an indicator of high-level language skills and strongly contributing to his feeling of belonging. Ostensibly, the better his language skills are, the more included he feels in a certain speech community.

At the same time, when his language skills 'out' him as a foreigner, that is, when he makes grammatical mistakes in either Swiss German or Macedonian, as he reports, he feels excluded. The clear link Arthur establishes between language and self-concept is particularly interesting for this study. His self-concept improves through higher language skills and is exacerbated by, in his view, 'deficient' language use. Importantly, such self-descriptions were not always explicitly retrievable for participants. Some of the participants–as well as many other non-linguists in general–had never reflected on their self-descriptions of linguistic competence but rather relied on external evaluations and other measurements to define them and navigate social spaces successfully. An experience shared by Adya demonstrates this: "In elementary school, I still received compliments because my standard German was so good."

Although all participants were speakers of multiple languages, they attributed much significance to a relatively high proficiency and speaking *and* writing skills in a particular language. Adya, for instance, says that she "can neither read nor write in Urdu," which impacts how she perceives of herself as an Urdu speaker. Her own assessment results in disappointment because she sometimes relies on ELF to compensate for her lack of writing skills. As she explained, at family reunions and online communication with her relatives abroad, the younger generation sometimes uses English instead of the family language, Urdu, due to differences in their proficiency. As a result, Adya sometimes feels as if she disappoints her parents because, by doing so, they break with tradition and seemingly abandon their rich linguistic and cultural background.

Given that the German-speaking participants spoke more heritage languages from Zurich, their self-concepts were more influenced by such high-level expectations, which were often unmet due to less contact with the language and speakers and a lower institutional/societal status. Samira, on the other hand, intentionally included her self-described high English skills as a crucial part of her self-concept. Her positive feelings toward the language and lived experiences of successfully using it had an impact on her incentive and affection for learning it (to achieve an even more proficient level). She reported that, "I wanted to apply for a student

job at a [comic convention]...and they only took people with English language skills and I had a huge advantage there...I think my English skills are very good."

Finally, as the results have shown, languages as fixed entities such as Urdu, English, or German can positively and negatively impact students' self-concept. Languages still seem to be closely linked to other concepts, such as legitimacy, belonging, and authenticity. Therefore, speakers' self-concept was positive whenever language skills were assessed positively. However, if language skills were deemed insufficient by their speakers or individuals in society/educational contexts assessing them, the self-concept is impacted negatively. Thus, if the understanding and conceptualization of language could be expanded to be more inclusive of other ways of speaking and individuals' entire linguistic repertoire, such categorizations would become superfluous and cause less harm to those who feel excluded.

Self-Concept and Minority Language Speakers

The Romansh-speaking students, given their almost equal competence in Romansh and German, however, rather assessed their communicative practices and to what extent to make use of their entire linguistic repertoires socially to define their self-concepts. As Jovin stated, "I have two languages at native-speaker level and English at C1, and the others do not have this by far. They may know more [languages], but not that well." He also conceded that "it's a bit of a conflict when I have to indicate German as my first language, [Romansh] is simply equivalent for me." The same was true for Hanna "because I grew up bilingually, it is very difficult for me to say which language I prefer speaking...Romansh and German are both parts of me."

Due to the minority status of Romansh, participants perceived others' interest in and knowledge about their L1 as an incentive to continue learning and advocating it. Hanna said, "it makes me happy that [people] are open and interested in [Romansh]." Christine further said that in her experience "many people were rather thrilled [and said] it's great that you can speak Romansh." At the same time, negative attitudes toward Romansh resulted in negative emotions, as Christine also explains: "someone...said, for instance, ah, that's the language of the peasants, that's the language of the mountains...it annoyed me a little." Timo also criticized the obliviousness of "a lot of people in Switzerland who have no idea [that Romansh still exists]." Further negative lived experiences of language influencing their self-concepts were reported by Jessica:

> Jessica: Yes, in German I don't feel so sure because yes [...] it's not my first language...I don't feel [Swiss German], I can't identify with it [...]
>
> Author: And how do you feel about your first language?
>
> Jessica: Not so well because you are laughed at...you're not so easily accepted, that's why you rather speak German than Romansh. It's not so accepted.
>
> Author: It is not so accepted by whom?
>
> Jessica: By [...] the German speakers [...]. For instance, when I have to do presentations, then I sometimes make mistakes when I speak German. Then you don't feel so well.

There was also one student, Melina, who did not attribute much importance to language in her self-concept, although it needs to be pointed out that her understanding of *language* might be rather restrictive. As she put it,

> I don't think language is that important to express one's feelings. You can also communicate at other levels, such as paraverbal or nonverbal, facial expressions, etc. Words can be supportive, but also counteractive because sometimes what you say and what you express doesn't match. (Melina)

That said, Melina does feel "proud that I can speak [Romansh] because it's a rather small language," indicating that there are strong individual differences related to a speaker's self-concept, which make every language biography unique. Similar to what the results revealed in the sections above, learners' self-concept was closely linked to their (self-perceived) language proficiency, which was often higher in the more prestigious and popular language. For instance, although French is an official, national language in the Swiss context, English is the language with which participants generally feel more comfortable and in which they have higher language skills. For the bilingual participants switching between their L1s German and Romansh, the societal prestige attributed to German impacts how they view their language skills in Romansh and, ultimately, their self-concept. Citing stereotypes such as 'the language of the peasants' has a negative impact on the self-concept, whereas being a speaker of a minority language and thus belonging to an in-group of a small number of people positively influences the self-concept. Depending on the status of the languages in society, that is, in official and educational contexts, these attitudes can change, making the self-concept very dynamic and dependent on other internal and external factors.

DISCUSSION

The data analysis has revealed that agency and self-concept are important concepts in the construction of one's social identity, academic trajectories, and linguistic development in L1

and SLA contexts. They vividly manifest in learners' identities and their lived experiences of language as they navigate social spaces with different expectations, normative categorizations of themselves and their lifeworlds, and restrictive overt and covert language policies. It has been shown that the relationship among learners' agency, self-concepts, and language biographies are complex, inextricably intertwined with local traditions and culture, and shaped by mobility and their own assessment of their linguistic resources.

These self-descriptions and perceptions are dynamic and co-constructed based on agentic linguistic behavior and positive or negative responses from the context (e.g., interlocutors) on the other. For instance, being able to use Romansh, a minority language in the Swiss context, in school and official communication increased participants' agency and improved their self-concept as speakers of a symbolically valuable language. At the same time, being exposed to pernicious stereotypes held by non-Romansh-speaking peers about the status and utility of Romansh exposed its speakers to discrimination, which limited their agency since they were unable to use it in communication with others and negatively influenced how they viewed their linguistic repertoire and ultimately themselves. Adya's case as a speaker of Urdu and German or Arthur's case as a speaker of Macedonian and German also illustrate the complexity of how linguistic identities are not only self-ascribed based on their self-evaluations of agency, but also imposed upon them through family and other societal standards.

These results are in line with other literature in the field, exemplified here by Gao's (2010) examination of learner agency through English medium instruction in multilingual educational contexts and the sociocultural factors associated with strategic language use. Hsieh, Chuang, and Albanese (2022), in a more recent study investigating students' agency in virtual exchange projects, also confirmed that certain languages, especially the ones with which agentic behavior is enabled, are conducive to positive learning outcomes. English was particularly helpful and activated learners' agency through 'linguistic, social, cultural, and digital affordances.'

This present study, while illustrating that English is an important linguistic resource for its participants, importantly revealed that minority languages also play a significant role, and more contextual linguistic affordances are essential to activate individuals' agentic behavior through those. Further, it showed that learners' agency and self-concepts are heavily impacted by commonly held perceptions of linguistic categorizations (standard language vs. dialect, national languages vs. heritage languages, etc.) as well as monolingual institutional practices excluding many students' L1s from the classroom. For instance, teachers in the canton of

Grisons imposed a Romansh-only policy, artificially creating a monolingual environment in which all learners are bilingual and used to communicating also in German with their peers.

In the canton of Zurich, where many students have other L1s than the medium of instruction, multilingual practices mostly revolve around popular FLs. Also, all participants were, in fact, speakers of multiple languages despite the fact that the L1 of many–Swiss German–is *not* an official language in Switzerland but is considered a dialect, which influenced how they perceived themselves and how many languages they indicated to know on the questionnaire. This also reveals that researchers potentially risk distorting data by framing questions about language biographies in quantitative terms (e.g., how many languages do you speak?), thereby reproducing structural issues of categorizing individuals externally instead of asking for experiences lived in different linguistic contexts.

For students' agency and self-concept, however, given the high symbolic meaning of Swiss German in Switzerland (despite its lacking official status as a language), being an L1/L2 speaker of the regional variety where one lives is beneficial despite the commonly adopted connotation of standard languages having more prestige than dialects (Milroy, 2007). As mentioned in the introduction of this article, languages can be categorized in high or low varieties, whereby certain social value is attributed depending on, among others, their codification and usage in formal or informal contexts. Dialects typically represent low varieties of a certain language and are not commonly used in official, educational, or administrative contexts. Swiss German, however, is an exception in that it is symbolically very valuable and is, in fact, considered a requirement for agentic behavior in many contexts in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, including schools, administration, media, medical services, etc. (Hove, 2017).

The diversity of students' linguistic repertoires, in many cases, increased their agency since some participants were able to apply more languages in more contexts (especially abroad), although ELF was perceived to have the same impact and increase both learners' sense of agency as well as agentic behavior (see for instance Hanna's increased agency during a trip to the USA and Christine's decision to use British English for classroom interaction and EFL for 'real-life' communication). English did not, however, have the same impact on all learners' self-concept, implying that their heritage languages were perceived as more meaningful to their biography and identity. Given the restrictive overt and covert language policies as well as institutional practices embedded in the problematic systemic reproduction of certain norms and standards, speakers of Urdu or Turkish, for instance, can neither employ their linguistic

resources nor receive any recognition for them and thus evaluate their competence more negatively.

At the same time, learners' language practices were hugely influenced by how their teachers implemented those policies in the classroom leading to several students adopting the same English accents (either British or American) or even completely changing languages, as Hanna and Adya reported, for instance. Critically aware of their teachers' actions and intentions to make them change their way of speaking, both students simultaneously lose agency in acquiescing to restrictive language policies, but also do so intentionally to develop additional linguistic skills and incorporate additional layers into their perceptions of themselves, as also observed by Rubio (2014). Furthermore, by training to speak a specific variety, they engage in 'linguistic passing' (Motha, 2014) and transition from being L1 speakers of Romansh and Urdu to an *imagined* American or Swiss German identity, as argued by Pavlenko and Norton (2007). Through (successful) linguistic practices, especially in communication with L1 speakers of those languages, these *imagined* identities arguably become *real* and significantly shape learners' self-concept when they become 'legitimate' members of a speech community.

The same was true for learners' linguistic skills in the non-L1 national languages, which can likely be attributed to the same reason: lacking opportunities to practice the language, although exchanges could be increased in a multilingual country such as Switzerland. Despite ongoing efforts and financial support to organize exchanges between language regions to foster communication in national languages, there is much room for improvement. More often than not, these offers are either considered too time-consuming or more distant destinations are preferred by students (Becker, 2023). Learning a second national language authentically in a different language region within the same country can, however, contribute to learners' agency and self-concept very effectively and fairly easily. As Adam et al. (2018) found in their study, living abroad for a certain period of time (and arguably in a different linguistic and cultural context as is the case in Switzerland) contributes positively to individuals' self-concept. They conclude that "leaving one's home country for extended periods of time likely allows people to reap the numerous benefits that a clear sense of self provides, ranging from greater life satisfaction to decreased stress...[and] enhanced career decision-making clarity" (Adam et al., 2018, p. 27).

Switzerland can even offer such an experience within the same country given the four different linguistic and cultural regions and the popularity of ELF for intercantonal communication if school exchanges were promoted more politically and institutionalized more

efficiently. This study argues that the combination of teaching Switzerland's national languages plus English in concert with providing real-life opportunities for language use is key to learner agency and to improving learners' self-concept.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Participants' complex language biographies and lived experiences in increasingly interconnected, multilingual, and transnational linguascapes showed that agency and self-concept are extremely important concepts informing students' learning experiences in L1, L2, and Lx contexts and that such linguistic categorizations are better viewed as a continuum than strict labels to define speakers. Learners' lived experiences, as portrayed here, also aim at raising awareness of structural issues and discriminatory mechanisms in language learning which need to be problematized and ultimately turned into equitable, student-centered, and inclusive approaches celebrating their potentials, strengths, and diversity (Ortega, 2019). Further research is, however, needed on these interactions and a clearer distinction regarding individual differences in very early bilinguals, L2 learners, and heritage language speakers is necessary (Becker, 2024; Knoll & Becker, 2023). As pointed out by Ortega (2019), "to date, most SLA studies have kept other languages of the individual–the first languages...or other already familiar or known languages–outside the purview of inquiry" (p. 25).

Also, importantly, as psychological constructs, individuals' beliefs and descriptions about their own linguistic competence, motivations, and emotions are transferable between the different resources at hand. That is, positive experiences after engaging in agentic behavior in intercultural, ELF-based communication can lead to a better self-concept and higher sense of agency in other languages as well. This is crucial for classroom contexts where transfer, or rather transformation, is key. As argued by Larsen-Freeman (2013), "transformation is an optimizing process whereby learners alter their language resources to adapt to a changing environment or their changing goals" (p. 119).

More specifically, as remarked by Christine, pedagogical approaches should more prominently focus on the notion of agentic behavior in a second language since knowing grammatical structures and vocabulary is not sufficient to achieve communicative success. As she said, it is important to know "how to behave" (Christine) because agency is culture- and context-dependent (Bart et al., 2019). Practicing agentic behavior can include role-playing in the SLA classroom and other forms of theater pedagogy to provide students with the opportunity to take on different roles in different contexts while maintaining a safe space for

learning (Delpit, 2006). As argued by Wright (2011), "drama practices, forms and structures [enable] individuals to become creative and active constructors of knowledge and so cultural producers rather than cultural consumers" (p. 112). More recent approaches have also included virtual lifeworlds such as *Second Life*, which–under pedagogical supervision–represent immersive, diverse, and engaging environments for learners and enhance their autonomy and motivation (Lawrence & Ahmed, 2018).

A more structural and radical implication might be a (partial) reorganization of language teaching based on more optional courses and autonomous, project-based learning opportunities. As shown in another study conducted in secondary schools in Switzerland (Becker, 2023), motivation was higher when students were allowed to choose which language to learn and for how long. Even teachers suggested that more optional modules should be integrated into curricula, which would increase not only students' agency but also their responsibility and autonomy. Generally, a non-hierarchical, top-down pedagogical mindset in which learners co-construct knowledge and teachers act as facilitators rather than knowledge transmitters is crucial.

In addition to this, Kubanyioba and Crookes (2016) argue that "a political or moral stance may be required in relation to the kind of language practices that are promoted, tolerated, or discouraged in classrooms, schools, and beyond" (p. 120), which is necessarily influenced by teachers' sociolinguistic knowledge, awareness, and beliefs. They go on to state that:

> across the theoretical and curricular spectra of language teaching research and practice, the role of the language teacher emerges as one filled with questions of what languages and language teachers are for, what purposes language education and language teacher education should serve in societies in which multilingualism and multiculturalism are the norm...(Kubanyioba & Crookes, 2016, p. 120)

It becomes clear that learners' lived experiences of language inside and outside of school, their agency, self-concept, and identities also depend on teachers' beliefs and preparation and to what extent teachers are willing to reflect on and improve their educational practices (Fairbanks & Hinman, 2018).

Finally, despite the potential long-term linguistic benefits for speakers based on restrictive language policies and their strict implementation in the classroom to increase language learning, the social reality is simply more heterogeneous, diverse, and multilingual. In addition to grassroots multilingualism (Han, 2013), whose practice and transmission to new generations of speakers is often left to the responsibility of the heritage/minority language community, it is up to educators and researchers to provide more equitable, sustainable, and professional

solutions for language learning. By establishing institutional offers for learners' heritage and other underrepresented languages, understanding and appreciation of those but, very importantly, also their speakers can be fostered, and their agency and self-concept improved (Flores & Rosa, 2015).

In line with The Douglas Fir Group's (2016) call for more transdisciplinary research, this study advocates for research collaborations combining multiple disciplines and perspectives from practitioners, learners, researchers, and other stakeholders to achieve truly agentic practices and a more critical and accurate understanding of our own self-concept in the multiple roles we adopt in society. This study is also a call to form multilingual researcher collaborations, including under-researched languages, dialects, and ways of speaking, in order to do away with convenience sampling methods based on one's limited linguistic resources and instead amplify voices from marginalized communities within the academe.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all the students who participated in my study. Thank you for sharing your stories! Without you, this work would not exist. And thanks to the teachers who made this possible in the first place. I would also like to thank the reviewers for the thorough reading of the earlier version of this manuscript and the invaluable comments they provided.

THE AUTHOR

Anna Becker is an Assistant Professor & Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow in the Department of Linguistics at the Polish Academy of Sciences. She received her Ph.D. in Education and a Diploma of Advanced Studies in higher education & educational technology from the University of Fribourg, Switzerland. Her research focuses on multilingualism in schools and society, identity, migration, and power as well as research-practice relationships. Anna serves as managing editor of *European Education* and advisory board member of the *Comparative Education Review* and is a consultant for the *European Cooperation in Science & Technology* for international student mobility.

REFERENCES

Abendroth-Timmer, D., & Hennig, E.-M. (2014). Plurilingualism and multiliteracies: Identity construction in language education. In D. Abendroth-Timmer & E.-M. Hennig (Eds.), *Plurilingualism and multiliteracies: International research on identity construction in language education* (pp. 23–40). Peter Lang.

Adam, H., Obodaru, O., Lu, J. G., Maddux, W. W., & Galinsky, A. D. (2018). The shortest path to oneself leads around the world: Living abroad increases self-concept clarity. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 145*, 16–29. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2018.01.002

Ahearn, L. M. (2001). Language and agency. *Annual Review of Anthropology, 30*, 109–137. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.30.1.109

Apple, M. (2012). *Education and power* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Bart, V. K. E., Sharavdorj, E., Bazarvaani, K., Munkhbat, T., Wenke, D., & Rieger, M. (2019). It was me: The use of sense of agency cues differs between cultures. *Frontiers in Psychology, 10*(650). https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00650

Becker, A. (2021). 'I'm always in this conflict.' – Students' struggle of plurilingual identity expression, linguistic insecurity, and assimilation in Switzerland's higher education. *European Education, 53*(1), 15–30. https://doi.org/10.1080/10564934.2021.1971542

Becker, A. (2023). *Identity, power, and prestige in Switzerland's multilingual education.* Transcript.

Becker, A. (2024). 'I'm also trying to figure out the identity of my students.' – Teachers' multilingual identity negotiation in the heritage language classroom. *International Journal of Multilingualism, 21*(1), 574–587. https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2022.2078328

Becker, A., & Magno, C. (2022). Cognitive migration through language: Capturing linguistic movement and barriers in language portraits. In C. Magno, J. Lew, & S. Rodriguez (Eds.), *(Re)mapping migration and education: Centering methods and methodologies* (pp. 134–157). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004522732_007

Berthele, R. (2010). Dialekt als Problem oder Potenzial? Überlegungen zur Hochdeutschoffensive in der deutschen Schweiz aus Sicht der Mehrsprachigkeitsforschung. In F. Bitter Bättig & A. Tanner (Eds.), *Sprachen lernen – Lernen durch Sprache* (pp. 37–52). Seismo.

Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Polity Press.

Bucholtz, M., & Hall, K. (2005). Language and identity. In A. Duranti (Ed.), *A companion to linguistic anthropology* (pp. 369–394). Blackwell.

Butler, J. (2016). Rethinking vulnerability and resistance. In J. Butler, Z. Gambetti & L. Sabsay (Eds.), *Vulnerability in resistance* (pp. 12–27). Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822373490-002

Dalziel, F., & Piazzoli, E. (2019). 'It comes from you': Agency in adult asylum seekers' language learning through process drama. *Language Learning in Higher Education, 9*(1), 7–32. https://doi.org/10.1515/cercles-2019-0001

Delpit, L. (2006). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. The New Press.

Fairbanks, C. M, & Hinman, T. B. (2018). Teacher and institutional beliefs, vision, belonging, and identity. H. Nassaji (Ed.), *The TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0141

Federal Statistical Office. (2022). *Languages*. Swiss Confederation. https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/en/home/statistics/population/languages-religions/languages.html

Ferguson, C. A. (1959). Diglossia. *Word, 15*(2), 325–340. https://doi.org/10.1080/00437956.1959.11659702

Ferrada, J. S., Bucholtz, M., & Corella, M. (2020). ‘Respeta mi idioma‘: Latinx youth enacting affective agency. *Journal of Language, Identity, & Education, 19*(2), 79–94. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2019.1647784

Flick, U. (2004). Triangulation in qualitative research. In U. Flick, E. von Kardorff, & I. Steinke (Eds.), *A companion to qualitative research* (pp. 178–183). Sage.

Flores, N., & Rosa, J. (2015). Undoing appropriateness: Raciolinguistic ideologies and language diversity in education. *Harvard Educational Review, 85*(2), 149–171. https://doi.org/10.17763/0017-8055.85.2.149

Gao, X. (2010). *Strategic language learning: The roles of agency and context*. Multilingual Matters.

Gkonou, C. (2014). Agency, anxiety and activity: Understanding the classroom behavior of EFL learners. In P. Deters, X. Gao, E. R. Miller, & G. Vitanova (Eds.), *Theorizing and analzying agency in second language learning: Interdisciplinary approaches* (pp. 195–212). Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781783092901-013

Han, H. (2013). Individual grassroots multilingualism in Africa Town in Guangzhou: The role of states in globalization. *International Multilingual Research Journal, 7*(1), 83–97. https://doi.org/10.1080/19313152.2013.746803

Hascher, T., & Hagenauer, G. (2020). Swiss adolescents’ well-being in school. *Swiss Journal of Educational Research, 42*(2), 367–390. https://doi.org/10.24452/sjer.42.2.5

Heller, M. (2007). Bilingualism as ideology and practice. In M. Heller (Ed.), *Bilingualism: A social approach* (pp. 1–21). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230596047_1

Higgins, E. T. (1987). Self-discrepancy: A theory relating self and affect. *Psychological Review, 94*(3), 319–340. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.94.3.319

Hove, I. (2017). Konfrontiert mit Schweizerdeutsch, Schweizerhochdeutsch und bundesdeutschem Hochdeutsch. *SAL-Bulletin, 165*, 5–14. https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-146981

Hsieh, M.-H., Chuang, H.-H., & Albanese, D. (2022). Investigating student agency and affordances during online virtual exchange project in an ELF context from an ecological CALL perspective. *System, 109*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2022.102888

Jiang, A. K., & Zhang, L. J. (2019). Chinese students‘ perceptions of English learning affordances and their agency in an English-medium instruction classroom context. *Language and Education, 33*(4), 322–339. https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2019.1578789

Knoll, A., & Becker, A. (2023). Children’s agency in interaction: How children use language(s) and contribute to the language ecology in Swiss bilingual German-English daycare centers. *International Journal of Multilingualism, 20*(4), 1304–1318. https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2023.2225857

Kolde, G. (1981). *Sprachkontakte in gemischtsprachigen Städten: Vergleichende Untersuchungen über Voraussetzungen und Formen sprachlicher Interaktion verschiedensprachiger Jugendlicher in den Schweizer Städten Biel/Bienne und Fribourg/Freiburg i.ü*. Franz Steiner.

Lantolf, J. P., & Pavlenko, A. (2001). (S)econd (L)anguage (A)ctivity theory: Understanding second language learners as people. In M. P. Breend (Ed.), *Learner contributions to language learning* (pp. 141–158). Routledge.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (2013). Transfer of learning transformed. *Language Learning, 63*(S1), 107–129. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2012.00740.x

Larsen-Freeman, D. (2019). On language learner agency: A complex dynamic systems theory perspective. *The Modern Language Journal, 103*(S1), 61–79. https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12536

Lawrence, G., & Ahmed, F. (2018). Pedagogical insights into hyper-immersive virtual world language learning environments. *International Journal of Computer-Assisted Language Learning and Teaching*, *8*(1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.4018/IJCALLT.2018010101

Lyrigkou, C. (2019). Not to be overlooked: Agency in informal language contact. *Innovation in Language and Teaching, 13*(3), 237–252. https://doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2018.1433182

Mercer, S. (2011). Understanding learner agency as a complex dynamic system. *System, 39*(4), 427–436. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2011.08.001

Mercer, S. (2012). The complexity of learner agency. *Apples - Journal of Applied Language Studies*, *6*(2), 41–59. https://apples.journal.fi/article/view/97838

Milroy, J. (2007). The ideology of the standard language. In C. Llamas, L. Mullany, & P. Stockwell (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to sociolinguistics* (pp. 133–139). Routledge.

Motha, S. (2014). *Race, empire, and English language teaching: Creating responsible and ethical anti-racist practice*. Teachers College Press.

Ortega, L. (2019). SLA and the study of equitable multilingualism. *The Modern Language Journal*, *103*(S), 23–38. https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12525

Oyserman, D., Elmore, K., & Smith, G. (2012). Self, self-concept, and identity. In M. R. Leary, & J. P. Tangney (Eds.), *Handbook of self and identity* (2nd ed., pp. 69–104). The Guilford Press.

Räsänen, E. (2024). Language learners' historical bodies directing their agency in the digital wilds. *Journal of Language, Identity, & Education.* Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2023.2300974

Ris, R. (1990). Diglossie und Bilingualismus in der deutschen Schweiz: Verirrung oder Chance? In J.-P. Vouga & M. E. Hodel (Eds.), *La Suisse face à ses langues – Die Schweiz im Spiegel ihrer Sprachen* (pp. 40–49). Sauerländer.

Roiha, A., & Mäntylä, K. (2022). 'It has given me the kind of courage…': The significance of CLIL in forming a positive target language self-concept. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, *25*(1), 100–116. https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2019.1636761

Rubio, F. D. (2014). Self-esteem and self-concept in foreign language learning. In S. Mercer & M. Williams (Eds.), *Multiple perspectives on the self in SLA* (pp. 41–58). Multilingual Matters.

Ruoss, E. (2019). *Schweizerdeutsch und Sprachbewusstsein: Zur Konsolidierung der Deutschschweizer Diglossie im 19. Jahrhundert*. De Gruyter.

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. Sage.

The Douglas Fir Group. (2016). A transdisciplinary framework for SLA in a multilingual world. *The Modern Language Journal, 100*(S1), 19–47. https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12301

Udry, I., & Berthele, R. (2024). Young learners' academic self-concepts for L2/L3 French and English. *International Journal of Multilingualism*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2023.2301094

van Lier, L. (2008). Agency in the classroom. In J. P. Lantolf & M. E. Poehner (Eds.), *Sociocultural theory and the teaching of second languages* (pp. 163–186). Equinox.

Werlen, I. (1998). Mediale Diglossie oder asymmetrische Zweisprachigkeit? Mundart und Hochsprache in der deutschen Schweiz. *Babylonia, 1*, 22–35.

Wright, P. (2011). Agency, intersubjectivity and drama education. In S. Schonmann (Ed.), *Key concepts in theatre/drama education* (pp. 111–115). Sense Publishers.

Yoshida, R. (2013). Learners' self-concept and use of the target language in foreign language classrooms. *System, 41*(4), 935–951. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2013.09.003

APPENDIX A

Interview Guide

1. When and where do you use the languages you speak?
    a. Are there places where you cannot use a specific language? Examples? Stories? Are there times when you have tried? What happened?
    b. Are there times when you would like to use a specific language but cannot? Are there times when you have tried? What happened? Examples? Stories?
    c. Are there any situations in which you use (your) language as a "secret language"?
2. Please explain why you [insert answer from questionnaire, e.g., don't like] [insert language, e.g., French].
3. Do you have a favorite language? Why?
4. Which additional language would you like to learn that is not offered at school? Why? In what way is this (im)possible?
5. What do you think about teaching approaches in which the subject, e.g. history, is taught in a foreign language?
6. What is your experience with English (school, movies, music, internet, friends)? What do you like about it? What do you think about how English is used in national and international communication, that is, between speakers of different first languages? Should everyone try to speak it as 'native-like' as possible or is understanding more important despite 'mistakes' and 'wrong pronunciation'? What about other languages, i.e. French, German/Swiss German?
7. Explain your rankings of the languages you created in the questionnaire for personal and professional opportunities.
8. To what extent do you agree with the following sentences?

a. I like learning languages so that I can learn about other cultures, communicate with people from other countries and travel.

b. I like learning languages so that I can use them for my future job.

c. Languages are important because I can express who I am and how I feel.

9. To what extent are proficient English language skills responsible for better personal and professional opportunities? What exactly does this mean for your future? Can you give an example?

10. To what extent can/should English be a neutral mediator among the Swiss language regions?

APPENDIX B

Questionnaire Items

I. Personal Information

1. First and last name

2. What best describes your gender?

a. Female

b. Male

c. Do not wish to indicate

d. Other

3. Year and place of birth

4. Nationality (as indicated in passport). If you have multiple nationalities, please use enter to separate them.

5. If you were not born in Switzerland, how old were you when you arrived?

II. Heritage Languages and Countries

1. Indicate the languages you learned growing up as a child. Indicate the order of the languages you learned using 1, 2, 3. For instance: 1) Swiss German, 2) Italian.

2. What language(s) do you speak at home?

3. If the language(s) you learned first is not the same as the school language(s), when and with whom do you use it/them?

4. How well can you read and write in your (first) native language? Rate from 1 (I can read and write only a few words) to 5 (I can read and write texts on any topic without difficulties)

5. How well can you read and write in your second native language? You do not have to answer if you have one native language.

III. School Languages

1. If you learn another language in school which is not listed in the table below, please indicate the language, how much you like it/learning it, and your grade for this or last year in the comment box below.

2. Table for French, German, English, Italian, Romansh, Spanish, Latin, and Russian ranked from “I love it” to “I don’t like it at all”

3. What were your grades in the languages you learn at school? (1 through 6)

IV. Language Use

1. Refer to the following explanations of your language level when answering the questions below.

   a. I can introduce myself, understand and use familiar everyday expressions, e.g., where do you live?

   b. I can exchange and ask for personal and family information, talk about shopping, the neighborhood, and work.

   c. I can express myself on familiar topics of personal interest (school, work, hobbies) and talk about experiences, events, dreams and hopes.

   d. I can discuss the main ideas of a complex text linguistically and defend a particular point of view with some fluency.

   e. I can use language flexibly and communicate in detail and in a well-structured manner on complex topics.

   f. I can use the language for virtually anything in unfamiliar situations.

2. Which other language(s) do you use apart from your native language(s)? Separate the language(s) using enter.

3. How well do you speak them? Differentiate your answer for each language referring to the explanations above (a through f) and separate each language using enter.

4. Describe the context in which you have learned the language(s) (where, how, with whom). Please answer separately for each language using enter.

5. Describe the context in which you use this/these language(s) now (where, how, with whom). Please answer separately for each language using enter.

V. Language Preferences

1. Here you can rank the languages, dialects or other ways of speaking that you use or want to learn in two rankings.

   a. Languages important for your personal life (family, friends, leisure, travel, origin, identity) and

   b. Languages important for academic/professional life (study abroad, work in international companies).

You can name the same languages in both rankings.

private	academic/professional
i. _____	i. _____
ii. _____	ii. _____
iii. _____	iii. _____
..……	……..

2. How satisfied are you with language learning in school? Rate from 1 (strongly dissatisfied) to 5 (strongly satisfied)
3. Would you rather learn French/German first than English in school? If so, why? If not, why not?
4. If you have a native language that is not used in school, would you like to include it more actively in the classroom? If so, why? If not, why not?
5. Would you like to introduce/intensify other languages and stop learning a language you are learning at the moment? Please provide examples and explain why.
6. Rate the following statements from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).
    a. More time should be spent on English in language classes than on other languages that are spoken in Switzerland.
    b. More time should be spent on English in language classes than on other languages that are spoken in Switzerland.
    c. When I learn a language, I want to speak it like a “native speaker.”
    d. When I learn a language, I want my teachers to correct my grammatical mistakes and pronunciation.
    e. I prefer learning American or British English over “Swiss English” (English with Swiss characteristics regarding grammar and pronunciation).
    f. In school, Swiss German should be taught instead of standard German.
    g. English is a neutral language which should be used to communicate among the Swiss language regions.
    h. English as an international language should be prioritized in the curriculum.
    i. All of our students’ native languages should be included in classes.
    j. We should talk more about languages and cultures in classes.