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Code-Switching as Social Identity Marker among Chinese-Indonesian Students in Urban Educational Settings

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Abstract

This study investigates code-switching practices as markers of social identity among Chinese-Indonesian students in urban secondary education settings. While code-switching has been widely studied in Indonesian bilingual contexts, research focusing on its sociocultural dynamics and identity functions within secondary schools remains limited. The study was conducted at a private urban school in Jakarta with a predominantly Chinese-Indonesian student population. Using a qualitative sociolinguistic approach and an ethnographic case study design, data were collected through participant observation, recordings of spontaneous conversations, and in-depth interviews with 15 bilingual and multilingual students (Grades 10–12). The analysis involved classifying types of code-switching (intersentential, intrasentential, and tag-switching), identifying their social functions, and examining identity construction processes. Findings reveal that Indonesian–Mandarin–English code-switching operates as a strategic social practice. English is used to express prestige, intelligence, and global lifestyle; Mandarin functions as an ethnic solidarity marker; and Indonesian is employed in formal contexts, reflecting school hierarchies. These patterns are not random but serve as performative acts to negotiate social class, ethnicity, and global youth identity, reinforcing in-group boundaries. The study offers novel insights into multilingual identity construction among Chinese-Indonesian youths and contributes to sociolinguistic scholarship by linking language practices to social stratification and identity. Pedagogically, the findings inform more responsive language and curriculum policies for urban multilingual schools.

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of language alternation, or code-switching, has become an inseparable part of everyday life in multilingual societies (Rojas, 2025). In Indonesia, this practice appears naturally across diverse communicative contexts, from public spaces and social media to educational settings. One particularly interesting community in this regard is the Chinese-Indonesian community in major cities. Within this context, students of Chinese descent frequently use three languages, Indonesian, Mandarin, and English, in their daily interactions. The use of these languages not only reflects linguistic competence but also illustrates how students negotiate social, ethnic, and class identities within the complex social spaces of schools (Agbozo & ResCue, 2021; Althobaiti & Alsaawi, 2025; Jehan et al., 2025). In spaces such as school cafeterias, hallways, or extracurricular activities, switching between English to convey cosmopolitanism, Mandarin to express ethnic solidarity, and Indonesian for

formal purposes is highly common. This phenomenon highlights that language functions not merely as a communicative tool, but as a symbolic means to construct and reinforce social identity.

The significance of examining this phenomenon lies not only in the growing prevalence of code-switching among urban students but also in the social dynamics surrounding it. Indonesia is a multilingual nation with a long history of ethnic and cultural interactions. The Chinese-Indonesian community, as one of the largest ethnic minorities, has a long-standing history of negotiating its identity amidst the currents of nationalism and globalization (Chean, 2025; Prosper, 2025). In urban educational settings, particularly in private schools attended largely by Chinese-Indonesian students, language becomes a critical arena of negotiation. On one hand, students seek to maintain their ethnic identity through the use of Mandarin (Fasah et al., 2025; Ria Hendriani et al., 2025). On the other hand, they use English to display global connectedness, while Indonesian serves as a marker of national belonging and formal identity. This dynamic not only illustrates multilingual realities but also reveals the underlying social structures and linguistic ideologies that shape educational life in Indonesia.

Research on code-switching itself is not new within sociolinguistics. Chun (2019) and Trudgill (2020) have described this phenomenon as a socially meaningful practice rather than a mere alternation of linguistic codes. In the Indonesian context, several studies have explored code-switching across various domains. For example, studies by Hymes (2020) and Pupynina & Aralova (2021) show that language alternation often serves to adjust levels of formality in conversation. Meanwhile, Tseng & Hinrichs (2021) and Wirtz & Pfenninger (2024b) emphasize the pragmatic functions of code-switching in higher education contexts. Canagarajah (2020) and Wirtz & Pfenninger (2024a) demonstrate how English operates as a symbol of modernity and globalization among Indonesian students. In terms of ethnicity, studies by D'Onofrio (2020) and Rodriguez-Ordoñez et al. (2022) on international schools in Jakarta reveal that language choice reflects the dynamic negotiation of global and local identities among students.

Other studies also emphasize the ideological dimensions of language alternation. Bratcher & Cabosky (2024) and Ismadi et al. (2021), for instance, highlight how English functions as a symbol of prestige and social class in urban Indonesian schools. Kandiawan (2022) and Nahak & Bram (2022) add that the use of English and Indonesian in daily interactions at private schools creates symbolic hierarchies defining who is considered "modern" and who is seen as "local." Conversely, research by Dewi (2021) and Susanti et al. (2024) on Chinese communities in Surabaya shows that Mandarin serves as an ethnic identity marker and a symbol of internal community solidarity. These findings demonstrate the dual function of language: as a communicative tool and as a symbol of social group membership.

At the global level, numerous studies have shown that code-switching is not a random practice but a socially calculated act. Candilas et al. (2023) and Romanowski (2024) describe it as a "contextualization cue", a way speakers signal social meaning through language choice. Treffers-Daller et al. (2022) developed the markedness model, explaining that speakers select particular languages to indicate or negotiate social roles within interactions. Bucholtz and

Gamelo & Roy (2024) emphasize the performative dimension of identity, asserting that language serves as a performative means of constructing self-image, whether as a member of an ethnic group, social class, or global identity. In Malaysia, Akfan (2025) and Fasah et al. (2025) found that Chinese students use English to project social mobility and Mandarin to maintain ethnic ties. In the Philippines, Sinamo et al. (2024) observed that switching between English and Tagalog symbolizes the educated middle-class identity.

Specifically concerning adolescents or secondary school students, several studies show that language often functions as a performative means of expressing group membership. Mirzoyeva & Syurmen (2020) and Yilmaz (2021), for instance, explain how peer group identity is constructed through linguistic practices. In the Indonesian context, Sutrisno (2023) and Taher et al. (2022) found that private school students in Jakarta tend to use English to project a modern and progressive image. Meanwhile, Taher (2022) and Widiastuti et al. (2021) demonstrate how switching between Indonesian and regional languages reflects power relations and social solidarity among adolescents.

However, most research in Indonesia remains focused on linguistic structures, pragmatic functions, or higher education contexts. Few studies have specifically examined code-switching as a marker of social identity among Chinese-Indonesian students in urban secondary schools. Yet, this group represents a particularly intriguing case of complex multilingual practice: they flexibly use three languages, Indonesian, Mandarin, and English, within a single interaction. English is often associated with modernity and social class, Mandarin with ethnic solidarity, and Indonesian with national identity and formality. This dynamic illustrates overlapping layers of identity as well as the social structures reflected in everyday linguistic practice.

This situation reveals a significant gap in the existing literature. Although previous studies have explored code-switching in relation to education or ethnicity more broadly, few have deeply examined how this practice operates as a form of social identity negotiation among Chinese-Indonesian students in urban private secondary schools. Moreover, the simultaneous use of three languages within one educational community offers a rich site for understanding how global, ethnic, and national identities are negotiated concurrently. This practice not only demonstrates linguistic competence but also functions as a social strategy to signal who they are, to whom they are speaking, and what identity they wish to project within the school community.

In this regard, the present study offers a new perspective on code-switching, viewing it not merely as linguistic alternation but as a strategic and performative social act in constructing and negotiating identity. By focusing on Chinese-Indonesian students as research subjects, this study provides a deeper understanding of how language operates as a symbolic arena for negotiating social position amid the forces of globalization and multiculturalism in Indonesia. This approach also enables a more nuanced reading of how social hierarchies, language ideologies, and cultural identities function within urban educational spaces.

Specifically, this study aims to uncover how code-switching patterns are used by Chinese-Indonesian students across various school interaction contexts, the social meanings underlying their language choices, and how these practices relate to the construction of social identity. Through a qualitative sociolinguistic approach and ethnographic case study, this research seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of the relationship between language, identity, and social stratification in multilingual education. Beyond enriching academic discourse, these findings are also expected to provide an empirical basis for developing education and language policies that are more responsive to students' natural linguistic practices in Indonesia's urban multicultural settings.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research method in this study was designed to understand code-switching practices as markers of social identity in a deep, contextual, and naturalistic manner. Therefore, a qualitative approach was adopted as the methodological foundation. This approach was considered most suitable because it allows researchers to explore the social meanings behind linguistic behavior holistically and non-reductionistically. As stated by Li (2024) and Taquette and Souza (2022), qualitative research provides space for understanding human experiences as they are, through an interpretive process rich in social context. In this regard, the language-switching practices of Chinese-Indonesian students are not only understood as linguistic phenomena but also as forms of identity negotiation, social expression, and meaningful communication strategies in their daily school lives.

An ethnographic case study design was chosen because it allows an in-depth exploration of a particular social context (Khan, 2019; Lim, 2025). An urban private school in Jakarta was selected as the research site, as it represents a highly relevant social environment for observing this phenomenon. The school has a majority of Chinese-Indonesian students and employs Indonesian, English, and Mandarin in both academic and non-academic activities. Moreover, urban private schools reflect the dynamics of social stratification in large cities, where language often functions as a symbol of social status, modernity, and ethnic identity. Thus, the choice of this location was not coincidental but grounded in strong sociolinguistic considerations: it is a space where three languages are used flexibly and dynamically across multiple interactional contexts, providing a rich opportunity to understand code-switching practices in depth.

The informants in this study consisted of 15 Chinese-Indonesian students from grades 10 to 12. This number was purposively selected, not to represent the population statistically, but to capture a diverse range of experiences while allowing for in-depth data collection. These informants were chosen because they actively engaged in school interactions, demonstrated multilingual competence, and consciously or unconsciously participated in code-switching in their daily communication. The selection was based on the information-rich case criterion, participants capable of providing in-depth insights into the phenomenon under study. Additionally, focusing on high school students is crucial since adolescence is a social stage during which identity is actively negotiated, including through language.

The data collection process was carried out in three complementary stages. First, participant observation was conducted to capture code-switching practices in natural situations such as classrooms, cafeterias, and extracurricular activities. This approach enabled the researcher to witness spontaneous language use within authentic social contexts, rather than in controlled settings. Observations were conducted over several weeks to ensure consistent and context-rich data. Second, students' conversations in various social situations were recorded naturalistically with ethical consent and subsequently analyzed. These recordings allowed for detailed analysis of the types of code-switching that emerged, such as inter-sentential, intra-sentential, and tag-switching (Stanley, 2023; Yani et al., 2025). Third, in-depth interviews were conducted to uncover students' perceived social meanings behind their language choices. Through these interviews, the researcher explored perceptions, motivations, and reflections on identity that might not be evident from observation data.

Data analysis was conducted interpretively, guided by Bratcher and Cabosky's (2024) framework on the social functions of code-switching, which emphasizes language as a performative means of constructing identity. The analysis began with transcription of recorded conversations, followed by the classification of language-switching types, identification of social functions, and interpretation of the identity meanings behind them. The process was iterative, meaning the researcher continuously moved between field data, observational notes, and theoretical frameworks to build a comprehensive understanding.

To ensure the credibility and validity of findings, data triangulation was employed through several strategies. First, methodological triangulation was achieved by combining observation, recorded conversations, and in-depth interviews, allowing for cross-verification between actual behavioral data and participants' perceptions. Second, source triangulation was conducted by comparing data across different interactional contexts and informants to identify consistency in code-switching patterns. Third, theoretical triangulation was applied to strengthen data interpretation by drawing from multiple relevant sociolinguistic perspectives. As suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Sundler et al. (2019), such triangulation ensures that the findings do not rely on a single data type or viewpoint but instead reflect a more comprehensive picture of social reality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Patterns and Types of Code-Switching in Student Interactions

The patterns and types of code-switching observed in the interactions of Chinese-Indonesian students at an urban private school in Jakarta reveal a rich and structured linguistic dynamic, rather than a random linguistic phenomenon. Based on field observations and in-depth interviews with 15 bilingual and multilingual students, three main types of code-switching were identified: intersentential, intrasentential, and tag-switching. These three forms appear across diverse contexts, ranging from formal classroom settings to more fluid spaces such as cafeterias and extracurricular areas. The code-switching patterns reflect how students consciously use language as a tool to negotiate social identity and signal particular forms of status.

In classroom contexts, intersentential code-switching was found to be the most dominant. During lessons, students often shifted from Indonesian to English when responding to teachers' questions or explaining academic concepts. For instance, when discussing history or science materials, students used Indonesian to present basic ideas and then switched to English for technical terms or elaboration. Field observations suggest that this phenomenon is not merely a strategy to facilitate comprehension but also a performative act to display academic competence and higher social status. Teachers often responded positively to such linguistic behavior, reinforcing the perception that using English in class is associated with intelligence and prestige. As one informant, S., an 11th-grade student, explained, speaking English in class "makes me sound smarter" and "more confident" in front of teachers and peers.

Intrasentential code-switching occurred more frequently in peer-to-peer interactions, especially in the cafeteria and extracurricular settings. This pattern involves switching languages within a single sentence or phrase, for example, inserting English or Mandarin words into Indonesian sentence structures. In casual cafeteria conversations, students often said things like, "Eh, nanti kita lunch bareng, ya," or "Aku lupa bawa homework-nya," mixing English words within Indonesian syntax. The use of terms like lunch and homework represents not just linguistic habit but a social practice to express an urban lifestyle perceived as modern and global.

Further observation showed that intrasentential switching often occurred in fast-paced or emotionally expressive conversations. In music club discussions, for instance, students mixed English and Mandarin with Indonesian to express emotions more naturally and spontaneously. Informant Y., a 12th-grade student, stated that mixed-language use feels "more natural" and "more fitting" for the private-school social environment, which is highly exposed to global culture. This phenomenon illustrates that language switching functions not only as a communicative tool but also as a practice of cultural and symbolic identity continually negotiated in everyday interaction.

Tag-switching, or the insertion of short words or phrases from another language into speech, also appeared significantly, although less frequently than the other two types. This pattern was most common in informal conversations, such as when students greeted each other with Mandarin expressions like ni hao or ended sentences with English discourse markers like you know or right?. Tag-switching illustrates how language serves as an in-group identity marker. Among Chinese-Indonesian students, the use of Mandarin greetings or expressions often reinforced ethnic solidarity and distinguished their group from others.

Tabel 1 Patterns of Code-Switching in Chinese-Indonesian Student Interactions

Type of Code-Switching	Context of Occurrence	Languages Involved	Dominant Social Function	Frequency
Intersentential	Formal classroom	Indonesian – English	Academic prestige, intellectual status affirmation	High
Intrasentential	Cafeteria, extracurricular, casual interaction	Indonesian – English – Mandarin	Global identity performance, spontaneity, self-expression	Medium–High
Tag-switching	Informal conversation	Mandarin – English – Indonesian	Ethnic identity reinforcement, group intimacy	Low–Medium

Source: Research analysis, 2025

A deeper examination shows that these types of code-switching are inseparable from the school's social and symbolic structure. Indonesian, as the national and primary instructional language, holds formal status and is used in academic situations requiring politeness and adherence to school hierarchy. English, by contrast, functions as a symbol of status and global mobility, reflecting the aspirations of the urban middle class that associates itself with global culture. Meanwhile, Mandarin operates as a marker of ethnic identity and cultural closeness among Chinese-Indonesian students.

These findings align with Jiang's (2023) theory of markedness, which posits that language choices in social interaction are never neutral. Students use particular languages to mark specific social relations and symbolic meanings, such as solidarity or prestige. In this context, the use of English in classrooms represents a marked choice signaling intellectual status, while the use of Mandarin in informal interactions serves as an unmarked choice among peers sharing the same ethnic background.

Furthermore, these findings can be interpreted through the lens of strategic multilingualism, which emphasizes that multilingualism is not merely a linguistic ability but a social and political strategy employed by individuals to achieve specific goals. For Chinese-Indonesian students, code-switching serves as a conscious strategy to construct self-images as modern, elite, and ethnically grounded learners. Language alternation in cafeterias or extracurricular spaces thus represents not spontaneous reflexes, but deliberate acts of membership and participation in what they perceive as a prestigious global culture.

Field observations reinforce this strategic reading. When interacting with teachers or staff, students predominantly used Indonesian, inserting English words for academic or polite expressions. However, in peer interactions, English and Mandarin flowed more freely and dynamically. In one observed moment, a group of students chatted over lunch about their weekend plans, fluidly mixing Indonesian, English, and Mandarin within a single conversation without any communication barriers. This shows that multilingualism operates not only as a communicative resource but also as a social practice that creates a sense of belonging.

In-depth interviews also revealed strong linguistic awareness among students. Informant A., for instance, admitted to deliberately using English when speaking with students from international classes "to show that I'm also capable and not less cool." Meanwhile, informant L. stated that speaking Mandarin with fellow Chinese-Indonesian peers made her feel "closer," as the language reminded her of family and community ties.

English as a Marker of Prestige and Global Identity

The use of English among Chinese-Indonesian students in urban private schools illustrates its powerful symbolic dimension in shaping self-image as modern, intelligent, and globally oriented individuals. English functions not only as a communication or academic tool but also as a social and class identity marker. In both classroom and informal settings, English is strategically used to signal prestige, social status, and affiliation with a globalized lifestyle considered superior in urban secondary education. This phenomenon is significant given English's position in Indonesia as a prestigious language associated with intelligence, modernity, and upward social mobility.

Field observations found that English appeared most prominently during classroom discussions. When teachers asked questions or initiated discussions, some students quickly responded in English or mixed Indonesian structures with English terminology. For example, in a history lesson about global politics, several students answered fluently in English, performing not only knowledge but also linguistic competence. As student S. noted, speaking English in class made her "look smarter" and "more confident." This reflects a high linguistic awareness of the symbolic value of English.

A similar phenomenon was observed in casual contexts such as cafeterias and extracurricular areas. Here, English use became more flexible and fluid. Students frequently inserted English expressions such as "literally," "seriously," or "that's so funny" during casual exchanges. These phrases did not merely replace Indonesian equivalents but created a conversational tone that felt "global" and "internationally trendy." Informant L., a 12th-grade student, said she and her friends felt "cooler" speaking in English, even for trivial topics like fashion or movies. In this sense, English acts as a symbolic resource for constructing a modern self and cosmopolitan lifestyle.

English use was also prominent in discussions about digital culture and global pop culture. Students talked about films, music, games, or social media content in English, both online and offline. For instance, when discussing the latest superhero movie, students preferred English for titles, characters, and plot descriptions. This indicates that English functions as a symbolic lingua franca connecting them to upper-middle-class global culture.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, this aligns with the concept of identity performance in multilingual practices, which highlights how language choices in multilingual communities often serve as identity performances (Wongso et al., 2023). For Chinese-Indonesian students, English acts as a medium for performing membership in a modern, educated, and globally minded social group. This identity becomes even more pronounced in front of teachers or international-class students, where linguistic display serves as a form of self-branding.

This phenomenon also reveals in-group exclusivity mechanisms. In cafeteria settings, some students intentionally used English within small circles but switched back to Indonesian when interacting with others. As informant Y. expressed, speaking English with close friends made her feel "more connected" because they "understand the vibe." Here, English functions as a social boundary marker, signifying inclusion within a selective peer group.

Online interactions mirrored this exclusivity. On social media, students who frequently wrote captions or comments in English were often perceived as more "classy" and "knowledgeable." Informant A. noted that she consciously used English on Instagram to "look more international" and distinguish herself from peers who only used Indonesian. Thus, the performativity of English extends beyond the classroom into digital spaces, reinforcing its symbolic association with global middle-class identity.

At a broader level, this cannot be separated from the macro-sociolinguistic positioning of English in Indonesia as a prestigious language. Private schools with predominantly Chinese-Indonesian students often adopt bilingual or international curricula that reinforce this symbolic hierarchy. The school environment itself, with English signage, foreign-trained teachers, and globally themed extracurricular programs, constitutes a social arena where English holds high symbolic capital.

In this light, English use among Chinese-Indonesian students exemplifies what Putra and Tustiawati (2024) describe as multilingual identity performance, a performative practice in which language operates as both a sign and a tool for constructing particular social identities. The "global identity" these students project is not merely about linguistic proficiency but about positioning themselves as urban upper-middle-class youths with access to education and global culture.

Socially, this phenomenon also contributes to the reproduction of symbolic stratification within the school. Students more fluent in English tend to receive greater recognition from teachers and peers. During class discussions, those who spoke in English were often perceived as smarter and more active, regardless of content quality. Teachers offered explicit praise, while peers viewed them as "intelligent" or "international-class" students. This demonstrates how English functions as capital symbolique in Bourdieu's framework, where mastery of certain linguistic codes confers symbolic and cultural advantages within specific social fields.

Thus, English in Chinese-Indonesian students' communicative practices cannot be reduced to a mere linguistic instrument. It operates as a status symbol, a means of inclusion and exclusion, and a performative medium for constructing global identity. English enables students to negotiate their social positioning within the school structure, reinforcing group solidarity while differentiating themselves from others. In Jakarta's urban private school context, English functions as a kind of symbolic currency, signifying who possesses access to global cultural capital and who does not.

These findings underscore that multilingualism in the era of globalization is deeply embedded in symbolic power relations and transnational aspirations. English, in particular, functions as a symbolic lingua franca representing modernity, intelligence, and global

belonging. As Lee et al. (2023) emphasize, linguistic performativity in multilingual societies is never neutral, it serves as a mechanism for producing, negotiating, and performing social identities within symbolically charged spaces. In this case, Chinese-Indonesian students use English to express who they are, and who they wish to be seen as in the globalized world.

Mandarin as an Ethnic Solidarity Marker

Mandarin occupies a uniquely symbolic position in the interactions of Chinese-Indonesian students at urban private schools in Jakarta, not as the primary medium of daily communication, but as a marker of intimacy and ethnic solidarity. The language typically appears through tag-switching or short phrase insertions within conversations conducted in Indonesian or English. Although it may seem like casual linguistic play, the presence of Mandarin in informal student conversations is laden with social meaning. It serves as a kind of "secret code" understood only by members of the same ethnic group, reinforcing a sense of togetherness, communal identity, and subtle social differentiation within the multicultural educational environment.

Field observations in the school cafeteria during lunch breaks reveal groups of Chinese-Indonesian students chatting in mixed Indonesian, English, and short Mandarin expressions such as aiyo, hao la, mei shi, or bu yao. These expressions are not used as complete sentences but appear as inserts within larger Indonesian or English sentences. When a student arrives late, peers jokingly say, "Aiyo, why so late?" or "Bu yao like that lah," producing a conversational rhythm that is fluid yet ethnically marked. Such observations indicate that tag-switching into Mandarin functions not to convey literal meaning but to signal familiarity and emotional closeness among speakers of shared ethnic background.

The use of Mandarin in tag-switching form also appears consistently in social situations outside the classroom, such as extracurricular activities and casual corridor interactions. In these contexts, Mandarin becomes more than a communicative tool, it serves as a symbolic marker of membership in a small community with a shared cultural background. Informant J., an eleventh-grade student, noted that inserting Mandarin phrases makes interactions with co-ethnic peers feel "closer and more natural," unlike interactions with non-Chinese classmates that rely entirely on Indonesian. This reflects an acute social awareness of language as a means of distinguishing between the in-group ("us") and out-group ("them").

This phenomenon can be further explained through the framework of ethnolinguistic vitality proposed by Kayumova and Tippins (2021), which emphasizes the role of ethnic languages in reinforcing internal group cohesion and maintaining cultural identity continuity. Within Jakarta's multicultural urban schools, Mandarin clearly fulfills this function. Although Chinese-Indonesian students do not use Mandarin as the primary instructional language, it continues to live symbolically as an ethnic heritage and solidarity marker. By using Mandarin phrases in everyday conversation, they implicitly affirm their membership in an ethnic group and sustain cultural identity in a predominantly Indonesian-speaking environment.

The presence of Mandarin also generates a subtle layer of exclusivity in the school's social dynamics. In many cases, non-Chinese students do not understand the inserted Mandarin phrases. During an extracurricular session, for example, a group of Chinese

students joked among themselves using Mandarin expressions, leaving nearby non-Chinese peers visibly puzzled but unwilling to interrupt or inquire. This interaction created an invisible symbolic boundary, a subtle delineation of who belongs to the "insider" group and who remains outside. Informant L. stated that using Mandarin phrases among fellow Chinese students feels "more comfortable" because there is mutual understanding even without explicit explanation. In this sense, Mandarin serves as an in-group signaling mechanism that strengthens internal solidarity.

Such in-group signaling plays a crucial role in multicultural urban contexts like Jakarta. Ding (2022), in his study on translanguaging and urban multiculturalism, emphasizes that ethnic languages often function not merely as communication tools but as essential instruments for maintaining minority community cohesion in broader public spaces. In situations where the dominant language (in this case, Indonesian) governs formal discourse, ethnic languages like Mandarin persist symbolically to affirm the existence of the ethnic group. Consciously or not, Chinese-Indonesian students use Mandarin to preserve their cultural connection, even in limited and non-formal expressions.

From a social-functional perspective, the use of Mandarin among students also reflects a strategy of dual identity adaptation. On one hand, they are part of Indonesia's urban society, where Indonesian serves as the main school language. On the other, they maintain their Chinese cultural identity through the selective use of Mandarin. This strategy illustrates what Muslim et al. (2024) describe as ethnolinguistic maintenance, the effort to preserve minority language and ethnic identity amid the pressures of dominant cultural assimilation. Informant W., a twelfth-grade student, remarked that although they are not fully fluent in Mandarin, "using a little bit still reminds us that we are Chinese." This highlights that language need not be used fully to signify identity, symbolic use alone can suffice to reinforce ethnic belonging.

The urban private school context provides a fertile ground for such practices. Schools with a majority of Chinese-Indonesian students create a social environment where Mandarin occupies a relatively safe and respected symbolic space. This environment boosts students' confidence to use Mandarin phrases without fear of misunderstanding or judgment. Furthermore, extracurricular activities related to Chinese culture, such as Lunar New Year celebrations and calligraphy classes, further strengthen Mandarin's role as a symbol of cultural heritage. Observations during Lunar New Year festivities reveal that students tend to use more Mandarin expressions, albeit in limited form, as a means of celebrating their collective identity.

When compared with English, which functions as a marker of prestige and global identity, Mandarin serves a more intimate and communal role. English projects outward, signaling global orientation and class status, whereas Mandarin projects inward, reinforcing solidarity and ethnic bonds. This distinction creates two layers of linguistic identity among Chinese-Indonesian students: a global identity and an ethnic identity. These two layers coexist strategically rather than conflictually within their everyday school interactions.

In daily practice, Mandarin use is also highly selective. Students tend to employ Mandarin phrases only when speaking with other Chinese students. When interacting with teachers or non-Chinese peers, they almost always switch fully to Indonesian or English. This pattern demonstrates a high degree of audience awareness and social contextual sensitivity, a phenomenon consistent with Wigdorowitz et al. (2022), who argue that translanguaging practices are strategic and deeply rooted in existing social relations. The use of Mandarin, therefore, is not a passive linguistic habit but a conscious choice shaped by interlocutor and social meaning.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, Mandarin in this context functions as both a marker of social differentiation and a symbol of ethnic cohesion. The use of short phrases and tag-switching is far from trivial; it serves as a means to construct and sustain internal solidarity networks within a minority ethnic community. Within the multicultural school space, such practices enable Chinese-Indonesian students to negotiate their identities between two worlds: the world of their ethnic heritage and the broader urban social world.

Indonesian Language and the Formal Hierarchy of School

Within the formal educational sphere, Bahasa Indonesia occupies a dominant position as the institutional language that signifies the presence of structure, norms, and school decorum. Based on ethnographic observations conducted in an urban private high school in Jakarta with a majority of Chinese-Indonesian students, the most intensive use of Bahasa Indonesia was found in contexts related to formal interactions, when students spoke with teachers, participated in classroom instruction, delivered presentations, or took part in official school events. In such contexts, language functions not merely as a medium of communication but as a mechanism that regulates social relations and institutionalized power. This aligns with Madkur's (2024) notion of language ideology and institutional power, in which a dominant language not only reflects but also reproduces structures of authority within social institutions such as schools.

Field observations reveal that once class hours begin, a distinct linguistic shift occurs throughout the classroom. The previously noisy conversations, blending English and Mandarin in informal exchanges, gradually subside as the teacher enters. Once greeted, students almost invariably respond in Bahasa Indonesia with expressions such as "Selamat pagi, Bu" or "Selamat siang, Pak." When the teacher begins to explain the lesson, students likewise employ Bahasa Indonesia to ask or answer questions. This is markedly different from their pre- or post-class interactions, which are more fluid and multilingual. In one history lesson, for instance, a student (FY) who usually conversed in English with a seatmate suddenly switched to formal, syntactically structured Bahasa Indonesia when asking a question: "Bu, apakah peristiwa itu terjadi sebelum kemerdekaan Indonesia?" This shift demonstrates the symbolic function of Bahasa Indonesia as a language of authority, marking that the interaction belongs to a regulated, formal domain governed by institutional norms.

The function of Bahasa Indonesia as the dominant language in formal spaces is also evident during evaluative moments such as class presentations. When students are asked to present the results of group discussions, they almost always choose Bahasa Indonesia, even

if their group discussions were previously conducted in a mix of English and Mandarin. In one observed sociology presentation, a group of students (LZ, KY, and JT) had previously discussed in English and Mandarin, yet when it was time to present, LZ automatically switched to formal, standard Indonesian. This transition reflects students' pragmatic awareness of Bahasa Indonesia's institutional role as the expected language in interactions with teachers and the class at large.

Interviews with several informants reinforced these findings. One student (LZ) noted that when speaking to teachers or during presentations, they "automatically feel the need to use Indonesian to sound more polite." Another student (KY) remarked that using English or Mandarin in such contexts feels "inappropriate" or "doesn't fit" because it could be perceived as disrespectful to the classroom atmosphere. These statements suggest the presence of a strong underlying language ideology: Bahasa Indonesia is positioned as the formal, ethnically neutral language that maintains politeness and hierarchical order within the school space. While English and Mandarin may represent personal or group identity, Bahasa Indonesia represents adherence to institutional norms.

The following table summarizes the observed patterns of Bahasa Indonesia use in various school interaction contexts over six weeks of fieldwork:

Tabel 2 Patterns of Bahasa Indonesia Use Across School Interaction Contexts

No.	Interaction Context	Frequency of Indonesian Use	Alternative Languages	Contextual Notes
1	Interaction with teachers (in and outside class)	95%	Slight English use (5%)	Used formally, with structured syntax
2	Class presentations and discussions	90%	Slight English use (10%)	Mostly during evaluations
3	Ceremonies and official school events	100%	–	Sole official language
4	Formal peer interactions	85%	English & Mandarin (15%)	When situations are "serious" or rule-bound
5	Casual conversations	40%	English & Mandarin (60%)	Indonesian used if non-Chinese peers are present

Source: Research Analysis, 2025

As the table indicates, Bahasa Indonesia dominates contexts that are institutionally marked as formal, such as interactions with teachers or participation in official ceremonies. Its frequency declines significantly in casual or peer interactions, where students' ethnic and global identities become more salient through the use of Mandarin and English. This supports the argument that Bahasa Indonesia functions as a high-domain language, while other languages are more often used in low-domain or informal interactions.

From a language ideology perspective, the dominant position of Bahasa Indonesia reflects the symbolic power of educational institutions as state agents in reinforcing national

identity. The school is not merely an academic learning space but also a site for reproducing linguistic ideologies, where Bahasa Indonesia is positioned as a representation of nationalism and social integration. In an interview, one student (JT) explained that speaking Indonesian to teachers made them "feel more accepted as an Indonesian student," even though they felt more comfortable using Mandarin with co-ethnic friends. This statement illustrates how language choice reflects identity negotiation: Mandarin as a symbol of ethnicity, English as a marker of globality, and Bahasa Indonesia as a symbol of belonging to the national community.

In practice, the use of Bahasa Indonesia also reveals hierarchical relations between teachers and students. Teachers consistently use Bahasa Indonesia in instruction, disciplinary communication, and administrative exchanges, reinforcing an asymmetrical power relation through language practice. When students respond in Bahasa Indonesia, they are not only complying linguistically but also acknowledging the teacher's authority and the institutional order. Conversely, if a student responds in another language, such as English, teachers often redirect the interaction back to Bahasa Indonesia, thereby reasserting normative boundaries.

Analytically, this reflects that Bahasa Indonesia in the school context is not a "neutral" language but an institutional instrument for controlling and framing interaction. Within Zein's (2019) framework, the dominant language in formal institutions mirrors the state's linguistic ideology and reinforces social hierarchies. The multilingual private school examined here clearly demonstrates how Bahasa Indonesia functions as a language of legitimacy, while English and Mandarin occupy spaces of personal and group identity expression.

Moreover, the choice to use Bahasa Indonesia in formal contexts can also be interpreted as a form of identity alignment with the national identity. For Chinese-Indonesian students, whose historical relationship with the state has often been marked by ambivalence, using Bahasa Indonesia within the school environment serves as a symbolic act of loyalty to national values and cultural integration. This practice does not negate ethnic identity but situates it within a formally recognized national framework. In this sense, Bahasa Indonesia serves as a bridge between ethnic and national identities, reconciling membership in an ethnic community with belonging to the nation-state.

Code-Switching as a Strategy of Social Identity Negotiation

In the multilingual environment of urban secondary schools, code-switching is not merely a spontaneous linguistic shift but a highly conscious and deliberate social strategy. The Chinese-Indonesian students in this study employ the flexibility of three languages, Indonesian, English, and Mandarin, to construct and negotiate their social identities. These languages function not only as tools of communication but also as resources of identity performance, allowing students to manage social impressions, assert group membership, and negotiate their positions within the school's social structure. Referring to the concept of multilayered identity negotiation, the students' social identities can be understood as overlapping and situational entities that are strategically expressed through language choices in diverse interactional contexts (Diko, 2024; Prada, 2022).

Field observations conducted over six weeks revealed that students' language shifts follow highly contextualized patterns, depending on the interlocutor and the interactional setting. When speaking with teachers or in formal forums, students almost exclusively use Indonesian, signaling compliance with institutional norms and formal hierarchy. However, when conversing with fellow Chinese-Indonesian peers, they often insert Mandarin phrases or words, particularly in the form of tag-switching, as expressions of intimacy and ethnic solidarity. In casual interactions, especially those related to pop culture or digital life, English tends to dominate as a symbol of modern lifestyle and global identity. The interplay of these three languages creates a dynamic code-switching practice that reflects multilayered but interconnected identity expressions.

One observation in the school cafeteria illustrates this dynamic vividly. A group of students (FY, KY, and JT) began their lunchtime conversation in casual English, discussing an upcoming K-pop concert. Moments later, FY switched to Mandarin to make a brief comment to KY, unintelligible to a non-Chinese peer nearby. KY laughed and replied in Mandarin. When a teacher approached to reprimand their noise, the trio instantly shifted to formal Indonesian. This rapid transition, from English to Mandarin to Indonesian, demonstrates their ability to manage social roles strategically within seconds: using English to signal global identity, Mandarin to affirm ethnic familiarity, and Indonesian to respond to institutional authority.

An interview with one informant (FY) reinforced this finding. She explained, "When I speak English, it feels more relaxed and cool, but when I talk with my community friends, I sometimes use Mandarin because it feels more natural." This statement reflects a high degree of pragmatic awareness that each language carries distinct social meanings. English conveys global prestige, Mandarin connotes cultural closeness, and Indonesian indexes formality. Another informant (JT) noted that he rarely uses Mandarin with non-Chinese peers because "they might not understand," showing how language choice also functions to construct in-group boundaries, differentiating who belongs and who does not.

Similar patterns emerged in classroom contexts. When teachers allowed group discussions, students often switched to English when explaining ideas, especially in subjects related to social sciences or global issues. Yet between discussions, they inserted short Mandarin expressions such as nicknames or casual remarks. Once it was time to present their work, they fully reverted to Indonesian. This observation underscores that code-switching is not random behavior but a performative representation of the identities students hold and wish to project to particular audiences.

Tabel 3 Pola code-switching dan makna sosialnya dalam komunitas siswa Tionghoa-Indonesia

No.	Language Used	Interaction Context	Social Meaning	Primary Interlocutor
1	Indonesian	Class, teacher interaction, formal presentation	Formality, institutional compliance	Teachers, school staff, class audience
2	English	Casual conversation, informal discussion, digital context	Global identity, modern image, lifestyle exclusivity	Peers
3	Mandarin	Interaction among Chinese peers	Ethnic solidarity, cultural closeness, group exclusivity	Chinese-Indonesian peers

Source: Research findings, 2025

In Jehan et al.'s (2025) framework, such linguistic behavior illustrates that identity is not an inherent essence but an interactionally constructed entity emerging from each communicative situation. Ethnic identity, social class, and global orientation are not fixed categories but are continuously negotiated through linguistic practice. Ho and Tai (2024) term this phenomenon multilayered identity negotiation, in which individuals simultaneously activate different identity layers depending on the context and audience. The students are not merely "switching languages" but "switching social identities" with each linguistic transition.

This dynamic is also evident in how students address teachers versus peers. When FY spoke to a teacher during a class discussion, she used Indonesian with clear syntax and polite intonation, signaling her identity as a "student" within the school's hierarchical structure. However, upon returning to her group, she immediately shifted to English and Mandarin, speaking in a relaxed and humorous tone. Such identity shifts demonstrate a keen contextual awareness and strategic competence in managing social positioning.

The role of code-switching in defining in-group boundaries is equally significant. Chinese-Indonesian students use Mandarin phrases as ethnic codes understood only within their community. During an observation in the school corridor, a group of students (LZ, KY, and FY) conversed in a mix of English and Mandarin. When a non-Chinese student joined, the use of Mandarin sharply decreased, and the conversation shifted to a blend of Indonesian and English. This adjustment illustrates how inclusion and exclusion mechanisms are linguistically mediated.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, this phenomenon reveals the performative and symbolic dimensions of language. English is not merely a tool of global communication but a symbol of prestige and upper-middle-class aspiration. Mandarin is not only an ethnic language but a marker of cultural closeness and group exclusivity. Indonesian, meanwhile, serves as a language of legitimacy and compliance with institutional order. Together, these languages form an overlapping and flexible configuration of identities, allowing students to

navigate strategically between distinct social roles.

In interviews, KY reflected on this experience: when speaking English, she "feels cooler and more confident"; when speaking Mandarin with close friends, she feels "more comfortable and more like herself"; but when addressing teachers, she "has to use Indonesian to be polite." These three expressions clearly illustrate the three layers of negotiated identity, globality, ethnicity, and nationality.

This phenomenon also carries important sociological implications. The school, as a social space, functions not only in shaping academic identity but also in constructing social and cultural identities. Among these Chinese-Indonesian students, code-switching operates as a means of managing social distance, asserting group status, and fostering internal solidarity. Within the school's social structure, this practice reinforces the symbolic stratification between "those inside the group" and "those outside," creating identity boundaries that are fluid yet socially meaningful.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that code-switching among Chinese-Indonesian students in urban secondary education is not a spontaneous linguistic phenomenon but a socially meaningful practice of identity construction. Switching between Indonesian, Mandarin, and English serves as a symbolic strategy for negotiating social positions, as members of the Chinese ethnic group, as middle–upper-class students, and as participants in a global youth community. The use of English represents cosmopolitan image and academic prestige; Mandarin affirms ethnic solidarity; while Indonesian signals compliance with institutional norms. Thus, code-switching functions as a performative medium for constructing and maintaining in-group boundaries that simultaneously reflect social structures and symbolic stratification within the school space. These findings affirm that the social identities of Chinese-Indonesian students are dynamically constructed through linguistic choice, offering theoretical contributions to sociolinguistic studies on language and identity, while also informing more inclusive and context-responsive language education policies for multilingual urban schools in Indonesia.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants' confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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