



Visualizing the unspoken: emotion, identity, and reflective meaning-making in multilingual educational conversations

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Abstract

This study explores how emotion and identity shape meaning making in multilingual educational conversations and how reflective qualitative analysis can help make visible dimensions of interaction that remain unspoken. While multilingual education has traditionally emphasized linguistic competence and verbal expression, this paper argues that significant aspects of educational experience emerge beyond words, through affective responses, identity positioning, and relational interpretation. Adopting a qualitative, reflective approach, the study examines emotionally charged educational conversations as sites where meaning is negotiated through the interplay of interpretation, emotion, and identity. Rather than treating conversational difficulties as individual communicative failures, the analysis conceptualizes them as structurally patterned and socially situated phenomena embedded within multilingual educational contexts. The findings highlight three interrelated patterns: unspoken emotional undercurrents, moments of identity vulnerability, and discrepancies between conversational outcomes and lived experience. Conceptually, the paper advances the notion of visualizing the unspoken as an interpretive and epistemological practice that renders affective and identity-related dimensions of meaning analytically visible. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of reflective qualitative analysis for researching multilingual educational experience. Pedagogically, the study underscores the importance of attending to emotion and identity in fostering more inclusive and identity-affirming multilingual learning environments. By foregrounding meaning-making beyond linguistic expression, the paper contributes to ongoing discussions on multimodality, reflection, and equity in multilingual education.

Keywords: Multilingual education, Emotion, Identity, Reflective qualitative analysis, Meaning making, Visualizing the unspoken

1. Introduction

In multilingual educational settings, language is often positioned as the primary medium through which learning, identity, and participation are enacted. Pedagogical attention typically focuses on what learners say, how accurately they use linguistic forms, and how effectively they convey propositional meaning. While such concerns are important, an exclusive emphasis on language as verbal output risks overlooking significant dimensions of meaning that operate beyond words, including emotions, embodied experiences, silences, and identity negotiations. These dimensions, though frequently unspoken, shape how multilingual learners understand themselves and how they are positioned within educational interactions.

Recent work in multilingual education has increasingly called for approaches that move beyond purely linguistic frameworks to account for multimodal, affective, and embodied ways of knowing. Scholars have argued that meaning making is not confined to spoken or written language, but is distributed across modes such as gesture, image, spatial arrangement, and affective expression (Kress, 2010; Jewitt, 2014) [3, 2]. From this perspective, *seeing language* involves attending to how meaning is sensed, felt, and negotiated, rather than merely articulated. Such a shift is particularly important in multilingual classrooms, where learners' linguistic and cultural identities are often complex, fluid, and unevenly recognized.

Identity has long been understood as central to multilingual learners' engagement with language and education. Rather than a fixed attribute, identity is continually negotiated through social interaction, shaped by power relations, emotional experiences, and access to symbolic resources (Norton, 2013) [4]. In educational conversations, especially those involving evaluation, disagreement, or feedback, learners' sense of self may be affirmed or destabilized in subtle ways. These identity-related processes are rarely made explicit, yet they exert a powerful influence on how interactions unfold and how meaning is constructed.

Emotion constitutes another critical yet frequently marginalized dimension of multilingual educational interaction. Research on language and affect has shown that emotions are not peripheral to learning, but are deeply entangled with identity, agency, and participation (Pavlenko, 2005; Benesch, 2017) [5, 1]. In classroom conversations, emotions such as anxiety, frustration, or vulnerability often remain unarticulated, particularly in contexts where emotional expression is perceived as inappropriate or risky. As a result, conversations may appear orderly and instructional on the surface while masking affective tensions that shape learners' experiences and future engagement.

Difficult or emotionally charged educational conversations offer a particularly revealing site for examining these unspoken dimensions of meaning. In such interactions, participants may

achieve immediate instructional or procedural outcomes, yet leave with lingering feelings of discomfort, misrecognition, or diminished trust. Understanding these moments requires an analytical lens capable of capturing not only what is said, but also what is felt, implied, or left unsaid. It is in this sense that the notion of *visualizing the unspoken* becomes analytically significant, pointing to the need to render affective and identity-related processes visible through reflective inquiry.

This study adopts a qualitative, reflective approach to explore how emotion and identity are negotiated in multilingual educational conversations and how these processes contribute to meaning making beyond linguistic expression. Reflection is understood here not merely as introspection, but as a methodological stance that enables researchers to revisit interactional moments with critical distance, making visible dimensions of practice that are not immediately observable in real time (Schön, 1983) [6]. Through reflective qualitative analysis, the study conceptualizes difficult conversations as structured, socially situated interactions shaped by the interplay of interpretation, affect, and identity positioning.

Guided by the question: *How can reflective qualitative analysis help visualize emotion and identity in multilingual educational conversations?* This paper contributes to ongoing discussions on identity-affirming pedagogies and methodological innovation in multilingual education. By foregrounding the unspoken aspects of interaction, it challenges reductive views of multilingual communication as primarily linguistic and argues for a more holistic understanding of meaning-making as emotional, relational, and identity-laden. In doing so, the study seeks to offer a reflective framework for educators and researchers interested in more inclusive, humane, and responsive approaches to multilingual education.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research orientation

This study adopts a qualitative research orientation grounded in reflective and interpretive traditions. Rather than seeking to measure predefined variables or test causal relationships, the research aims to understand how meaning emerges in multilingual educational conversations through emotion, identity negotiation, and interactional dynamics. Such an approach is particularly appropriate for examining phenomena that are subtle, relational, and often unspoken, including affective responses, identity positioning, and moments of conversational tension that resist straightforward quantification.

Qualitative inquiry is well suited to capturing the complexity of multilingual educational experiences, where meaning is co-constructed through language, emotion, and social context. In this study, meaning making is understood as a situated process that unfolds through interaction, shaped by participants' histories, identities, and emotional investments. Accordingly, the research prioritizes depth of interpretation over breadth of representation, focusing on how particular conversational moments illuminate broader patterns of experience.

2.2. Reflection as methodological stance

Reflection functions in this study not merely as a personal activity, but as a methodological stance that enables systematic

inquiry into lived experience. Drawing on reflective traditions in qualitative research, reflection is used to revisit and interrogate educational conversations with critical distance, allowing the researcher to identify affective and identity-related dimensions that may not be immediately visible during interaction. This stance recognizes that researchers are not detached observers, but participants in meaning-making processes whose interpretations are shaped by their positionality and professional experience.

Reflective analysis involves moving between engagement and distance: engaging with interactional moments as they are experienced, and subsequently distancing oneself from them to examine underlying assumptions, emotional responses, and identity implications. Through this process, reflection becomes a tool for *visualizing the unspoken*, rendering analytically visible those aspects of interaction that remain implicit, silenced, or taken for granted.

Importantly, reflection in this study is not equated with anecdotal narration. Instead, it is treated as a disciplined qualitative practice guided by theoretical concepts related to emotion, identity, and interaction. By situating reflective insights within existing scholarly conversations, the study seeks to balance interpretive depth with analytical rigor.

2.3. Data sources and analytical focus

The analysis draws on naturally occurring multilingual educational conversations situated in higher education contexts. These conversations include instructional interactions, feedback exchanges, and moments of pedagogical negotiation where emotional and identity-related tensions are likely to surface. Rather than treating conversations as isolated events, the study approaches them as interactional episodes embedded within broader educational relationships and institutional contexts.

Data sources may include field notes, reflective journals, and interactional excerpts recalled or documented by the researcher as part of ongoing professional practice. The emphasis is not on producing exhaustive transcripts or representative samples, but on selecting analytically rich moments that reveal how emotion and identity shape meaning making beyond explicit linguistic content. Such moments are treated as illustrative cases through which broader interactional patterns can be explored.

2.4. Analytical procedure

Analysis proceeds through an iterative, reflective process. First, conversational moments are identified in which participants experience discomfort, misalignment, or heightened emotional intensity. These moments are then examined through multiple analytical lenses, focusing on (1) participants' interpretations of what is happening, (2) the emotional undercurrents shaping the interaction, and (3) the identity positions being affirmed, challenged, or negotiated.

Throughout the analytical process, attention is paid to what remains unspoken as much as to what is articulated. Silences, shifts in tone, hesitation, and indirect responses are treated as meaningful indicators of affective and identity-related

processes. By repeatedly revisiting these moments, the analysis seeks to move beyond surface descriptions toward a deeper understanding of how meaning is constructed and experienced in multilingual educational conversations.

2.5. Trustworthiness and ethical considerations

Given the interpretive nature of reflective qualitative research, issues of trustworthiness are addressed through transparency and reflexivity rather than claims of objectivity or generalizability. The researcher's positionality is acknowledged as an integral part of the analytical process, and interpretations are grounded in sustained engagement with both empirical experience and relevant theoretical frameworks.

Ethical considerations center on respect for participants' dignity and privacy. Reflective accounts are anonymized, and identifying details are omitted or altered to prevent recognition. The purpose of the analysis is not to evaluate individual communicative competence, but to illuminate interactional dynamics that have broader relevance for multilingual education. By foregrounding ethical reflexivity, the study aims to contribute to more inclusive and humane understandings of educational communication.

3. Analytical framework

This study is guided by an analytical framework that conceptualizes multilingual educational conversations as sites of meaning-making shaped by the dynamic interplay of emotion, identity, and interaction. Rather than treating language use as a purely cognitive or linguistic activity, the framework foregrounds affective and relational dimensions that influence how participants interpret, experience, and respond to educational encounters. Within this perspective, meaning is understood as emergent, situated, and deeply connected to learners' emotional experiences and sense of self. The framework is not intended as a rigid coding scheme or a set of predetermined categories. Instead, it functions as a sensitizing lens that directs analytical attention to recurring dimensions of experience that often remain unspoken in multilingual educational conversations. By focusing on emotion, identity, and reflective meaning-making, the framework enables the analysis to move beyond surface-level interaction toward a more holistic understanding of how conversations are lived and felt by participants.

3.1. Emotion as an interactional dimension

Emotion is conceptualized in this framework as an integral component of interaction rather than as an internal state detached from social context. In multilingual educational conversations, emotions such as anxiety, frustration, vulnerability, or relief are often triggered by moments of evaluation, misunderstanding, or perceived misrecognition. These emotions shape how participants listen, respond, and interpret one another, even when they are not explicitly named. Analytically, emotion is approached through attention to interactional cues that signal affective states, including shifts in tone, hesitation, silence, pacing, and indirect language. Rather than seeking to label emotions definitively, the analysis

explores how emotional undercurrents influence the flow of conversation and the meanings participants take away from it. In this sense, emotion is treated as relational and dynamic, emerging through interaction rather than residing solely within individuals.

3.2. Identity and positioning in multilingual conversations

Identity constitutes a second central dimension of the analytical framework. In multilingual educational settings, learners' identities are continually negotiated in relation to language proficiency, cultural background, institutional expectations, and perceived competence. Educational conversations often function as moments of identity positioning, where participants implicitly or explicitly negotiate who they are, how they are seen, and what they are entitled to say or feel.

Within this framework, identity is understood as fluid and interactionally constructed rather than fixed or essentialized. Particular attention is paid to moments in which participants' sense of self appears to be affirmed, threatened, or destabilized. Such moments may be marked by defensiveness, withdrawal, over-justification, or heightened emotional response. By examining how identity concerns surface indirectly through interaction, the analysis seeks to illuminate the often-invisible ways in which educational conversations shape learners' experiences of belonging, legitimacy, and agency.

3.3. Reflective meaning-making beyond linguistic expression

The third component of the framework focuses on reflective meaning-making as a process that extends beyond explicit linguistic content. While what is said in multilingual educational conversations is important, this study emphasizes that meaning is also produced through what remains unspoken, implied, or emotionally charged. Reflection allows these dimensions of meaning to be revisited and examined with analytical distance.

Reflective meaning-making involves attending to discrepancies between conversational outcomes and lived experience. For example, a conversation may reach a formal resolution while leaving participants with lingering feelings of discomfort or misrecognition. Such discrepancies point to meanings that are not captured by linguistic analysis alone. Through reflective analysis, these meanings are rendered visible by examining how emotion and identity intersect with interpretation and response.

Within this framework, *visualizing the unspoken* refers to the analytical act of making affective and identity-related processes visible through reflection. Visualization is thus understood metaphorically and epistemologically rather than as a reference to visual artifacts. It denotes a way of seeing interaction differently, one that foregrounds experiential and relational dimensions of meaning that are often overlooked in language-focused analyses.

3.4. Interplay among emotion, identity, and reflection

Crucially, the three dimensions of the framework do not operate independently. Emotional responses often signal

underlying identity concerns, while identity positioning shapes how emotions are experienced and managed. Reflection serves as the mechanism through which these interconnections become analytically accessible. By moving iteratively between interactional moments and reflective interpretation, the analysis traces how meaning emerges through the entanglement of emotion, identity, and interaction.

This interconnected framework allows the study to account for the complexity of multilingual educational conversations without reducing them to linear cause-and-effect relationships. Instead, it highlights patterns of experience that recur across interactions, offering insight into why certain conversations feel productive while others leave participants unsettled, despite appearing successful on the surface.

By adopting this analytical framework, the study provides a structured yet flexible lens for examining how multilingual learners and educators experience educational conversations as emotional and identity-laden encounters. In doing so, it aligns with calls for more reflective, multimodal, and identity-affirming approaches to research in multilingual education.

4. Findings

The reflective analysis revealed three interrelated patterns through which meaning was negotiated in multilingual educational conversations: (1) the presence of unspoken emotional undercurrents, (2) moments of identity vulnerability and positioning, and (3) discrepancies between conversational outcomes and lived experience. Together, these patterns illuminate how meaning-making extends beyond linguistic exchange and how educational conversations are experienced as emotional and identity-laden encounters.

4.1. Emotional undercurrents and the management of affect

Across multilingual educational conversations, emotional responses were consistently present but rarely articulated explicitly. Feelings such as anxiety, frustration, uncertainty, or relief surfaced indirectly through interactional cues, including hesitation, shifts in tone, pauses, and changes in conversational pacing. These affective signals often emerged at moments involving evaluation, clarification of expectations, or perceived misunderstanding.

In many cases, participants appeared to prioritize maintaining surface-level coherence and professionalism over acknowledging emotional responses. This tendency resulted in conversations that proceeded smoothly in linguistic terms while leaving emotional tensions unaddressed. Reflection on these interactions revealed that emotional undercurrents frequently shaped how messages were interpreted and remembered, influencing participants' sense of satisfaction or discomfort after the conversation had concluded.

Importantly, emotional responses were not uniformly negative. Moments of affirmation, recognition, or understanding were associated with feelings of relief and increased engagement. However, these positive emotions were also rarely named, suggesting that affect, whether supportive or destabilizing, often remained in the background of multilingual educational

interaction. The unspoken nature of emotion thus functioned as both a stabilizing force and a source of latent tension within conversations.

4.2. Identity vulnerability and interactional positioning

A second prominent finding concerned the role of identity in shaping participants' engagement with educational conversations. Interactions frequently activated implicit questions related to competence, legitimacy, and belonging, particularly in multilingual contexts where language proficiency intersects with cultural and institutional expectations. These identity concerns were seldom voiced directly, yet they were evident in participants' defensive responses, over-explanations, or withdrawal from further dialogue.

Reflective examination of conversational moments revealed that perceived threats to identity often intensified emotional responses and narrowed participants' interpretive flexibility. When individuals felt their competence or credibility was at stake, they were more likely to interpret feedback or clarification as judgment, even when no explicit evaluative language was used. This dynamic contributed to conversational misalignment, as participants responded to perceived identity threats rather than to the propositional content of the interaction.

Conversely, conversations in which identity was implicitly affirmed, through recognition of effort, acknowledgment of difficulty, or respectful engagement with differing perspectives, tended to foster greater openness and mutual understanding. These moments highlight the importance of identity safety in multilingual educational settings, where learners' sense of self is closely tied to their linguistic performance and participation.

4.3. Meaning making beyond conversational outcomes

A third finding concerned the relationship between conversational outcomes and participants' lived experience of interaction. In several instances, conversations achieved their immediate instructional or procedural goals, such as clarifying expectations or reaching agreement on a course of action. However, reflective analysis indicated that instrumental resolution did not necessarily correspond to relational or emotional closure.

Participants often reported lingering feelings of unease, misrecognition, or dissatisfaction despite outward agreement. These residual experiences pointed to meanings that were not captured by the observable outcomes of conversation. The analysis suggests that such discrepancies arise when emotional and identity-related dimensions remain unaddressed, leaving participants with unresolved interpretations of what the interaction signified for their sense of self and their relationship with others.

This finding underscores the limitations of evaluating educational conversations solely in terms of efficiency or task completion. Meaning making, from a reflective perspective, encompasses not only what is decided or communicated, but also how participants experience the interaction and what they

carry forward into future engagements. Visualizing these unspoken meanings reveals why some conversations continue to shape participants' attitudes and behaviors long after they have formally concluded.

4.4. Interconnections among emotion, identity, and reflection

Taken together, the findings illustrate that emotion, identity, and meaning making are deeply intertwined in multilingual educational conversations. Emotional responses often signaled underlying identity concerns, while identity positioning influenced how emotions were regulated or suppressed. Reflection functioned as the means through which these interconnections became visible, enabling a deeper understanding of interactional dynamics that were not apparent in real time.

By adopting a reflective analytical lens, the study makes visible the affective and identity-related processes that shape multilingual educational interaction beyond linguistic expression. These findings suggest that attending to the unspoken dimensions of conversation is essential for understanding how meaning is constructed, experienced, and remembered in multilingual educational contexts.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study invite a reconsideration of how multilingual educational conversations are understood and evaluated. Rather than viewing such conversations primarily as exchanges of linguistic information or instructional directives, the analysis foregrounds their affective and identity-laden nature. By visualizing the unspoken dimensions of interaction, the study highlights how meaning-making in multilingual education extends beyond what is explicitly articulated, encompassing emotional experiences, identity positioning, and relational interpretation.

5.1. Visualizing emotion as pedagogical knowledge

One of the central contributions of this study lies in its treatment of emotion as a form of pedagogical knowledge rather than as a peripheral or disruptive element of educational interaction. The findings demonstrate that emotional undercurrents are consistently present in multilingual educational conversations, shaping how participants interpret feedback, negotiate expectations, and remember interactional encounters. When emotions remain unacknowledged, they do not disappear; instead, they influence meaning-making indirectly, often in ways that complicate or undermine instructional intentions.

From the perspective of the special issue's focus on visual- and arts-based approaches, *visualizing emotion* can be understood as an epistemological act. It involves rendering affective processes visible through reflective interpretation, thereby expanding what counts as knowledge in multilingual education. This aligns with broader calls to move beyond deficit-oriented and monolingual frameworks that privilege linguistic accuracy while marginalizing learners' emotional and experiential realities. By attending to emotion as a

meaningful dimension of interaction, educators can better understand why certain conversations resonate positively while others generate resistance or withdrawal, despite similar linguistic content.

5.2. Identity affirmation and vulnerability in multilingual education

The findings also underscore the centrality of identity in shaping multilingual educational conversations. Identity emerged not as a stable attribute brought into interaction, but as something continually negotiated through conversational positioning. Moments of feedback, clarification, or disagreement frequently activated concerns related to competence, legitimacy, and belonging, particularly for multilingual learners whose identities are closely intertwined with language use.

These observations reinforce the importance of identity-affirming pedagogies in multilingual education. Conversations that implicitly affirmed learners' identities fostered openness and engagement, whereas those that inadvertently threatened identity triggered defensiveness and emotional withdrawal. Crucially, identity vulnerability was often activated without overtly evaluative language, suggesting that even well-intentioned instructional practices can have unintended identity consequences.

By visualizing identity-related processes that remain unspoken, this study contributes to intersectional understandings of multilingual education that recognize learners as emotional and relational beings, not merely language users. It also challenges educators to reflect on how everyday conversational practices may either reproduce or resist deficit discourses, even in subtle and indirect ways.

5.3. Reflective meaning-making as methodological and pedagogical practice

The use of reflective qualitative analysis in this study highlights reflection as both a methodological and pedagogical practice. Methodologically, reflection enabled the identification of affective and identity-related meanings that were not immediately visible during interaction. This supports arguments for reflective approaches as legitimate and rigorous forms of qualitative inquiry, particularly in research areas where lived experience and relational dynamics are central.

Pedagogically, reflective meaning-making offers a way for educators to engage more critically with their own conversational practices. Rather than focusing solely on improving clarity or efficiency, reflection encourages educators to examine how their interactions are experienced emotionally and identity-wise by multilingual learners. This shift aligns with the special issue's emphasis on innovative ways of *seeing language* and on pedagogies that center learners' voices, experiences, and sense of self.

In this sense, reflection functions as a bridge between theory and practice. It allows educators to move beyond prescriptive communication strategies toward a more responsive and ethically attuned engagement with multilingual learners. By making the unspoken visible, reflective practice opens space for more humane and inclusive educational conversations.

5.4. Implications for multilingual education research and practice

The findings and discussion point to several implications for multilingual education. First, research on multilingual interaction would benefit from greater attention to affective and identity-related dimensions that are often overlooked in language-focused analyses. Reflective and multimodal approaches offer valuable tools for capturing these dimensions without reducing them to measurable variables.

Second, educational practice should recognize that conversational success cannot be evaluated solely in terms of task completion or instructional outcomes. Conversations that appear successful on the surface may still produce negative emotional or identity-related effects that shape learners' future engagement. Attending to these unspoken meanings is therefore essential for fostering equitable and sustaining multilingual learning environments.

Finally, this study suggests that visualizing the unspoken, whether through reflective analysis, narrative inquiry, or arts-based methods, represents a promising direction for methodological innovation in multilingual education. Such approaches challenge narrow conceptions of language and learning, foregrounding the complex, embodied, and relational nature of educational experience.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to explore how emotion and identity shape meaning making in multilingual educational conversations and how reflective qualitative analysis can help visualize dimensions of interaction that remain unspoken. By adopting a reflective analytical lens, the study has demonstrated that multilingual educational conversations are not merely linguistic exchanges, but emotionally and relationally complex encounters in which learners' identities are continually negotiated.

The findings highlight that emotional undercurrents are a persistent feature of multilingual educational interaction, influencing how conversations are interpreted and remembered, even when they are not explicitly articulated. Similarly, identity vulnerability emerged as a central factor shaping participants' engagement, particularly in moments involving feedback, evaluation, or perceived misrecognition. These affective and identity-related processes often operate beneath the surface of conversation, producing meanings that extend beyond observable conversational outcomes.

Conceptually, this study contributes to multilingual education research by foregrounding *visualizing the unspoken* as an interpretive and epistemological practice. Rather than referring to visual artifacts alone, visualization is understood as a reflective act that renders affective and identity-related dimensions of meaning analytically visible. This perspective aligns with broader calls for multimodal and arts-based approaches that challenge language-centered and deficit-oriented frameworks in multilingual education.

Methodologically, the study underscores the value of reflective qualitative analysis as a rigorous and ethically attuned approach to researching multilingual educational experience.

Reflection enables researchers and educators to revisit interactional moments with critical distance, making visible meanings that are not accessible through real-time observation or purely linguistic analysis. In doing so, reflective inquiry expands the methodological repertoire available for studying identity, emotion, and meaning making in educational contexts.

Pedagogically, the findings suggest that attending to the unspoken dimensions of educational conversations is essential for fostering more inclusive and identity-affirming learning environments. Educators who engage reflectively with their conversational practices are better positioned to recognize how emotions and identity concerns shape learners' experiences, even in interactions that appear successful on the surface. Such awareness can support more responsive and humane approaches to multilingual education that honor learners' linguistic, cultural, and emotional realities.

While this study is conceptual and reflective in nature, it opens several directions for future research. Empirical studies employing arts-based, visual, or participatory methods could further explore how learners themselves visualize and represent unspoken dimensions of their educational experiences. Additionally, longitudinal and collaborative inquiries may examine how reflective practices influence educators' conversational approaches over time and how such practices contribute to more equitable multilingual educational contexts.

In conclusion, by making visible what is often left unspoken, this study invites researchers and educators to reconsider how meaning is constructed, experienced, and remembered in multilingual educational conversations. Attending to emotion and identity not as peripheral concerns but as central dimensions of interaction offer a pathway toward more reflective, inclusive, and ethically grounded practices in multilingual education.

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