

Quadrilingualism and Identity in the Bugis-Indonesian Diaspora in Tawau, Malaysia (Kuadrilingualisme dan Identiti dalam Diaspora Bugis-Indonesia di Tawau, Malaysia)

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ABSTRACT

Multilingualism in diaspora is not merely a skill; it is a way of negotiating identity and social inclusion for the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora in Tawau, Malaysia, language becomes a means of maintaining identity while adapting to new cultural landscapes. This study explores quadrilingual language practices within the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora in Tawau, Malaysia, a context shaped by cultural migration and multilingual interaction. In an increasingly globalized and multicultural society, language plays a crucial role in identity formation, particularly among diasporic communities. This study investigates how the use and maintenance of four languages: Bugis, Malay, Indonesian, and English, reflect the linguistic choices and identity construction of the community. Using a qualitative design, data were collected through interviews, observations, and questionnaires involving members of the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora: parents, students, and educators. A total of 18 participants were purposively sampled from four groups: children (aged 10-17, n = 5), adults (18-40, n = 6), elders (40+, n = 4), and teachers (n = 3), all proficient in Indonesian, Malay, English, and Bugis. The findings reveal that Bugis and Malay dominate in familial and community interactions, while Indonesian is used in formal or cultural contexts, and English is mostly reserved for educational settings, often with code-switching. These patterns indicate a strategic and context-sensitive approach to language use. The findings provide theoretical insights into multilingual identity negotiation and highlight the practical implications for language policy and diaspora education. These findings underscore the need for supportive policies that recognize the cultural significance of heritage languages while promoting national and international language competencies.

Keywords: *Quadrilingualism; Identity; Bugis-Indonesian Diaspora; Language Choice; Language Maintenance*

ABSTRAK

Multilingualisme dalam komuniti diaspora bukan sekadar suatu kemahiran, tetapi merupakan suatu cara untuk merundingkan identiti dan keterangkuman sosial. Bagi diaspora Bugis-Indonesia di Tawau, Malaysia, bahasa menjadi wahana untuk mengekalkan identiti di samping menyesuaikan diri dengan landskap budaya yang baharu. Kajian ini meneroka amalan bahasa kuadrilingual dalam diaspora Bugis-Indonesia di Tawau, Malaysia, dalam konteks yang dipengaruhi oleh migrasi budaya dan interaksi pelbagai bahasa. Dalam masyarakat yang semakin global dan multibudaya, bahasa memainkan peranan penting dalam pembentukan identiti, khususnya dalam kalangan komuniti diaspora. Kajian ini meneliti bagaimana penggunaan dan pemertahanan empat bahasa, iaitu bahasa Bugis, bahasa Melayu, bahasa Indonesia dan bahasa Inggeris, mencerminkan pilihan linguistik serta pembinaan identiti komuniti tersebut. Dengan menggunakan reka bentuk kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui temu bual, pemerhatian dan soal selidik yang melibatkan anggota diaspora Bugis-Indonesia, termasuk ibu bapa, pelajar dan pendidik. Seramai 18 orang peserta dipilih secara bertujuan daripada empat kumpulan, iaitu kanak-kanak (berumur 10–17 tahun, n = 5), dewasa (18–40 tahun, n = 6), golongan lebih berusia (40 tahun ke atas, n = 4) dan guru (n = 3), yang kesemuanya mempunyai penguasaan dalam bahasa Indonesia, bahasa Melayu, bahasa Inggeris dan bahasa Bugis.

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Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa bahasa Bugis dan bahasa Melayu lebih dominan dalam interaksi kekeluargaan dan komuniti, manakala bahasa Indonesia digunakan dalam konteks formal atau kebudayaan, sementara bahasa Inggeris lebih banyak digunakan dalam konteks pendidikan, sering kali melalui pertukaran kod. Pola ini menunjukkan pendekatan penggunaan bahasa yang strategik dan peka terhadap konteks. Dapatan kajian memberikan sumbangan teoretikal terhadap pemahaman tentang perundingan identiti dalam konteks multilingualisme serta menonjolkan implikasi praktikal terhadap dasar bahasa dan pendidikan diaspora. Dapatan ini menegaskan keperluan terhadap dasar yang menyokong dan mengiktiraf kepentingan budaya bahasa warisan, di samping menggalakkan penguasaan kompetensi dalam bahasa kebangsaan dan bahasa antarabangsa.

Kata Kunci: Kuadrilingualisme; Identiti; Diaspora Bugis-Indonesia; Pilihan Bahasa; Pemertahanan Bahasa

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, cross-border migration and intercultural contact have reshaped how language and identity are formed, particularly among diaspora communities. This has impacted the nationalist spirit of youth, which is beginning to fade (Maher, 2017; Nemegeer & Bezari, 2024; Paminto et al., 2025; Widiyono, 2019). This phenomenon has significant implications for various aspects of human life, including language and identity (Jadidah et al., 2023). Amidst this tide of globalization, diaspora communities have become increasingly important in understanding how individuals maintain, modify, or even replace their identities (Georgiou, 2010). These communities, comprising individuals who have settled far from their ancestral homelands, often find themselves negotiating between inherited traditions and the demands of their new cultural environments. One important phenomenon that emerges in such contexts is quadrilingualism, the ability and practice of using four languages in daily life. In this study, quadrilingualism refers to the concurrent use of Bugis (a regional language), Malay (the national language of Malaysia), Indonesian (the national language of Indonesia), and English (an international language), which are commonly spoken within the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora in Tawau, Malaysia.

The term quadrilingualism has rarely been the focus of sociolinguistic studies, especially in Southeast Asia, where bilingual and trilingual practices have traditionally dominated scholarly attention, despite its increasing relevance in multilingual societies. Yet, communities such as the Bugis-Indonesians in Tawau demonstrate rich and complex linguistic practices involving four distinct languages, each serving different communicative and symbolic functions in their daily lives thereby challenging conventional multilingual frameworks. This community does not merely alternate among two or three languages, but strategically navigate four linguistically and functionally distinct languages – Bugis, Malay, Indonesian and English. Each language carries specific symbolic, cultural, and pragmatic value, making this case distinct from more commonly studied multilingual contexts. By examining quadrilingual language practices within the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora, this study provides new empirical evidence on how four-language repertoires shape language maintenance, domain-specific language use, and identity negotiation in a transnational setting. Rather than proposing a new theoretical framework, the study extends existing research on multilingualism by demonstrating how a quadrilingual repertoire operates within an underexplored diaspora community.

The Indonesian diaspora in Malaysia is one of the largest in the world, with an estimated population reaching millions (Surwandono & Nugroho, 2022). Tawau, a town located in the Malaysian state of Sabah, is home to many Indonesian migrants, many of whom are of Bugis descent. Most of them are migrant workers, students, or entrepreneurs who have settled in Malaysia for an extended period. These migrants and their descendants form tightly-knit

communities where ethnic, national, and global languages co-exist and intersect. Youth and families in these communities navigate a multilingual reality: Bugis is spoken in family and community life; Malay dominates in public and institutional settings; English is used in schools; and Indonesian is preserved for cultural, religious, and formal functions. This dynamic setting presents an opportunity to explore how language choice reflects cultural adaptation, identity preservation, and negotiation in a diaspora context. In this context, Indonesian in Malaysia often experience identity dilemmas, as they must navigate between their native culture and the culture they encounter in Malaysia (Hasanah et al., 2019; Pamoso et al., 2025; Saefudin, 2024).

In Malaysia's multicultural and multilingual society, Indonesian navigate complex linguistic and cultural landscapes (Brown, 2018; Lie, 2017). A prominent phenomenon among them is quadrilingualism, where they acquire proficiency in Indonesian, Malay, English, and a regional language from their ethnic background. This multilingual practice reflects the everyday life of Indonesian in Malaysia, who use several languages regularly (Hasanah et al., 2019). This multilingualism reflects both an adaptive response to their environment and a means of expressing hybrid identities in the diaspora context.

Language plays a central role in shaping their identity and daily interactions. Indonesian must constantly negotiate language choices based on social settings, educational demands, and occupational roles (Dhanawaty et al., 2020; Djenar, 2015). These choices are not merely practical but also symbolic, reflecting their efforts to maintain cultural roots while integrating into Malaysian society (Bonvillain, 2011; Fernando et al., 2020; Shelestyuk, 2023).

Research on quadrilingualism and the identity of Indonesian in Malaysia has significant relevance in the context of understanding the dynamics of diaspora and cultural identity in the era of globalization. Through this research, we can gain deeper insights into how Indonesian in Malaysia maintain and express their cultural identity through language. Additionally, this research can also provide a better understanding of how diaspora influences the formation of identity and social interactions of individuals.

The problem addressed in this study, therefore, centers on how members of the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora in Tawau maintain the use of four languages and how these language choices shape their individual and collective identities. Although language shift and assimilation have been widely examined in diaspora communities, comparatively less attention has been given to how a stable quadrilingual repertoire is maintained and negotiated across different social domains. This study contributes new empirical evidence by examining how language maintenance, language choice, and identity intersect within the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora in Tawau.

While multilingualism has been widely examined across diverse sociolinguistic contexts, comparatively less attention has been paid to communities that routinely use four distinct languages in everyday life. A quadrilingual repertoire offers insights beyond multilingualism in general because each language may fulfill different cultural, social, educational, institutional, and symbolic functions across interactional domains. Examining how speakers strategically navigate four languages rather than two or three provides a deeper understanding of language maintenance, identity negotiation, and domain-specific language choice in transnational diaspora settings such as the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora in Tawau.

The research questions of this study are twofold:

1. How do Bugis-Indonesians in Tawau maintain and choose among four languages (Bugis, Malay, Indonesian, and English)?
2. How do these language choices inform their sense of identity?

To answer these research questions, this study employs a qualitative design using interviews, questionnaires, and observations with members of the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora in Tawau. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of quadrilingual language practices and their relationship to language maintenance, language choice, and identity negotiation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

MULTILINGUALISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: A COMPLEX LANDSCAPE

Multilingualism in Southeast Asia is a dynamic phenomenon shaped by the region's rich cultural diversity and complex historical developments (Feng Teng & Lixun, 2020; Tupas, 2015). With hundreds of languages spoken, this diversity reflects long-standing socio-political and economic influences (Kubota & Lin, 2009; Kumari & Bhaduli, 2025). Countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines exhibit intense linguistic plurality, where indigenous, national, and colonial languages coexist (Sun & Rong, 2018; Tang, 2020). Indonesia alone has over 700 languages, underscoring its vast cultural heterogeneity (Kumar, 2011; Lee et al., 2023).

This diversity stems from historical interactions; trade, migration, and colonization, that have shaped language development (Sneddon, 2003). Despite the dominance of national languages in formal domains, local languages remain essential in everyday life, particularly in rural settings. Colonial legacies and the spread of major religions like Islam and Buddhism also contributed to the region's linguistic layers (Derhemi, 2002; Feener & Blackburn, 2019; Gill, 2014; Lee et al., 2023; Mufwene, 2002).

Modern factors; urbanization, globalization, and mobility, further influence language contact and hybridization in urban centers (Appel & P, 1987; Bagga-Gupta, 2023; Garrett, 2007; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). Educational policies attempt to balance national unity with linguistic diversity, though implementation varies (Abello-Contesse, 2013; Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2017; Lin & Man, 2009; Sah & Fang, 2023).

Nevertheless, challenges such as language shift, endangerment, and inequality persist, especially under globalization and the dominance of English (Guan, 2017; Singh et al., 2012; Tupas & Sercombe, 2014). Understanding this linguistic complexity is key to fostering inclusive policies and preserving Southeast Asia's linguistic heritage (Rappa & Wee, 2006).

The multilingual practices of the Bugis diaspora in Tawau, Malaysia, reflect broader regional patterns shaped by historical migration, colonial influence, and cross-border kinship. Often using Bugis, Malay, Indonesian, and English, their language use illustrates Southeast Asia's complex linguistic landscape. Tawau's location near the Indonesia-Malaysia border has long made it a hub for migration and cultural exchange, supporting the intergenerational transmission of Bugis identity. Influenced by national language policies and cross-cultural interactions, the Bugis community offers a valuable case for understanding the dynamics of language, identity, and history in a transnational, multilingual context.

The Bugis-Indonesian diaspora in Tawau represents a distinctive example of multilingual practice in Southeast Asia, where four languages; Bugis, Malay, Indonesian, and English, are used across different social domains. Each language fulfills complementary cultural, social, educational, and institutional functions, reflecting the complex linguistic ecology of a transnational borderland community. Examining this quadrilingual repertoire provides a useful context for understanding how language maintenance, language choice, and identity are negotiated within multilingual settings shaped by migration, cross-border interaction, and national language policies.

IDENTITY FORMATION AND LANGUAGE

Identity formation intertwines deeply with language use and linguistic practices, especially within diverse sociocultural contexts (Norton, 2000). Language functions as a core identifier, mirroring facets of ethnicity, nationality, social class, and cultural affiliation. In multilingual environments, individuals navigate their identities through language choices, maintenance, and proficiency levels (Heller, 2007a). For instance, among immigrant communities, language serves as a vehicle for both cultural preservation and adaptation to new sociolinguistic surroundings (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001). Language ideologies and attitudes shape identity perceptions, impacting self-perception and societal reception (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Moreover, the interplay of power and privilege intersects with language, influencing the construction of social identities and hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1991). Practices such as code-switching, borrowing, and language blending illustrate the fluidity of identity formation in multilingual contexts (Auer, 1998).

These dynamics become more pronounced in transnational spaces, where individuals are exposed to competing linguistic norms and cultural expectations. In the case of the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora in Tawau, multilingualism is not merely functional but symbolic, demonstrating the ability to shift between cultural identities depending on social context. Malay is commonly used in official and educational settings to align with national norms, while Indonesian affirms ethnic origin and strengthens solidarity within the diaspora. The Bugis language, though often used in more intimate or familial contexts, retains cultural and historical significance as a symbol of ancestral identity.

Understanding the intricate relationship between identity formation and language is essential for promoting inclusive language policies, preserving linguistic heritage, and nurturing intercultural understanding. By acknowledging the multifaceted influences of sociocultural, historical, and individual factors, society can create environments that validate diverse identities and linguistic repertoires (Gee, 2000). In this context, identity is not fixed but negotiated through daily language use across various domains, including home, school, the workplace, and social interactions. Individuals often face the challenge of choosing whether to integrate into Malaysian sociolinguistic norms, maintain Indonesian cultural affiliation, or express distinct Bugis identity. These choices reflect ongoing processes of adaptation, belonging, and distinction, in which language serves as both a personal and communal marker of identity.

LANGUAGE CHOICE: UNDERSTANDING ITS SIGNIFICANCE

Language choice refers to the decision-making process individuals or communities undertake when selecting a particular language or languages for communication in various contexts (Holmes & Wilson, 2017). It encompasses not only the selection of a specific language but also the way it is used, whether in formal or informal settings, written or spoken form. The significance of language choice extends beyond mere communication; it reflects cultural identity, societal norms, and power dynamics (Dhanawaty et al., 2020; Meyerhoff, 2006). There are several components that influence someone's language choice, namely: (1) participants, who is speaking and who they are speaking to, (2) setting, the context of social interaction, (3) topic, what is being discussed, and (4) function, why they are speaking (Fasya and Gilang Sari; Fishman). These components align closely with the participant-setting-topic-function model, which offers a pragmatic framework to understand how language choice operates in real-life interactions.

Language choice can reflect and perpetuate power dynamics within society. Dominant languages often hold economic, political, and social power, leading individuals, and institutions to

prioritize them over minority languages (Romaine, 2007). This dynamic can result in the marginalization or even erosion of linguistic diversity. Conversely, language choice can also serve as a form of resistance or empowerment for marginalized communities, enabling them to assert their rights to use and maintain their languages despite dominant cultural pressures.

In an increasingly interconnected world, language choice is influenced by globalization (Dewey, 2007). English, as a global lingua franca, frequently serves as the default choice in international communication, and is widely adopted in domains such as business, academia, and media. This phenomenon raises concerns about linguistic hegemony and challenges the preservation of linguistic diversity in the face of globalizing forces.

To analyze the linguistic behavior of Bugis-Indonesian in Tawau, this study adopts an integrated conceptual framework combining Fishman's theory of language domains, the participant-setting-topic-function model (Fasya & Gilang Sari, 2021), and identity-based perspectives (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Heller, 2007b). Fishman's domain theory provides a structured lens for examining how language choice varies across social settings, such as home, school, and public spaces, where different languages may be used to fulfill distinct communicative roles and reflect social norms. These frameworks guide the analysis by linking language choice to specific social settings (Fishman), clarifying how participants, topics, and functions shape linguistic behavior (participant-setting-topic-function), and revealing how such choices construct and express Bugis-Indonesian identity (identity-based perspectives).

The participant-setting-topic-function model allows for a detailed analysis of interactional factors influencing language use, considering who is speaking, the context, topic, and purpose. This helps capture the situational and pragmatic aspects of language choice.

Identity-based frameworks add that language is not only for communication but also a way to construct and express identity. For the Bugis in Tawau, language use reflects a balance between preserving ethnic identity, adapting to Malaysian culture, and navigating global influences like English.

These frameworks provide an analytical perspective on multilingualism, showing how the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora in Tawau strategically uses its linguistic repertoire across different social contexts, relationships, and identity-related practices. This approach connects theory with empirical evidence and provides empirical insight into localized language dynamics in Southeast Asian diaspora communities.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on Fishman's Domain Theory, which explains language choice based on interactional contexts; setting, participants, and topic (Fishman, 1968). Domains like family, education, religion, and work represent socially defined spheres where certain language uses are expected. These domains shape how multilinguals, such as the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora in Tawau, navigate their language choices. For example, Bugis may be used in family settings, while Malay or English is more common at school or work.

The study also incorporates language identity theory, emphasizing how language reflects cultural affiliation and group identity. Language use is not only functional but also symbolic, expressing belonging and pride. Together, these frameworks provide an analytical framework for examining quadrilingual practices by linking domain-based language use with identity

construction. They guide data collection and thematic analysis by tracing how language aligns with specific domains and how it shapes cultural identity.

These theories inform the study's objectives by clarifying how quadrilingual practices both maintain the Bugis language and reflect identity choices across domains. In the coding process, domain theory guided theme development around language use in family, education, work, and religion, while identity theory shaped themes on cultural affiliation, belonging, and distinction. Together, they operationalize the analysis by linking language patterns directly to the study's aims: understanding how language maintenance and choice construct Bugis-Indonesian identity in Tawau.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study explores how quadrilingualism is practiced and maintained in the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora in Tawau, Malaysia. Research took place in schools, homes, and community centers in Tawau, chosen for its significant Bugis-Indonesian population and multilingual environment. Eighteen participants were purposively sampled from four groups: children (10–17 years, $n = 5$), adults (18–40 years, $n = 6$), elders (40+ years, $n = 4$), and teachers ($n = 3$), all of whom were proficient in Bugis, Malay, Indonesian, and English. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure variation across generations and social roles relevant to language use and identity negotiation. The sample size was considered sufficient because thematic saturation was achieved, with no new themes emerging during the final stage of the interviews. The recurrence of similar responses across participant groups indicated that the data adequately represented the linguistic practices investigated in this study. Ethical approval and informed consent were obtained prior to data collection.

Data collection combined semi-structured interviews (in Malay or Indonesian), structured questionnaires on language habits, and non-participant observations in various settings. Interviews lasted 30–60 minutes, covering language preference by domain, language attitudes, and identity. The questionnaire was developed by the researchers based on the study objectives and relevant sociolinguistic literature on language use, language maintenance, and language choice. It consisted of Likert-scale and open-ended items covering language use across different social domains, language attitudes, and identity-related practices. Prior to data collection, the questionnaire was reviewed by an expert in sociolinguistics to ensure its content validity, clarity, and relevance before being administered to the participants. The questionnaire complemented the interview data by providing a structured overview of participants' language practices across different interactional domains. Observations focused on natural language use, code-switching, and intergenerational communication.

Interview data were analyzed using thematic coding focused on language use contexts. Questions such as “In what situations is Bugis used?” or “When is English typically spoken?” generated codes that reflect social settings and language functions in the daily life of the Bugis community in Tawau. For example, Bugis is predominantly used in informal and family communication, such as speaking with spouses or playing with children, coded as “Bugis – informal/familial domain.” One participant stated, “At home and during play, we always speak Bugis to preserve our traditions.” Malay is more commonly used in public spaces, schools, and social interactions with neighbors, coded as “Malay – social/educational domain.” For instance, “At school and when interacting with neighbors, we usually speak Malay.” Indonesian is limited

to formal events, community meetings, or interactions with Indonesian officials, coded as “Indonesian – formal/ceremonial domain,” as explained by a participant, “We use Indonesian during official meetings or when guests come from Indonesia.” English generally appears in educational contexts, especially at school, often mixed with Malay or Bugis, coded as “English – educational/code-switching domain,” with a teacher noting, “We teach English in class, but the children often mix it with Malay when speaking.” This approach links language functions to social contexts and illustrates a structured quadrilingual pattern within the community.

Data Collection and Analysis Flow

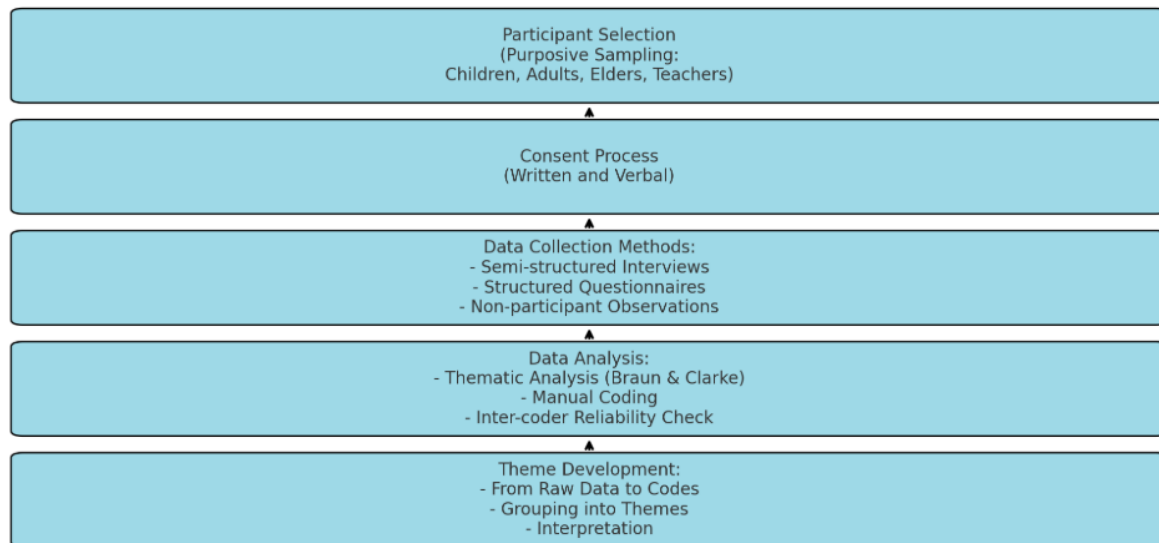


FIGURE 1. Data Collection and Analysis Flow

In analyzing language usage, Fishman's concept of language domain analysis was employed. This framework conceptualizes language domains as interactional settings characterized by factors such as participants, location, and topic. According to Fishman (1968), domains represent recurring social situations, including family, neighborhood, religion, education, and occupation, in which language choice is shaped by shared roles and communicative purposes. Guided by this framework, the interview and observational data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method. Two coders independently coded the data to enhance the reliability of the analysis, and any discrepancies in coding were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Initial codes were grouped into broader themes representing patterns of language use, language maintenance, and identity negotiation across different social domains.

This methodological framework provides a systematic understanding of language use across social domains and identity negotiation within the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora, especially how language is shaped by generational roles, educational influence, and cultural attachment in a multilingual environment.

RESULTS

LANGUAGE USAGE PATTERNS AMONG THE BUGIS COMMUNITY IN TAWAU

This section presents the empirical findings on language use across everyday social domains within the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora in Tawau. Questionnaire data from the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora in Tawau indicate that language use varies systematically across different social domains, reflecting the functional distribution of Bugis, Malay, Indonesian, and English in everyday interactions. Table 1 presents participants' reported language use across key domains, including family communication, neighborhood interactions, school settings, and children's play.

TABLE 1. Daily language usage

No.	Language Usage Activity	Language Used			
		L1	L2	L3	L4
1	language used when speaking with a spouse	10%	50%		40%
2	language used when speaking with family	5%	15%		80%
3	language used when parents speak to their children		40%		60%
4	language used when children speak to their parents	10%	70%		20%
5	language used when speaking with neighbors	5%	15%		80%
6	language used by children at school		60%	30%	10%
7	language used by teachers when teaching	10%	50%	20%	20%
8	language used when children play		80%		20%

Note. L1 = Indonesian, L2 = Malay, L3 = English, and L4 = Bugis.

Based on Table 1, language use varies systematically across different social domains, with each language serving distinct communicative functions within the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora in Tawau.

Firstly, Bugis (L4) emerged as the dominant language in family and community interactions. It accounted for 80% of language use when speaking with other family members and neighbors and 40% when communicating with spouses. Although its use among children during play was lower (20%), these findings indicate that Bugis remains the principal heritage language for maintaining kinship ties and community cohesion.

Secondly, Malay (L2) predominated in educational and public-facing interactions while also playing an important role within the family. It was used by 60% of children at school, 50% of teachers during instruction, and 80% of children during play. Within family interactions, Malay was particularly prominent when children spoke to their parents (70%) and was also used between spouses (50%), suggesting that it functions as an important language for intergenerational communication and broader social integration rather than replacing Bugis as the dominant family language.

English language (L3) is mainly used in educational contexts but has a presence in other areas as well. Teachers use English 20% of the time when teaching, and children use it 30% of the time at school. However, it is not as dominant in other contexts compared to Malay and Bugis languages. While, Indonesian language (L1) is used in educational context and when children speak to their parents although only 10%.

From this analysis, it can be concluded that Bugis language (L4) and Malay language (L2) emerge as dominant languages across various realms of daily life, encompassing both informal and familial communication. While English (L3) is crucial in educational contexts, its dominance is limited to those areas. Indonesian language (L1) seems to have a more restricted usage compared to the other languages mentioned.

The data presented in Table 2 offer a detailed overview of language use among the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora in Tawau, highlighting the four primary languages spoken, Bahasa Indonesia, Malay, English, and Bugis, along with their typical contexts of use. The example sentences were derived from interview responses, in which participants described their daily communication practices across various social settings. These authentic utterances reflect the natural and context-specific use of each language in domains such as home, school, public spaces, and formal events.

TABLE 2. Language Use Among the Bugis Community in Tawau

Language	Context of Use	Examples Sentence
Bahasa Indonesia (L1)	Formal settings, cultural events, interactions with Indonesian officials	"Selamat datang di Tawau" "Kami senang ada tamu dari Indonesia yang datang"
Malay (L2)	Home, Public places, school, official matters	"Awak dah siap keje sekolah ke?" "Cikgu, saya nak pergi bilik air" "Syahmi, buat la homework kat bilik" "Weh, jom main kejar-kejar"
English (L3)	Educational contexts, code-switching with Malay/Bugis	"Let's go to the canteen together" "I already finished your homework" "Library tutup la hari ni" "buat la homework kat home"
Bugis (L4)	Home, community interactions, school	"Laoni manre" "Tabe, tudakki" "Aga dipugau' kotu? Laoni' mai maddepungeng maneng" "Engkani ga Gurutta' takkappo"

The data presented in Table 2 reinforces the earlier findings regarding language use patterns among the Bugis diaspora in Tawau. The table provides a concrete overview of the four languages used, Indonesian, Malay, English, and Bugis, across various social contexts, accompanied by authentic example sentences used in daily communication. As shown in the data, Bugis and Malay are the most used languages in everyday interactions. Bugis is predominantly spoken at home and within the community, reflecting its role as a language of identity and cultural heritage. Expressions such as "*Laoni manre*" and "*Tabe, tudakki*" convey respect and intimacy in both familial and social settings.

In contrast, Malay is widely spoken in schools, public spaces, and official matters in Malaysia, as illustrated by examples like "*Cikgu, saya nak pergi bilik air*" and "*Weh, jom main kejar-kejar.*" Although Indonesian is the ethnic mother tongue, its use is limited to formal settings such as community meetings or interactions with Indonesian officials, as indicated by expressions like "*Selamat datang di Tawau.*" This reflects a shift from everyday usage to symbolic or ceremonial functions. English is primarily used in educational settings and often appears in code-switched forms alongside Malay or Bugis, such as "*Library tutup la hari ni.*"

Overall, the data in Table 2 supports the conclusion that language use among the Bugis in Tawau is highly contextual and strategic, showcasing their ability to balance cultural identity with the social and educational demands of a multilingual environment.

LANGUAGE USE AND COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES FROM INTERVIEWS

The interviews conducted with the Bugis diaspora in Tawau reveal significant insights into their language use patterns. These findings highlight the dominant use of Bugis and Malay in daily interactions, while Bahasa Indonesia and English are used in more specific contexts.

The Bugis and Malay languages are predominantly used in daily conversations within the Bugis community in Tawau. Community members, including parents, students, and local leaders, consistently highlighted Bugis as the primary language spoken at home and within the local community. One participant noted, "At home, we always speak Bugis. It is our way of keeping our heritage alive. Even the younger children speak Bugis, especially with their grandparents." Malay, the official language of Malaysia, is extensively used in broader social contexts. For instance, a high school student explained, "In school and public places, we mostly use Malay. It's essential for communicating with others who are not Bugis and for official matters."

Despite being the national language of Indonesia, Indonesian is rarely used in everyday interactions. Its use is mainly confined to formal settings such as community meetings, cultural events, or interactions with Indonesian officials. A community member shared, "Indonesian is essential when dealing with Indonesian officials or during community meetings where formal language is required. However, in our daily lives, it doesn't feature prominently." Parents also ensure their children learn Indonesian, though it is not the primary language spoken at home. "We teach our children Indonesian because it is our national language," a father of two noted. "They need to know it for cultural reasons and when they visit relatives in Indonesia."

This pattern suggests that the use of Indonesian language within the Bugis diaspora in Tawau is primarily symbolic rather than communicative. Its presence in formal and ceremonial contexts reflects an effort to preserve ties with their Indonesian national identity. However, its limited practical use in daily life indicates that it does not serve as a core language for identity construction or social interaction within the host country. Instead, it occupies a role that is largely performative, used when necessary to fulfill cultural obligations or demonstrate respect in formal situations. This strategic use underscores the community's pragmatic multilingualism and the prioritization of locally relevant languages such as Bugis and Malay in everyday communication.

English is seldom used in daily conversations, primarily restricted to educational contexts. A high school teacher commented, "English is part of the curriculum, and we encourage students to learn it. However, outside of the classroom, it's rarely used." When English is used, it often appears mixed with Malay or Bugis, a phenomenon known as code-switching. "We mix English with Malay or Bugis when speaking. It is easier and more natural for us," explained another teacher.

The dominance of Bugis and Malay languages underscores their cultural importance. Language serves not only as a tool for communication but also as a vital component of cultural identity. A community elder emphasized, "Speaking Bugis keeps our culture and traditions alive. It's how we pass down our stories and heritage to the next generation." The use of Bugis and Malay reinforces the community's resilience and unity.

Balancing the use of multiple languages presents several challenges. While maintaining Bugis and Malay, the community must also navigate the formal requirements of Indonesian and the educational emphasis on English. A parent of three school-aged children expressed concern, "It's challenging to ensure our kids are fluent in all these languages. They need Bugis for home, Malay for society, Indonesian for formal occasions, and English for school." Despite these challenges, the community has developed strategies to manage multilingualism effectively. "We use different languages in different contexts to balance them," a local community observed. "This way, we don't lose our cultural identity while adapting to modern demands."

The interviews underscore the complex linguistic landscape of the Bugis diaspora in Tawau. Bugis and Malay dominate daily conversations, Indonesian is reserved for formal occasions, and English is mainly used in educational contexts with instances of code-switching.

These findings highlight the importance of language in maintaining cultural identity and the need for strategies to support multilingualism. Ensuring Indonesian remains a living language and embracing the practicalities of English are crucial for the community's linguistic and cultural future.

DISCUSSION

LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE IN DIASPORA: PRESERVING BAHASA INDONESIA AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

The findings indicate that the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora in Tawau actively maintains both Bugis and Indonesian, although each language serves different social functions. While Bugis predominates in family and community interactions, Indonesian is primarily used in formal and ceremonial contexts, reflecting complementary roles in sustaining ethnic and national identities.

This pattern reflects the community's strategic approach to language maintenance within a multilingual diaspora. Indonesian functions as an important marker of national identity, consistent with Fishman's (1991) view that language maintenance is central to preserving ethnic and national identity among migrant communities. At the same time, Bugis remains fundamental to maintaining cultural continuity and reinforcing ethnic identity (Lukman et al., 2023). The Bugis diaspora in Tawau benefits from living in a cohesive ethnic enclave, where the language is actively transmitted across generations through daily interaction, storytelling, rituals, and family communication. Rather than representing passive language inheritance, this continuity reflects an ongoing process of identity construction through language use. As argued by Bucholtz and Hall (2005), identity is continuously produced through interaction and linguistic choices, making the use of Bugis in domestic and familial settings a powerful expression of ethnic belonging and attachment to ancestral values.

The findings also demonstrate that language maintenance in this community is domain-specific rather than uniform. Although Bugis dominates informal interactions, Indonesian is largely reserved for ceremonial occasions and formal communication, symbolizing a broader sense of national identity. This selective deployment of languages suggests that "Indonesianness" is recontextualized within the Malaysian sociolinguistic environment, supporting Fishman's notion that language use shifts across domains according to social functions and integration needs. Likewise, the strategic alternation among Bugis, Malay, Indonesian, and English illustrates the fluid and situated nature of identity proposed by Bucholtz and Hall (2005), in which identity emerges through linguistic interaction, alignment, and negotiation. For example, the use of English in educational settings while reverting to Bugis at home demonstrates how multilingual language choices simultaneously facilitate institutional participation and preserve ethnic affiliation.

These findings are consistent with previous studies highlighting the influence of the Malaysian linguistic environment on diaspora communities. Indonesian migrants negotiate language ideologies shaped by the dominant roles of Malay and English (Gill, 2014; Surwandono & Nugroho, 2022), creating challenges for maintaining Bahasa Indonesia in everyday communication. Nevertheless, ethnic languages continue to function as both symbolic and practical resources that strengthen connections to cultural heritage (Suparlan, 2000). Similarly, studies on diaspora language preservation emphasize the importance of maintaining both national and heritage languages as essential components of cultural identity (Sunarti & Fadel, 2021). The present study extends this body of research by demonstrating how these languages are not only

preserved but also strategically distributed across social domains within a stable quadrilingual repertoire.

In Tawau, these language maintenance practices are reinforced through both everyday interaction and organized community activities, including cultural events and language instruction. At the same time, the growing influence of Malay and English on younger generations reflects broader societal pressures and institutional language policies (Hamzah et al., 2024). These overlapping linguistic practices illustrate how identity is simultaneously preserved and adapted in response to changing sociolinguistic conditions. Families and community organizations continue to engage in language-focused activities such as home language use, religious practices, and participation in ethnic associations, reaffirming identity boundaries while facilitating integration into the host society. This observation is consistent with Joseph's (2004) view that diasporic identity is discursively constructed through ongoing social interaction.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that language maintenance among the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora in Tawau involves not only preserving linguistic forms but also strategically negotiating multiple identities across different social domains. Theoretically, this study reinforces Fishman's framework of language maintenance and provides empirical support for Bucholtz and Hall's perspective on identity construction by illustrating how language choices reflect identity negotiation within a quadrilingual diaspora context. Practically, the findings suggest that community-based cultural activities, family language transmission, and heritage language programs can play an important role in sustaining both ethnic and national identities within multilingual diaspora communities.

THE ROLE OF FAMILY IN LANGUAGE TRANSMISSION

The findings indicate that the family plays a central role in transmitting Bugis and Indonesian to younger generations within the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora in Tawau. Although Malaysian Malay dominates children's language use in schools and public settings, Bugis continues to be actively used in the home, enabling its intergenerational transmission and reinforcing cultural identity.

This pattern highlights the family's function as the primary domain of heritage language maintenance in a multilingual environment. Parents consistently use Bugis in daily communication with their children, providing continuous exposure to the language while simultaneously transmitting cultural values and traditions. Through everyday interactions, storytelling, songs, and shared cultural practices, children acquire not only Bugis vocabulary and grammatical structures but also a sense of ethnic belonging. As a result, family language practices extend beyond communication, becoming an important mechanism for sustaining both linguistic competence and cultural identity across generations. This finding reinforces the view that family communication plays a fundamental role in maintaining language and cultural identity (Masruddin et al., 2024; Nawaf & Alzayed, 2015). Similarly, parents function as the primary agents of language acquisition and cultural transmission, making their active involvement essential for preserving heritage languages among younger generations (Hidayat et al., 2024; Phinney et al., 2001).

These findings are consistent with previous studies emphasizing the importance of supportive family environments in heritage language maintenance. Family encouragement and regular use of Bugis and Indonesian strengthen speakers' motivation to preserve both their language and cultural identity (Phinney et al., 2001; Sari et al., 2018; Tseng, 2020). Likewise, Hiratsuka and Pennycook (2020) argue that language maintenance in multilingual families is primarily sustained through everyday family interactions and the strategic management of

language practices within the household. The present findings extend this perspective by showing that, within a quadrilingual community, the home remains the most stable domain for maintaining the heritage language despite increasing exposure to Malay and English in educational and social contexts.

Beyond linguistic transmission, family communication also strengthens emotional attachment and reinforces cultural continuity. The continued use of Bugis within family interactions enables members of the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora to maintain close emotional ties with their cultural heritage despite living outside Indonesia. This observation supports previous studies demonstrating that family communication fosters emotional connectedness and cultural affiliation (Blechman & Delamater, 1990; Tannenbaum, 2005). Theoretically, these findings reinforce Fishman's perspective on intergenerational language transmission by demonstrating the enduring importance of the family domain in heritage language maintenance. Practically, they suggest that encouraging parents to consistently use heritage languages at home and supporting family-based cultural activities can strengthen long-term language maintenance among multilingual diaspora communities.

LANGUAGE CHOICES, FUNCTIONS, AND IDENTITY FORMATION

The findings demonstrate that language choice among the participants from the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora in Tawau is associated with identity-related meanings and serves different communicative functions across social domains. Rather than relying on a single language, the participants used Bugis, Malay, Indonesian, and English according to different interactional contexts, illustrating a quadrilingual repertoire within the participants included in this study.

This pattern suggests that language choice within the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora is both pragmatic and symbolic. Bugis remains the primary language for family and community interactions, reinforcing ethnic identity and cultural continuity, whereas Malay dominates everyday public communication because of its status as Malaysia's national language. This relationship is also reflected in participants' interview responses. One participant explained, "At home and during play, we always speak Bugis to preserve our traditions," directly linking the use of Bugis with the preservation of ethnic heritage and family traditions. Indonesian, although less frequently used in daily interactions, retains strong symbolic significance as a marker of national identity and connection to the homeland. As one participant noted, "We use Indonesian during official meetings or when guests come from Indonesia," indicating that Indonesian is associated with maintaining ties to Indonesia in specific social contexts rather than serving as the primary language of everyday communication. Parents deliberately teach Indonesian to their children despite its limited everyday use, demonstrating a conscious effort to preserve national identity alongside ethnic heritage. English, meanwhile, is largely associated with educational and institutional contexts and is frequently used alongside Malay through code-mixing. These interviews responses indicate that different languages carry different social and cultural meanings, suggesting that language choice is shaped not only by communicative needs but also by how participants relate particular languages to family traditions, national affiliation, and participation in Malaysian society. Rather than treating language choice as direct proof of identity, these accounts show that participants used different languages to express particular relationships and affiliations, such as preserving Bugis traditions within the family and maintaining a connection to Indonesia in formal interactions.

These findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating that multilingual speakers adapt their language choices according to social domains and communicative purposes (Jaafar & Mis, 2024). Likewise, the continued prominence of Malay in education reflects Malaysia's language policy and the influence of globalization on educational practices (Gill, 2005), although Malay remains the dominant language in schools despite efforts to expand the use of English. Similar patterns of identity negotiation have also been reported among Filipino migrants in Malaysia, who construct hybrid identities through English varieties and code-switching across workplace interactions (Dumanig et al., 2023). The present study suggests that, among the participants from the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora in Tawau, Indonesian functioned as a symbolic language of national affiliation even though its everyday communicative role was relatively limited. More broadly, the findings support recent sociolinguistic perspectives that view language practices as fluid and strategically adapted to changing social contexts (Wei & García, 2022). Participants in this study also demonstrated translanguaging practices by flexibly drawing upon their multilingual repertoire across family, educational, and public contexts, illustrating how multilingual resources support both cultural continuity and participation in Malaysian society. This dynamic use of language demonstrates that multilingual practices are not fixed but continuously negotiated through interaction (Blommaert, 2010; Rojas, 2025).

Overall, the findings suggest that participants associated different languages with different aspects of ethnic, national, and educational life, indicating that language choice carried identity-related meanings alongside practical communicative functions. Theoretically, this study contributes to sociolinguistic understandings of quadrilingualism by illustrating how four languages served complementary cultural, social, educational, and symbolic functions among the participants in this study. Rather than extending theories of translanguaging and multilingual identity, the findings provide empirical support for these perspectives by showing how participants themselves linked Bugis with family traditions and Indonesian with connections to the homeland. Practically, these findings suggest that educational institutions, community organizations, and families should continue supporting multilingual practices that promote both heritage language maintenance and successful social integration, thereby strengthening cultural continuity without limiting participation in the broader Malaysian society.

CONCLUSION

The findings demonstrate that quadrilingualism among the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora in Tawau is characterized by the complementary use of Bugis, Malay, Indonesian, and English across different social domains. Bugis remains central to family communication and ethnic identity, Malay dominates public and everyday interactions, Indonesian functions primarily as a marker of national identity in formal and cultural contexts, and English supports educational and professional participation. These language practices illustrate how members of the diaspora balance heritage language maintenance with social integration in a multilingual environment.

This study provides new empirical evidence on quadrilingual language practices within the Bugis diaspora in Malaysia by showing how four languages perform distinct cultural, social, educational, and symbolic functions. Rather than introducing quadrilingualism as a new concept, the findings provide empirical support for existing multilingualism research by illustrating how a quadrilingual repertoire functioned within the participants included in this study and contributed to language maintenance and identity-related practices.

To strengthen heritage language maintenance among the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora in Tawau, several context-specific measures are recommended. Indonesian schools and educational institutions serving Indonesian children in Malaysia should incorporate heritage language activities, such as Bugis storytelling, bilingual literacy programs, and cultural projects that reinforce both Bugis and Indonesian alongside formal education. Bugis diaspora organizations in Tawau and other Indonesian diaspora associations in Malaysia should expand intergenerational initiatives, including Bugis language classes, cultural festivals, and family-based language programs that encourage younger generations to actively use Bugis and Indonesian. Policymakers in Indonesia and Malaysia should strengthen collaboration with diaspora communities by supporting heritage language programs, providing educational resources, and facilitating community-based cultural initiatives that promote multilingual competence while preserving linguistic and cultural heritage.

This study is limited to the Bugis-Indonesian diaspora in Tawau, Sabah, and therefore may not fully represent the linguistic experiences of other Indonesian diaspora groups in Malaysia. Future research should examine a wider range of Indonesian ethnic communities across different geographical settings and explore longitudinal changes in language maintenance, quadrilingual practices, and identity negotiation over time. Despite these limitations, the present study contributes to a broader understanding of multilingualism by demonstrating how language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a dynamic resource for preserving heritage, negotiating identity, and fostering social participation within transnational diaspora communities.

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