

Language Choice among University Students: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Language choice among university students has become an increasingly important topic in sociolinguistic research due to the growing prevalence of multilingualism and the internationalization of higher education. However, previous studies have reported diverse findings regarding the factors influencing students' language choices across different educational contexts. This study aims to synthesize existing evidence on the determinants of language choice among university students through a systematic literature review (SLR). The review followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines and analyzed 25 studies published between 2015 and 2025, retrieved from Google Scholar, ERIC, DOAJ, and Crossref. The selected studies were examined using thematic synthesis to identify recurring patterns and research trends. The findings reveal that language choice is influenced by four interconnected dimensions: contextual factors, interpersonal factors, individual factors, and institutional factors. Contextual factors, including communicative settings, formality, and interactional purposes, emerged as the most frequently reported determinants, followed by interpersonal relationships, language proficiency and identity, and institutional policies such as English-Medium Instruction (EMI). The review also identifies several research gaps, including the predominance of qualitative studies, limited longitudinal research, and the concentration of studies in Asian higher education contexts. Based on these findings, this study proposes an Integrated Framework of Factors Influencing Language Choice among University Students, highlighting the dynamic interaction among institutional, contextual, interpersonal, and individual dimensions in shaping multilingual communication. The proposed integrated framework represents the primary contribution of this review by synthesizing evidence from previous studies into a unified conceptual model of language choice among university students, illustrating how contextual, interpersonal, individual, and institutional factors interact dynamically in shaping multilingual language practices in higher education.

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INTRODUCTION

Language choice has long been recognised as a central topic in sociolinguistics because it reflects the dynamic relationship between language and society. In multilingual communities, speakers continuously make linguistic decisions according to the social contexts in which communication takes place. Rather than using a single language across all situations, multilingual speakers select different linguistic codes depending on the interlocutor, setting, communicative purpose, and prevailing social norms. Consequently, language choice is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but also a social practice through which speakers negotiate identity, solidarity, power, and group membership (Fishman, 1972; Holmes, 2013; Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021). Understanding how individuals select languages therefore provides valuable insights into the interaction between language behaviour and social structure.

The increasing internationalisation of higher education has transformed universities into multilingual environments where students regularly communicate using multiple languages. Besides the national language, university students frequently employ English for academic purposes, while local or heritage languages continue to function as important

resources for interpersonal communication and cultural identity. The rapid expansion of student mobility, international academic collaboration, English-medium instruction (EMI), and digital learning platforms has further intensified multilingual practices in higher education. Consequently, university students constantly negotiate language choice across diverse communicative settings, including classrooms, group discussions, presentations, online learning, student organisations, and everyday social interactions.

Within sociolinguistics, language choice is commonly explained through Fishman's (1972) domain theory, which proposes that speakers select languages according to combinations of participants, settings, and communicative functions. Holmes (2013) further argues that multilingual speakers adjust their linguistic behaviour depending on the degree of formality, interpersonal relationships, and communicative purposes of particular situations. Likewise, Spolsky (2009) suggests that language choice is influenced by multiple interacting factors, including language proficiency, identity, institutional norms, language policy, and habitual language practices. These perspectives collectively demonstrate that language choice is a complex sociolinguistic process shaped by both individual and contextual factors rather than a simple preference for one language over another.

Because universities bring together students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, higher education has become an important context for investigating multilingual language practices. In academic settings, students are generally expected to use formal linguistic varieties that conform to institutional expectations, whereas non-academic interactions often allow greater flexibility through the use of local languages, bilingual communication, or multilingual repertoires. In many countries, particularly those characterised by linguistic diversity, students regularly alternate between national languages, regional languages, and English depending on the communicative context. This multilingual reality has encouraged increasing scholarly attention to language choice among university students during the last decade.

Previous studies have investigated language choice from various perspectives. Existing research has examined language choice in classroom interaction, bilingual and multilingual education, English-medium instruction, online communication, intercultural interaction, and student identity construction. Other studies have explored the influence of factors such as interlocutors, communicative settings, language attitudes, institutional policies, and social identities on students' linguistic behaviour. Collectively, these studies indicate that language choice is affected by a combination of social, cultural, educational, and psychological variables rather than by linguistic competence alone.

Although the body of literature on language choice continues to expand, the existing evidence remains fragmented across different educational contexts, countries, and methodological approaches. Individual studies often focus on particular universities, specific language pairs, or isolated communicative situations, making it difficult to identify broader research trends and recurring patterns. Furthermore, previous investigations employ diverse theoretical frameworks, research designs, participant characteristics, and analytical procedures, resulting in findings that are not always directly comparable. Consequently, there remains limited understanding of how research on language choice among university students has evolved over time, which methodological approaches dominate the field, what factors consistently influence language choice, and where significant research gaps remain.

Systematic literature reviews provide an effective approach for synthesising accumulated evidence through transparent, rigorous, and replicable procedures. Unlike traditional narrative reviews, systematic reviews follow explicit protocols for identifying, selecting, evaluating, and synthesising relevant studies, thereby reducing selection bias and improving the reliability of research synthesis (Page et al., 2021). By systematically mapping

existing studies, researchers are able to identify dominant themes, methodological tendencies, geographical distributions, theoretical developments, and emerging research gaps that may not be evident from individual empirical investigations.

Despite the growing number of publications on language choice in higher education, a comprehensive systematic review specifically examining language choice among university students remains limited. Existing review studies generally focus on broader multilingual practices, bilingual education, code-switching, or translanguaging, while language choice itself has received comparatively less systematic attention. Consequently, there is a need to consolidate the available empirical evidence to provide a clearer understanding of the development of this research field.

Therefore, this study conducts a systematic literature review of research on language choice among university students published between 2015 and 2025. Specifically, the review aims to identify publication trends, examine the methodological characteristics of existing studies, synthesise the factors influencing students' language choice, and highlight research gaps that may guide future sociolinguistic investigations. By providing a comprehensive synthesis of current evidence, this review contributes to the advancement of sociolinguistic research on multilingualism in higher education and offers recommendations for future studies on language behaviour in increasingly multilingual university contexts.

METHOD

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The review aimed to identify research trends, methodological approaches, and factors influencing language choice among university students.

The literature search was conducted using Google Scholar, ERIC, DOAJ, and Crossref, as these databases provide broad coverage of peer-reviewed studies in linguistics, applied linguistics, education, and higher education. The search was limited to journal articles published in English between 2015 and 2025. The search strategy employed combinations of the keywords "language choice", "language preference", "language selection", "university students", "undergraduate students", "higher education", and "multilingualism". Boolean operators (AND and OR) were used to combine the search terms, with the primary search string formulated as: ("language choice" OR "language preference" OR "language selection") AND ("university students" OR undergraduate OR "higher education"). Searches were performed in the title, abstract, and keyword fields whenever the database allowed.

Studies were included if they were written in English, focused on language choice among university students, and employed qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods research designs. Conference papers, book chapters, dissertations, review articles, editorials, and studies that did not specifically investigate language choice were excluded. Duplicate records were removed before the screening process.

The selection process followed the four stages of the PRISMA framework: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Titles and abstracts were first screened to determine their relevance, followed by a full-text assessment of the remaining studies. Only articles meeting all inclusion criteria were included in the final review.

Relevant information was extracted from each study, including the author(s), publication year, country, research design, participants, data collection methods, and main findings. The selected studies were then analysed using descriptive analysis to identify publication trends and thematic synthesis to classify the major factors influencing language choice among university students.

RESULTS

A total of 25 studies met the predefined inclusion criteria and were included in this systematic literature review. The reviewed studies were published between 2015 and 2025, representing research conducted across 11 countries in Asia, Europe, and Africa. The studies examined language choice among university students in various multilingual contexts, including classroom interaction, English-Medium Instruction (EMI), multilingual communication, language attitudes, translanguaging, and heritage language maintenance. The findings are presented in four sections: publication trends, characteristics of the reviewed studies, factors influencing language choice, and research gaps.

Publication Trends

The reviewed studies demonstrate a clear increase in scholarly interest in language choice among university students during the last decade. As presented in Figure 1, only two studies were published during the period 2015–2016, followed by a relatively limited number of publications until 2020. Research activity increased substantially after 2023, with the largest number of publications appearing in 2024 and 2025, which together accounted for more than 80% of the reviewed literature.

This publication pattern indicates growing academic attention toward multilingual practices in higher education, particularly in relation to English-Medium Instruction, internationalization, multilingual identities, and digitally mediated communication.

Table 2. Publication Trends of Reviewed Studies

Year	Number of Studies	Percentage (%)
2015	1	4
2016	1	4
2017	0	0
2018	0	0
2019	0	0
2020	1	4
2021	0	0
2022	0	0
2023	1	4
2024	8	32
2025	13	52
Total	25	100

As shown in Table 2, studies on language choice among university students remained limited during the early years of the review period. Between 2015 and 2020, only three studies were identified. Research productivity increased substantially after 2023, with 21 studies (84%) published between 2023 and 2025. This pattern indicates a growing scholarly interest in multilingual communication and language practices within higher education.

Figure 1. Publication Trend of Reviewed Studies (2015–2025)

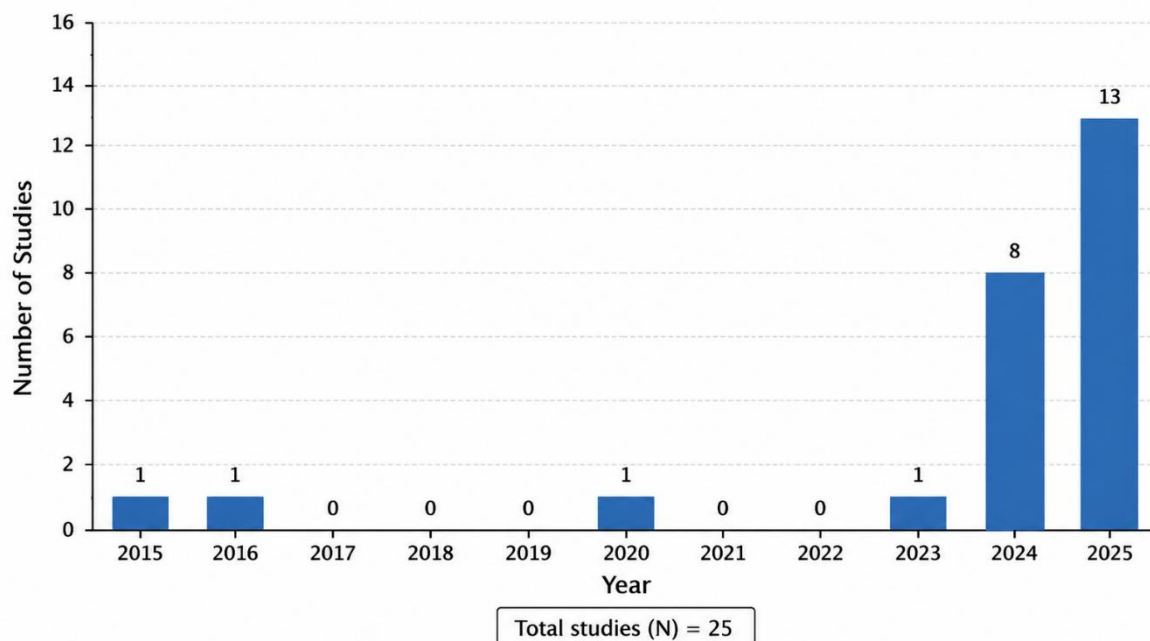


Figure 1 illustrates the publication trend of studies on language choice among university students between 2015 and 2025. The results reveal a gradual increase in research interest over the review period. Only three studies were published during the early years (2015–2020), with one study each appearing in 2015, 2016, and 2020. No eligible studies were identified for 2017–2019 or 2021–2022 based on the inclusion criteria.

A notable increase in publication output began in 2023, followed by a substantial rise in 2024 and 2025. Specifically, eight studies (32%) were published in 2024, while thirteen studies (52%) appeared in 2025. Together, these two years account for 84% of all reviewed studies, indicating that research on language choice among university students has gained significant momentum in recent years.

This publication pattern reflects the growing scholarly attention to multilingual communication in higher education, particularly in relation to English-Medium Instruction (EMI), translanguaging practices, language attitudes, multilingual identity, and the internationalization of universities. The increasing number of publications also suggests that language choice has become an important area of inquiry as higher education institutions continue to accommodate linguistically diverse student populations.

Characteristics of the Reviewed Studies

The characteristics of the reviewed studies are summarized in Table 1. Overall, the literature shows a strong concentration of research in multilingual Asian countries, particularly Indonesia, which contributed 11 of the 25 studies (44%). Other studies were conducted in China, Malaysia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Ghana, Taiwan, Norway, Finland, Sweden, Luxembourg, and a regional study covering Southeast Asia.

Qualitative research dominated the literature, accounting for 16 studies (64%), followed by mixed-methods research (20%), quantitative surveys (12%), and one scoping review (4%). Interviews, classroom observations, discourse analysis, and case studies were the most frequently employed methods of data collection. Most participants were undergraduate students enrolled in multilingual universities, although several studies also investigated international students and participants in English-Medium Instruction programmes.

Table 3. Summary of Reviewed Studies

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Countries		
Indonesia	11	44
China	4	16
Other countries	10	40
Research Design		
Qualitative	16	64
Mixed Methods	5	20
Quantitative	3	12
Scoping Review	1	4

Table 3 shows that Indonesia contributed the largest number of studies (44%), followed by China (16%), while the remaining studies were distributed across other multilingual contexts. The reviewed literature also demonstrates a strong preference for qualitative research designs, accounting for nearly two-thirds of the studies. Mixed-methods and quantitative approaches were comparatively less common.

Factors Influencing Language Choice

The thematic synthesis identified four interrelated categories influencing language choice among university students: contextual, interpersonal, individual, and institutional factors.

Among these, contextual factors were the most frequently reported. Students adjusted their language according to communicative settings, interactional purposes, classroom formality, and online communication. English or the national language was generally preferred in formal academic situations, whereas bilingual communication and local languages were more common during informal interactions.

The second dominant category comprised interpersonal factors, including interlocutors, peer relationships, and social solidarity. Students frequently modified their language depending on whom they were communicating with, particularly when interacting with lecturers, classmates, or international students.

Individual factors included language proficiency, confidence, language attitudes, and identity. Students generally preferred languages in which they felt linguistically competent, while multilingual identities encouraged flexible language practices.

Finally, institutional factors referred to university language policies, English-Medium Instruction, curriculum requirements, and internationalization initiatives. Although institutional policies often encouraged English use, many students continued to rely on their first language to facilitate comprehension and collaborative learning.

Table 4. Factors Influencing Language Choice among University Students

Category	Major Factors	Number of Studies
Contextual	Communicative setting, formality, online communication, communicative purpose	23
Interpersonal	Interlocutors, peer influence, solidarity, social relationships	20

Individual	Language proficiency, identity, confidence, language attitudes	18
Institutional	Language policy, EMI, curriculum, internationalization	15

The findings indicate that language choice is shaped by multiple interacting factors rather than a single determinant. Contextual and interpersonal variables appeared consistently across the reviewed studies, whereas individual and institutional influences varied depending on sociolinguistic settings.

The thematic synthesis identified four major categories influencing language choice among university students. Contextual factors appeared in 23 of the 25 reviewed studies, making them the most frequently reported determinant. Interpersonal factors were identified in 20 studies, followed by individual factors (18 studies) and institutional factors (15 studies). These findings indicate that language choice is shaped by multiple interacting dimensions rather than a single variable.

Research Gaps

The review also identified several recurring gaps in the existing literature.

First, qualitative research overwhelmingly dominated previous studies, indicating the need for more quantitative and mixed-methods investigations to provide broader empirical evidence.

Second, most studies adopted cross-sectional designs, while longitudinal research examining changes in language choice over time remains scarce.

Third, research has primarily focused on classroom interaction and English-Medium Instruction. Comparatively fewer studies have investigated language choice in digital communication, social media, extracurricular activities, and hybrid learning environments.

Finally, the reviewed studies generally employed individual sociolinguistic frameworks, such as domain theory, language attitudes, or multilingual practices, with relatively limited attempts to integrate these perspectives into a comprehensive explanatory model.

Table 5. Research Gaps Identified in Previous Studies

Research Gap	Evidence	Future Direction
Methodological imbalance	Qualitative studies dominate	Increase quantitative and mixed-methods research
Limited longitudinal evidence	Most studies are cross-sectional	Conduct longitudinal investigations
Restricted research contexts	Focus mainly on classrooms	Explore digital and informal communication
Geographical concentration	Research concentrated in Asia	Expand comparative studies across regions
Limited theoretical integration	Single-theory approaches dominate	Develop integrated sociolinguistic models

As presented in Table 5, several recurring gaps remain in the existing literature. Most studies employed qualitative approaches and cross-sectional designs, while relatively few adopted quantitative, mixed-methods, or longitudinal approaches. In addition, previous research predominantly examined classroom interaction, leaving digital communication, extracurricular activities, and informal multilingual practices comparatively underexplored.

DISCUSSION

The present systematic literature review synthesized evidence from 25 studies published between 2015 and 2025 to examine the factors influencing language choice among university students. Overall, the findings indicate that language choice in higher education is not determined by a single variable but emerges from the interaction of contextual, interpersonal, individual, and institutional factors. These findings reinforce the sociolinguistic perspective that language choice is a dynamic social practice shaped by communicative contexts, social relationships, language competence, and institutional environments rather than merely an individual's linguistic preference.

The reviewed studies consistently demonstrate that contextual factors are the most influential determinants of language choice. Students continuously adjust their linguistic behaviour according to communicative purposes, classroom settings, interactional formality, and digital communication environments. English tends to dominate formal academic activities such as lectures, presentations, and classroom discussions, whereas national and local languages remain prevalent during informal conversations, collaborative learning, and peer interaction. This finding supports Fishman's (1972) Domain Theory, which proposes that language selection varies according to social domains. However, unlike traditional domain boundaries, the reviewed studies suggest that university students frequently move across multiple linguistic domains within the same academic environment, resulting in flexible and dynamic language practices.

Based on the thematic synthesis, this review proposes an integrated framework that conceptualizes language choice among university students as the outcome of interactions among institutional, contextual, interpersonal, and individual factors. Unlike previous studies that examined these determinants separately, the proposed framework illustrates how they dynamically interact to shape students' linguistic decisions in multilingual higher education contexts.

Figure 2. Integrated Framework of Factors Influencing Language Choice among University Students

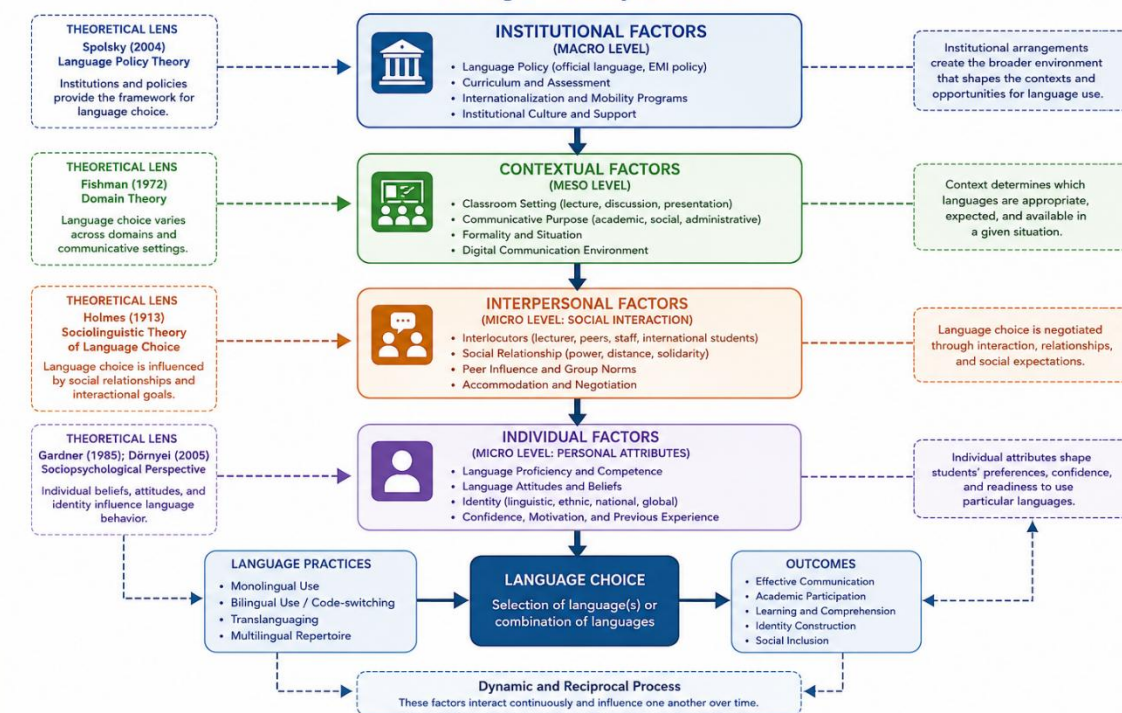


Figure 2 illustrates the integrated framework developed from the synthesis of the reviewed studies. The framework positions institutional factors as the macro-level environment shaping language policy, curriculum, and internationalization, which subsequently influence contextual conditions such as classroom settings and communicative purposes. These contextual conditions affect interpersonal interactions among lecturers, peers, and other interlocutors, while individual characteristics—including language proficiency, identity, attitudes, and confidence—mediate students' language choices. Rather than functioning independently, the four dimensions interact dynamically to influence multilingual language practices and communication outcomes in higher education.

The findings also confirm Holmes' (2013) argument that language choice is closely associated with interpersonal relationships and communicative purposes. Across the reviewed studies, students consistently adapted their language according to the interlocutor, social distance, and group membership. Communication with lecturers generally required more formal linguistic choices, while interactions among peers encouraged greater flexibility through bilingual communication, code-switching, or the use of local languages. These patterns indicate that language choice functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a resource for expressing identity, maintaining solidarity, and negotiating social relationships.

Another important finding concerns the increasing prominence of multilingual communication practices within higher education. Although many earlier studies interpreted language alternation primarily through the concept of code-switching, the reviewed literature demonstrates that contemporary university students employ more fluid multilingual strategies, particularly in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) settings. Rather than strictly separating languages, students strategically combine English, national languages, and local languages to facilitate comprehension, clarify meaning, and participate more actively in academic interaction. These findings align with recent translanguaging perspectives, which view multilingual speakers as drawing upon an integrated linguistic repertoire rather than switching between discrete linguistic systems. Consequently, language choice should be understood as a flexible communicative practice that enables students to respond effectively to diverse academic and social situations.

Beyond confirming previous sociolinguistic theories, this review offers a conceptual synthesis by integrating the various determinants identified across the reviewed studies into a single explanatory framework. Previous research has often examined language attitudes, language proficiency, classroom interaction, multilingual identity, or institutional language policy independently. In contrast, the present review demonstrates that these variables are interconnected and mutually influential. Individual factors, including language proficiency, confidence, identity, and language attitudes, shape students' readiness to use particular languages. Interpersonal factors, such as peer relationships and interlocutor characteristics, influence language accommodation during interaction. Contextual factors determine the appropriateness of particular linguistic choices, while institutional factors—including language policy, curriculum, English-Medium Instruction, and internationalization—establish the broader environment within which these choices occur. The interaction among these four dimensions forms a dynamic process in which language choice continuously evolves according to changing communicative circumstances. The proposed integrated framework (Figure 2) therefore represents the principal conceptual contribution of this review by explaining language choice as the outcome of multiple interconnected sociolinguistic processes rather than isolated variables.

The findings also have important implications for multilingual higher education. Universities should recognize multilingualism as an educational resource capable of supporting learning, participation, and inclusion rather than viewing the use of multiple languages as an

obstacle to academic communication. Language policies should therefore encourage flexible multilingual practices, particularly within English-Medium Instruction programmes, where strategic use of students' first languages can enhance comprehension and collaborative learning. At the same time, future research would benefit from employing more diverse methodological approaches, including quantitative, mixed-methods, and longitudinal designs, to complement the predominance of qualitative studies identified in this review. Broader geographical representation is also needed to strengthen comparative understanding of language choice across different sociolinguistic contexts. Such efforts will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of multilingual communication in contemporary higher education and provide stronger empirical foundations for language policy and pedagogical practice.

The integrated framework proposed in Figure 2 represents the principal conceptual contribution of this review. By synthesizing evidence from 25 empirical studies, the framework extends previous sociolinguistic perspectives by demonstrating that language choice among university students is shaped through the dynamic interaction of institutional, contextual, interpersonal, and individual factors rather than by isolated determinants.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review synthesized evidence from 25 studies published between 2015 and 2025 to examine the factors influencing language choice among university students in multilingual higher education contexts. The findings demonstrate that language choice is a dynamic sociolinguistic process shaped by the interaction of contextual, interpersonal, individual, and institutional factors. Rather than being determined by a single linguistic or social variable, students' language choices emerge from continuous negotiation between communicative purposes, social relationships, language competence, and institutional environments.

A major contribution of this review is the development of an Integrated Framework of Factors Influencing Language Choice among University Students, which synthesizes diverse findings from previous empirical studies into a unified conceptual model. Unlike earlier research that tended to examine language attitudes, language proficiency, classroom interaction, multilingual identity, or language policy independently, the proposed framework illustrates how these dimensions interact dynamically to shape language choice in higher education. This synthesis extends existing sociolinguistic perspectives by providing a more comprehensive explanation of multilingual language practices in university settings.

The findings also offer practical implications for higher education institutions. Universities should recognize multilingualism as a valuable educational resource and develop language policies that support flexible multilingual communication rather than promoting exclusive monolingual practices. Such an approach may foster greater student participation, improve academic communication, and create more inclusive learning environments, particularly within English-Medium Instruction (EMI) programmes and increasingly internationalized universities.

Despite these contributions, this review has several limitations. The synthesis was based on studies published between 2015 and 2025 and relied primarily on qualitative research conducted in Asian higher education contexts. Future studies should therefore incorporate broader geographical representation, employ longitudinal and mixed-methods designs, and investigate language choice in emerging digital learning environments. Further empirical research is also needed to validate and refine the integrated framework proposed in this review across diverse sociolinguistic and educational settings.

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