

Bilingual, Bicultural, and Charismatic? Reassessing Social Capability Among Students Who Grow Up Between Cultures

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ABSTRACT

This literature review examines whether bilingual and bicultural students, individuals who grow up speaking two languages and navigating multiple cultural contexts, such as immigrants and green-card holders, possess greater charisma, adaptability, and social capability than their monolingual peers. Drawing on research from cultural psychology, sociolinguistics, and organizational behavior, the review synthesizes findings on cultural intelligence (CQ), cultural frame-switching, code-switching, bicultural identity integration (BII), and the individualism-collectivism dimension. The evidence suggests that bilingual students often develop enhanced cognitive flexibility, empathy, and cross-cultural communication skills that contribute to social adaptability and a charismatic presence. However, these advantages are accompanied by significant psychological costs: code-switching fatigue, identity confusion, and a persistent sense of not fully belonging to any single cultural group. Critically, because charisma itself is defined differently across individualistic and collectivistic cultures, the very skills that make bilingual students adaptable may be perceived as charismatic in one context and inauthentic in another. The review concludes that while bilingualism confers measurable interpersonal and cognitive benefits, the relationship between multicultural experience and charisma is mediated by BII and cultural context, factors that determine whether the bilingual experience becomes a source of strength or strain.

KEYWORDS

bilingualism; bicultural identity integration; cultural intelligence; code-switching; charisma

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Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, a growing number of students grow up navigating multiple languages and cultural systems. These bilingual students, whether immigrants, green-card holders, or children of multinational families, inhabit a psychosocial space between cultures that most of their peers do not share. This position raises a compelling question: does growing up between cultures make a person more charismatic, adaptable, and socially capable than someone who grows up within a single cultural framework?

On one hand, bilingual and bicultural individuals develop cultural intelligence, cognitive flexibility, and the ability to adjust their behavior across diverse social settings, skills that align closely with charismatic leadership and social adaptability (Ang & Van Dyne, 2015; Hong et al., 2000). On the other hand, the constant negotiation between cultural frames imposes cognitive and emotional costs. Code-switching, the practice of alternating between languages and the cultural behavioral norms attached to them, can lead to mental fatigue, identity fragmentation, and a chronic sense of not belonging (Grosjean, 2010; Khan et al., 2025). The relationship is complicated further by cultural variation itself: as the GLOBE study demonstrates, what constitutes charismatic leadership differs across individualistic and collectivistic cultures (House et al., 2004), so a bilingual student who adapts seamlessly to both settings may be read as socially skilled by one audience and as inauthentic by another.

This review takes up that complexity in three movements. It first lays out the conceptual and empirical groundwork, distinguishing bilingualism from biculturalism and situating cultural intelligence, code-switching, and cultural frame-switching within that distinction. It then weighs the evidence for a genuine bilingual advantage against the evidence for its psychological costs, before turning to the individualism-collectivism dimension to argue that charisma itself is not a culturally neutral yardstick. It closes with an integrated argument: bilingual students possess the potential for enhanced social capability, but whether that potential is realized depends critically on bicultural identity integration and on the cultural context in which their skills are being judged.

Biculturalism, Frame-Switching, and Cultural Intelligence: A Conceptual Foundation

Bilingual students are individuals who possess proficiency in two or more languages, often as a result of growing up in multilingual households, immigrating to a new country, or holding permanent residency, such as green-card status, in a country different from their

heritage culture. Bilingualism, however, does not automatically imply biculturalism. A person may speak two languages while identifying primarily with a single cultural framework; bicultural individuals, by contrast, have internalized the norms, values, and behavioral scripts of two distinct cultural systems (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005). This distinction matters for research on social adaptability, since it is biculturalism rather than bilingualism per se that Chen et al. (2008) link to what they call bicultural competence, the ability to navigate and function effectively in two cultural worlds and the foundation for many of the interpersonal skills later associated with charisma.

Two related but distinct processes describe how bicultural individuals move between their cultural worlds. Code-switching refers to the alternation between two or more languages or language varieties within a single communicative episode. Historically viewed by some linguists as a sign of linguistic deficiency, contemporary research, particularly the work of Grosjean (2010), frames code-switching instead as a natural and sophisticated bilingual behavior. Cultural frame-switching describes a broader, more cognitive process: Hong et al. (2000) proposed that bicultural individuals possess two internalized cultural meaning systems, each with its own knowledge structures, and that a cultural cue, whether an icon, a stereotype, or simply the language being spoken, can activate one system over the other. In their studies, Chinese American biculturals produced more externally oriented, group-based attributions after exposure to Chinese cultural icons and more internally oriented, individual-based attributions after exposure to American icons. Code-switching is primarily linguistic, and frame-switching is cognitive and behavioral, but the two are interconnected: frequent linguistic code-switching may prime cultural frame-switching, and both feed into what organizational psychologists call cultural intelligence.

Cultural intelligence, or CQ, is defined as an individual's capability for successful work and social adaptation in new cultural settings (Ang & Van Dyne, 2015). Building on Earley and Ang's (2003) original three-factor model, later work identifies four components: metacognitive CQ, or awareness of one's own cultural assumptions during an interaction; cognitive CQ, or knowledge of cultural norms and conventions; motivational CQ, or the confidence and persistence to engage across cultural lines; and behavioral CQ, the capacity to adapt verbal and nonverbal behavior across cultures (Ang & Van Dyne, 2015). Because their daily lives require constant cultural adjustment, bilingual and multicultural individuals tend to score higher across all four CQ dimensions, particularly behavioral CQ, though high behavioral CQ does not automatically translate into personal confidence or psychological well-being, a tension this review returns to below.

Not all cultures, of course, define effective or admirable behavior the same way, and this is where a final construct becomes essential. Hofstede (2001) distinguished individualism, a cultural orientation in which ties between individuals are loose, and people are expected to look after themselves and their immediate family, from collectivism, characterized instead by strong, cohesive in-groups that protect their members in exchange for loyalty. The GLOBE project extended this framework specifically to leadership, examining how these orientations shape what different societies expect a leader to look like (House et al., 2004), a question this review takes up in detail once the evidence for and against a bilingual advantage has been laid out.

The Cognitive and Social Case for a Bilingual Advantage

A growing body of research links bilingualism to advantages in executive function, particularly attention control, inhibitory control, and task-switching. Xie and Ng (2024) found that bicultural bilinguals who switched between cultural frames more frequently resolved stimulus-response conflict faster and made fewer errors on cognitive tasks than those who switched less often, suggesting that the practice of navigating multiple cultural frameworks itself strengthens cognitive processing rather than simply reflecting a pre-existing cognitive advantage. This flexibility carries social implications directly: bilingual students who can shift rapidly between cultural mindsets may be better equipped to read a social situation, adjust their communication style, and build rapport with unfamiliar others, precisely the skills that underpin charisma.

Because acquiring a second language involves acquiring a second cultural worldview along with it, multilingual children are commonly described as developing greater empathy and open-mindedness as a result of this dual exposure (Nord Anglia Education, 2024). This claim comes from an education-sector source rather than a peer-reviewed study, so it is best treated as a plausible, widely observed pattern rather than as settled experimental fact; it is nonetheless consistent with the more rigorously tested cognitive findings above, since the ability to see a situation through more than one cultural lens is closely related to the interpersonal sensitivity that characterizes charismatic individuals.

Perhaps the most direct link between bilingual experience and social capability runs through cultural intelligence itself. Bilingual students, by virtue of navigating multiple cultural contexts, develop the behavioral flexibility that defines high CQ: the capacity to observe, recognize, and adapt verbal and nonverbal behavior in intercultural situations

(Ang & Van Dyne, 2015). Because language itself carries cultural scripts, bilingual individuals display different patterns of thinking depending on which language they are using at a given moment (Hong et al., 2000), which implies that bilingual students can strategically activate the cultural mindset appropriate to a given social context, a distinct interpersonal advantage over someone with only one cultural script available.

None of this advantage, however, is automatic or universal. Chen et al. (2008) found that bilingual students with high bicultural identity integration, meaning those who see their two cultural identities as compatible rather than oppositional, report better psychological adjustment overall, including higher self-esteem and life satisfaction and lower depression and anxiety. For these individuals, bilingualism becomes a genuine asset, a source of social confidence and interpersonal effectiveness, and they are more likely to leverage their bicultural skills in ways that enhance rather than undermine their charismatic presence. The cognitive and social advantages reviewed in this section, in other words, describe a potential that is realized most fully by a specific subset of bilingual students rather than by bilingual students as a whole, a point this review develops further below.

The Psychological Costs of Living Between Languages and Cultures

Code-switching is often discussed purely as a skill, but it also imposes real cognitive and emotional costs. In their study of bilingual youth in urban Pakistan et al. (2025) reported that more frequent code-switching between Urdu and English was linked to greater subjective cognitive load and to moments of confusion or difficulty articulating complex thoughts, hardly conditions conducive to charismatic communication. This particular study's findings are framed by its own authors as exploratory and self-report based rather than as a tightly controlled experimental result, so the effect should be read as suggestive rather than definitive; it is nonetheless consistent with more rigorously controlled laboratory work on the cognitive costs of habitual code-switching. The social implication follows directly: bilingual students who are cognitively fatigued by constant code-switching may withdraw from social interaction or struggle to present themselves with the ease that characterizes charisma, even when they possess the underlying social skill to do so.

A second and arguably more profound cost concerns identity itself. Bicultural individuals often face what researchers term identity denial, being told by others, implicitly or explicitly, that they cannot fully claim a particular identity. Albuja et al. (2019) found that this experience of identity denial is associated with worse psychological health outcomes

among bicultural and biracial people, mediated in part by reduced feelings of social belonging. Foley (2020) documents a related pattern in bicultural and biracial adults, who often want to claim both of their identities fully but encounter real interpersonal obstacles in doing so; a high sense of not belonging was, in that research, associated with poorer psychological outcomes. For bilingual students, the very skill that makes them socially adaptable, the ability to move fluidly between cultural worlds, can leave them feeling like an outsider in every world they enter.

A third cost is less about internal experience and more about the demands placed on bilingual students by others. Bilingual students often face pressure to behave differently across cultural settings, to be more assertive in individualistic contexts and more harmonious in collectivistic ones. Foley's (2020) research on bicultural identity formation suggests that managing these competing norms and expectations is a central and ongoing challenge rather than a skill that, once learned, ceases to require effort. The resulting feeling of being constantly on stage, of performing rather than simply being, can undermine the spontaneity and authenticity that genuine charisma requires.

Charisma as a Culturally Contingent Construct

The GLOBE study, one of the most comprehensive cross-cultural investigations of leadership ever conducted, identified charismatic and value-based leadership as the most universally endorsed leadership dimension across the 62 societies it surveyed (House et al., 2004). Charismatic leaders were broadly defined as those who inspire followers with a desirable and realistic vision and who are perceived as sincere, decisive, and credible. Even so, the GLOBE researchers found that while charismatic leadership is valued nearly everywhere, the specific behaviors that count as charismatic differ meaningfully across cultural clusters. In individualistic cultures, charisma tends to be associated with assertiveness, visionary thinking, and individual achievement; in collectivistic cultures, it is more closely tied to group-oriented behavior, humility, and the preservation of social harmony. As Hofstede (2001) argued, cultural values shape not only what leaders do but what followers expect a leader to do in the first place.

This variation carries direct implications for bilingual students. Those who have internalized both individualistic and collectivistic frameworks may be able to adapt their self-presentation to different audiences, shifting self-perception and behavior to fit the norms primed by whichever language or cultural context they are currently operating in (Hong et al., 2000). A bilingual student from a collectivistic background who studies in an

individualistic society, for instance, may learn to display the assertiveness and individual vision valued in their host culture while retaining the relational, harmony-oriented skills valued in their heritage culture. This bicultural competence, the ability to draw on more than one cultural toolkit, may make such students more broadly effective across a wider range of social contexts than a monocultural individual with only one toolkit available.

This adaptability comes at a cost, however. The very ability to shift between cultural frames can mean that bilingual students never feel entirely at home in either mode. Research on bicultural identity integration suggests that individuals who compartmentalize their two identities, keeping them separate rather than integrating them into one self-concept, experience greater psychological strain than those who achieve integration (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005). The skill that makes them socially adaptable may, for these individuals, work against the deep and unguarded connection that underpins genuine charisma. Compounding this, the GLOBE findings imply that a person who adapts too readily and too visibly to multiple cultural norms risks being perceived as culturally homeless or as lacking authenticity, since followers in both individualistic and collectivistic contexts consistently value leaders who come across as sincere and credible (House et al., 2004). If a bilingual student's adaptability is read by an audience as performance rather than as authentic self-expression, it may undermine rather than enhance their charismatic appeal.

Synthesis: Bicultural Identity Integration as the Deciding Factor

The evidence supports the potential for enhanced social capability: bilingual students develop cognitive flexibility, empathy, cultural intelligence, and the ability to adjust their behavior across diverse settings, precisely the skills that contribute to charismatic presence. This potential, however, is not automatically realized. The psychological costs of constant code-switching, identity negotiation, and cultural frame-switching can undermine the confidence, authenticity, and ease that characterize genuine charisma. Bilingual students may be skilled at social navigation without feeling comfortable or accepted in any single setting.

The critical mediating variable across this research appears to be bicultural identity integration. Bilingual students who successfully integrate their dual identities, seeing them as compatible rather than conflicting, experience better psychological well-being and are better positioned to leverage their bicultural skills socially. Those who instead experience their identities as fragmented or in conflict may develop the mechanics of code-switching

without reaping its social and emotional benefits (Chen et al., 2008). This finding carries practical implications for educators, parents, and policymakers: supporting bilingual students' identity development, helping them experience their dual cultural heritage as a source of strength rather than conflict, may matter as much as supporting their language development directly. The goal, in other words, should not be to produce students who can perform across multiple cultures, but students who can belong across multiple cultures.

The relationship between bilingual experience and charisma is further complicated by cultural variation itself. As the GLOBE study demonstrates, what counts as charismatic varies between individualistic and collectivistic cultures (House et al., 2004). Bilingual students who can adapt their self-presentation accordingly may possess something that could be called cultural charisma: the ability to inspire and connect across cultural boundaries rather than within only one. Yet this cross-cultural effectiveness may come at the cost of depth within any single cultural context; the student who can code-switch effortlessly may never develop the unselfconscious ease of someone who has fully internalized just one cultural framework. In this sense, the question "Are bilingual students more charismatic?" may be the wrong question to ask. A better one might be: under what conditions does bilingual experience enhance social capability, and under what conditions does it diminish it?

Conclusion

This literature review has examined whether growing up between cultures makes bilingual students more charismatic, adaptable, and socially capable than their monolingual peers. The evidence reveals a complex picture rather than a simple yes or no. Bilingual students develop cognitive flexibility, empathy, and cultural intelligence that enhance their social adaptability and cross-cultural effectiveness; they possess the potential for an enhanced form of charisma, the ability to inspire and connect across diverse social contexts. This potential, however, is accompanied by high psychological costs. Code-switching imposes real cognitive load. Identity negotiation can produce confusion and a persistent sense of not belonging. The pressure to perform differently across cultural settings can undermine the very authenticity that charisma depends on. Whether bilingual students realize the advantages of their experience depends critically on their ability to integrate their dual identities in psychologically healthy ways (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005).

This review also highlights the cultural contingency of charisma itself. What counts as charismatic varies across cultures, particularly along the individualism-collectivism

dimension (Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2004). Bilingual students who can navigate multiple cultural definitions of charisma may possess a distinctive form of cross-cultural social capability, but this capability may come at the cost of deep belonging within any single cultural context. Ultimately, the bilingual advantage is a psychological project. It requires identity work, emotional resilience, and cultural self-awareness. When these conditions are met, bilingual students can become remarkably effective social actors. When they are not, the very skills that make them adaptable can also leave them feeling unanchored.

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