



Can You Be Young Without Speaking English?

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Abstract

This paper examines the social factors that may have contributed to the growing significance of global ‘non-native’ English in shaping youth social identity. In recent years, a new sociolinguistic turning point appears to have emerged: positive attitudes toward English are now observed even among preschool and primary school children, and conversing in English has been documented in addition to the well-established practice of language mixing. The latter phenomenon remains underexplored; therefore, in investigating the factors driving changes in youth social practices, this paper specifically focuses on code-switching to English to converse among the youngest speakers. The study was inspired by a unique case of a Lithuanian family whose child has exclusively communicated in English since birth. The dataset comprises ethnographic data (speech recordings and interviews with parents and children) collected from six families in Lithuania between 2020 and 2024, along with additional metalinguistic material. The findings suggest that the social construction of youth identity through English may not occur in the absence of certain key social factors. These include access to the internet and digital media, the need to affiliate with translocal culture, parental pride in a child’s English proficiency, older siblings as role models, the desire to assert autonomy from adults and reinforce peer solidarity, and a speaker’s inclination toward performativity and role-play. A sociolinguistic perspective can enrich research on youth identity and foster discussion on the cultural implications of the increasing role of global English.

Keywords: youth; identity; code-switching; global English; linguistic practice