

An Autoethnographic Insight into My Multilingual Development

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An Autoethnographic Insight into My Multilingual Development

Introduction

Multilingualism, the ability to communicate in more than one language—actively through speaking and writing, and passively through listening and reading—has gained significant scholarly attention in recent years (Li, 2008). While traditionally influenced by geographical and political factors, the growing prominence of multilingualism has been accelerated by globalization, increased mobility, and technological advancements (Aronin & Singleton, 2008). In linguistics and second language acquisition (SLA), multilingualism is seen as a dynamic process encompassing various forms of language acquisition across an individual's life, such as learning within families or at institutions, and the practical use of languages in everyday social and professional settings. Not all multilingual speakers are native to each language they use; instead, they rely on their linguistic repertoires flexibly to navigate different domains. The increasing prevalence of multilingualism has drawn significant attention to its role in education. Integrating mother tongues and national languages alongside global languages like English enhances students' cultural identities, fosters a sense of belonging, and supports cognitive development. Furthermore, research highlights the broader benefits of multilingualism, including improved cognitive flexibility and memory (Antoniou, 2019), creativity (Fürst & Grin, 2021), and better metalinguistic awareness (Jessner, 2008). These benefits of multilingualism in education lead to inclusive and equitable learning environments. By celebrating students' diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, educational systems can equip learners with the tools they need to succeed in an interconnected, globalized world.

In this autoethnography, I intend to embark on my multilingual journey, rooted in the small countryside of Uzbekistan, meticulously describing and analyzing the role of each language in my multilingual development and multilingual literacy. Each language in my

repertoire serves as a vital component in becoming who I am today, providing me with distinct cultural perspectives, cognitive tools, and expressive capacities with a rich, dynamic range of linguistic resources. Through this reflection, I am honored and excited to share and reflect how these languages have harmonized to form the basis of my personal and academic growth.

Background Information

Having been born and raised in the northeastern part of Uzbekistan in a small district called Bostanlik in the Tashkent region, I have had full exposure to three languages since my childhood: Kazakh, my native language; Uzbek, the national language of Uzbekistan; and Russian, the colonial language that was also widespread in my locality. Uzbekistan, being the most populous country in Central Asia, is home to over 130 different ethnicities. De-Russification efforts in Uzbekistan (Pavlenko, 2008) led to Uzbek becoming the country's sole official language, the adoption of the Latin alphabet, and the solidification of "Uzbekness" as a unique identity. Although Russian is no longer an official language, it continues to play an essential role in interethnic communication. Meanwhile, English has become a mandatory foreign language in schools (Hasanova, 2007). Uzbekistan's Constitution and the 1995 Law on the State Language (amended in 2017) enshrine Uzbek as the official language while fostering respect and support for the languages and cultural traditions of all ethnic groups. It mandates conditions for citizens to learn Uzbek and respect other ethnic languages, with the right to choose the language of instruction. Education is available in Uzbek and other six languages—Karakalpak, Russian, Tajik, Turkmen, Kyrgyz, and Kazakh—across general, vocational, technical, and higher education. As a matter of fact, my parents collectively decided to give me to a Kazakh Medium of Instruction school (KMI), where I developed literacy not only in Kazakh but also Uzbek, Russian, and English, which

will be elucidated in detail in the subsequent paragraphs, showing how each language in my repertoire contributed to my multilingual development as a whole.

Childhood and School Years: My Multilingual Literacy Development

My language journey has been unique and complex, shaped and formed by the diverse linguistic landscape of Bostanlik district—the territory that was part of Kazakhstan until 1957, remaining a home for a large Kazakh community within Uzbekistan. My early language acquisition was deeply rooted in Kazakh, predominantly influenced by my family’s linguistic practices, cultural ideologies, and the Kazakh-speaking community around me. However, the first words I pronounced, “мама” and “папа,” reflected the Russian influence in my early linguistic environment, shaped by my parents’ use of mixed Russian and English at home. Their Kazakh, too, was interwoven with Uzbek dialects like “шашык,” “ортак,” and “ауқат,” illustrating linguistic convergence. As I analyze it now, my early language development aligns with Translanguaging Theory (Garcia & Wei, 2014), where my family fluidly switched between Kazakh, Russian, and Uzbek, a natural use of multiple languages. On the other hand, it also connects to Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), where my family and community were core players in shaping my multilingual skills.

My initial exposure to Uzbek came through watching cartoons with my siblings and role-playing with newly acquired words, which helped me engage with the broader Uzbek-speaking community. At the age of 3, when my grandpa took me to kindergarten, I encountered Uzbek as the medium of instruction. By that point, my rudimentary knowledge of the language was already helpful. I did not feel pressure or shyness because my mother tongue, Kazakh, was strongly supported in my environment—most of my teachers and peers were Kazakh, allowing me to use Kazakh freely without needing to switch to Uzbek often. This demonstrates how my first language, Kazakh, served as a resource for acquiring my

second language, Uzbek. Rather than feeling overwhelmed, I remember confidently interacting with Uzbek-speaking peers, which helped me build fluency and navigate the multilingual environment with ease. My language path further evolved when my mother, a Kazakh literature teacher, decided that I would attend a KMI school. Uzbekistan's support for minority languages enabled me to develop foundational literacy in Kazakh, which eased my transition to formal Uzbek and Russian literacy. This experience aligns with Cummins' Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) theory, which suggests that skills in one language can transfer effectively to others, supporting success in multiple languages. Additionally, Soto's (1993) research on native language proficiency indicates that a strong foundation in the family language enhances academic success through the transfer of skills.

In the second grade, Uzbek was formally introduced as a foreign language with a textbook for non-native speakers, following the national curriculum. I remember struggling with the Latin alphabet I had to acquire for Uzbek, as Kazakh was taught in the Cyrillic alphabet. I also could not receive much support from my family, as they were also instructed in the Cyrillic alphabet. All I could do was seek additional help and expose myself to Uzbek readings as much as possible. However, after mastering it, English was quite easy to acquire, as it was also in Latin. Additionally, during my school years, I had the opportunity to enrich my cultural and traditional understanding of Uzbek culture, as we used to organize celebrations in honor of Uzbek poets. What stands out vividly in my memory is the time we presented the life of Alisher Navoyi to an audience, a moment that deepened my connection with the Uzbek language. Meanwhile, my mother tongue, Kazakh, remained central to my education; I continued studying Kazakh language and literature through high school and participated in community events honoring writers like Abay and Shakarim. This dual exposure to Uzbek and Kazakh reinforced my multilingual identity, grounding me in my heritage and connecting me to the broader Uzbek cultural context.

The Russian language was a part of my everyday life too. Uzbekistan, influenced by Russian power and Soviet legacy, still carried traces of Russian in daily administrative work and informal communication, especially in urban areas, even if it was not overtly documented as a second language. There are still social benefits linked to Russian stating the more advanced your Russian is, the more likely you are to get a highly-paid job at a company. This reality encouraged my father to push me to learn it from a young age. Every month, he would bring me a fictional book in Russian, asking me to read it and be ready to retell it at the end of the month. Even though I had Russian classes at school, he was not satisfied with just that and insisted we speak Russian as much as possible at home. Around age 12, my parents enrolled me in private tutoring classes, understanding its significance for my future academic and career opportunities. They chose a native-speaking Russian tutor to build my speaking and comprehension skills, although learning Russian felt challenging. I put in extra hours, reading Russian literature from Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* to Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*, gradually building my confidence in the language. My father's insistence on me learning Russian from a young age reflects Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital, where language proficiency is seen as an investment in future success, opening doors to social and educational opportunities.

The dominance of English in today's neoliberal world highlights its dual role as both a means of social mobility and, paradoxically, an "inhibitor of local development" (Ricento, 2012, p. 49). Its complex power serves instrumental purposes, enabling individuals to transcend cultural boundaries and evolve into "flexible global citizens with multiple identities" (Benzehaf, 2023). My journey with English began in 7th grade, driven by intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. As the first person in my extended family to learn English, my motivations were similar to those that had driven my learning of Russian—seeking linguistic capital and educational opportunities. With two years of intensive private tutoring, I not only

learned English but also began developing what Dörnyei (2009) describes as the “ideal L2 self,” imagining my future self empowered by the language, aligning with my aspirations. Being multilingual gave me an advantage in acquiring English, particularly in areas such as vocabulary, phonology, grammar, and literacy (Kalashnikova, Mattock, & Monaghan, 2014). Initially, I encountered English through grammar instruction in Russian and Uzbek, primarily through grammar-translation methods. However, progress was slow until I was introduced to more effective techniques, such as Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and the integration of technology into my routine. I began chatting with friends in English, watching films, and learning songs, which deepened my multilingual identity. Through these practices, I created a “third space”, enabling me to hybridize my cultural identities (Benzehaf, 2023). As English became more integrated into my daily life, I experienced shifts in my emotional vocabulary and affective repertoires (Pavlenko, 2012). Actively seeking new experiences with native English speakers enabled me to engage in dynamic identity construction, shaped through negotiated experiences and social participation. This process formed a richly layered, multilingual identity.

University Years: My Multilingual Literacy Development

Many things changed in the usage of the languages in my repertoire when I enrolled in the English language program at the National University of Uzbekistan, which had a Russian Medium of Instruction (RMI). The constant use of Russian and Uzbek was replaced by English and Russian. Albeit having a strong command of both Russian and English, adapting to this new environment was challenging. Interacting with highly Russified peers and navigating the academic demands in English required a new level of adjustment. Although my written Russian and grammar skills were solid, I lacked exposure to its cultural context, leading to a period of linguistic silencing. This struggle was largely due to the learning strategies I had previously employed, such as grammar-translation and

memorization, which, while effective in building technical proficiency, did little to foster communication or cultural sensitivity. As part of the program, we were also given the option to study French. Although my classmates and I had intrinsic motivation to learn it, our actual investment in the language was minimal. This could be attributed to factors such as the limited symbolic capital associated with French (Bourdieu, 1987) and the lack of teacher agency in the classroom. Witnessing all of this, I concluded that the most effective method was simply talking and exposing myself to the linguistic environment. Although my French did not improve due to limited exposure and investment, I felt a predominant increase in both my Russian and English within several months.

In my second year, I was fortunate to participate in an exchange semester in the U.S. within the TESOL field. This opportunity provided full immersion, not only in the English language but also in American culture, allowing me to engage with an imagined community, where I could authentically participate and navigate new social norms. As my exposure to native-like speech increased, I began noticing subtle shifts in my identity. I adopted behaviors aligned with American norms and experienced a sense of pride when others did not notice my accent, allowing me to temporarily pass as a native English speaker. This reflected what Norton (2000) terms "investment" in the English language, where language proficiency opened doors for social integration, albeit with challenges. Despite my advanced English proficiency, success in content-specific subjects was not guaranteed, and I struggled to communicate my academic knowledge effectively in English. This difficulty highlighted gaps in my cultural understanding, particularly where language and context are intertwined, and led to a period of linguistic silencing. Nevertheless, my professors and peers were supportive, helping me succeed academically. Throughout my university years, I continued to interact primarily in English, which influenced my evolving multilingual identity. This immersion helped me actively construct and reconstruct my multilingual self as I engaged with the

broader social world, reshaping my linguistic and cultural perspectives. Ultimately, it reinforced the idea that identity is dynamic and ever-changing, influenced not just by language but by the social, academic, and cultural contexts in which I participated (Kramsch, 1993).

My Teaching Practice: Multilingual Teaching Practices and Translanguaging.

In my second year of university, I began working as a TESOL teacher at private tutoring centers. Initially, I relied heavily on structuralist methods, favoring rote memorization and grammar-translation, similar to those used by my own teachers. This monoglossic approach often discouraged students from using their native languages, viewing their mother tongues as obstacles rather than assets. Looking back, I see how this limited my students' learning and excluded their linguistic resources.

However, having completed specialized training in ESL teaching methods and gaining practical experience in the U.S., I shifted towards communicative and functional approaches, such as Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and translanguaging pedagogy. These methods encouraged students to engage dynamically with English while drawing on their own languages. For example, when teaching participles, I connected Russian grammatical forms like “депричастие” and “причастие” to their English counterparts, making the concepts more accessible and stimulating. This integration of students' linguistic resources reflects Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, emphasizing the role of social interaction and cultural context in learning. Group activities became powerful collaborative spaces where students could support each other's learning. I also introduced “identity texts” (Cummins, 2001) to boost student engagement. One project, where students explained the recipe for a traditional Kazakh dish in English, allowed them to share their cultural heritage and enhanced their

motivation and sense of belonging. Over time, I adopted translanguaging, which enabled me to make use of students' full linguistic resources and provide better scaffolding. This flexible approach, informed by García's (2009) concept, allowed students to construct meaning more effectively and view their bilingualism as a strength rather than a limitation. In conclusion, my teaching journey shifted from a monoglossic approach to more inclusive, student-centered methods, fostering both academic and personal development and highlighting the dynamic, evolving nature of my multilingual identity.

Master's Degree: Reflection Journey

The reflections and analyses in this autoethnography, as well as the person I have become—attuned to students' needs and the languages we use daily—would not have been possible without the guidance of the insightful professors and the curriculum of the Multilingual Education program. I had rarely thought about the trajectory of my linguistic journey or the profound ways it has shaped every aspect of my life. At times, I wonder if I would have gained this depth of understanding without English in my repertoire, which has broadened my opportunities and expanded my worldview.

From the outset, the program has encouraged me to critically analyze language policies and how they are often implemented from the top down, shaping our lives without our explicit consent. Although the primary focus of this program was on the Kazakhstani context, I was able to draw parallels to the Uzbek context, where colonial history has left lasting imprints on language politics. Like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan has also had to counter Soviet ideologies, where on both micro and meso levels, some educators still push for monoglossic, traditional methods, marginalizing minority languages in the classroom. Yet, despite this shift, the voices and experiences of teachers and students—the primary stakeholders in language policy enactment—remain largely unheard. Reflecting on my own

teaching experience in a public school, I was required to enforce an “English-only” classroom, a demand that was also reinforced by parents who believed it was necessary for their children’s success. This rigid approach, however, often led students to fear expressing themselves in their first language (L1) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes, worrying about lower grades or disciplinary actions if they did otherwise. Even now, despite my efforts to support the use of L1 as a resource in the classroom, some students resist, citing their parents’ objections to L1 usage, which clearly shows the challenges we still face.

Nevertheless, I am resolute in advocating for a greater focus on Critical Multilingual Language Awareness (CMLA), aimed at developing an informed understanding of multilingualism among parents, teachers, and students alike. Students should never be penalized for expressing themselves in their L1; rather, they should be encouraged to think critically and engage in learning where language supports rather than hinders their intellectual growth. Teachers should strive to use language as an instrument for knowledge-building, rather than the focal point of the classroom. Their awareness about plurilingualism, appreciation of linguistic tolerance should be fostered. Additionally, adopting a holistic approach to both curriculum and assessment not only enhances learners’ motivation but also encourages them to invest in their education and linguistic development. These steps and ideologies will help us to decolonize multilingual pedagogies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my journey toward multilingual literacy has been a dynamic and rewarding process, expanding my access to diverse opportunities and enabling rich connections across languages and cultures. My teaching philosophy has transformed from a rigid approach to a heteroglossic ideology that values each student’s linguistic background as a resource, recognizing the essential role of their linguistic repertoires in bridging to new

languages. The Master's program in Multilingual Education has further enriched my understanding of the complexities of linguistic landscapes and their social impacts, equipping me with advanced techniques for fostering inclusive language learning. As I move forward as a researcher and advocate for multilingual education, I am committed to cultivating inclusive multilingual environments where learners from all backgrounds feel valued, engaged, and empowered to participate fully in language acquisition.

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