

GULLALA JUMAMURATOVA

A Multilingual Journey: An Autoethnography of Language Learning and Transformation

Introduction

Multilingualism has become a daily tool in communication in the modern world for many members of it (Stein-Smith, 2021). High-speed globalization is accelerating multilingualism; however, the education system in many countries uses a monolingual approach (Tucker, 1999). Therefore, it is necessary for the education system of many countries to consider the needs of society to shift from monolingual traditional education to multilingual education. It is necessary to give space for multilingual students in a safe and inclusive classroom where they can learn without being neglected in their home languages (Garcia et al., 2014). Multilingual education goes beyond the classroom. It requires cooperation among teachers, families, and communities to ensure that everyone comprehends and recognizes the significance of speaking multiple languages. This can be done through community programs, engaging parents, and collaborating with local organizations that promote language diversity. Embracing multilingual education is not only crucial but also an opportunity to set fairness and inclusivity in education. Therefore, it is crucial for education systems worldwide to acknowledge the value of speaking multiple languages and take steps to celebrate linguistic diversity in the school setting.

In this autoethnography, I will describe and reflect on my multilingual development through my academic journey, drawing on my personal experiences in school during the Soviet period in Uzbekistan and in other contexts where I have had the chance to study and live. These experiences will provide a deeper understanding of the sociocultural factors that have shaped my multilingual journey. For me, multilingual development is not all languages in my linguistic repertoire, but it includes the experiences of transformation of my views for different languages, language policies, and the language teaching approaches that I experienced from a young age to my adulthood.

Background information

I was born and raised in the northwestern part of Uzbekistan, an autonomous republic called Karakalpakstan. It is a country inside Uzbekistan, with its own language that is different from Uzbek, the culture, traditions, and language most similar to the Kazakh language and tradi-

tions. Even the facial features of Karakalpaks are similar to those of the Kazakh people. The official languages are Karakalpak and Uzbek. In Karakalpakstan, there are schools with KMI (Karakalpak medium of instruction), RMI (Russian medium of instruction), and some schools with UMI (Uzbek medium of instruction), and now, because Uzbekistan is taking active steps toward internationalization, there are few schools that have EMI (English medium of instruction).

Uzbekistan is also a multicultural and multiethnic country like its neighbor, Kazakhstan. Due to this reason, there are schools for minority ethnicities. For example, for Tajik minorities in Uzbekistan, there are schools with TMI (Tajik medium of instruction), and for Kazakhs in Uzbekistan, there are schools with KzMI (Kazakh medium of instruction). During the Soviet Era, Uzbekistan did not have many schools in the titular languages. This variety of schools is due to the independence of Uzbekistan, where all parents in Uzbekistan have a great choice considering their ethnicities to which school they send their children.

My multilingual development in kindergarten

I was born and raised in a bilingual (Russian and Karakalpak languages) environment during the Soviet period. It was the time when the Russification policy was still at its active position in the Soviet period. The Soviet Government promoted only the Russian language to be promoted and unite all the fifteen states (republics) under the Soviet Union. Recalling my kindergarten experiences when I was enrolled in the RMI group, during that period, the Soviet era was still in its power. In addition, during the Soviet period, there was a small number of kindergartens and schools with KMI (Karakalpak medium of instruction) due to the dominance of the Russian language in all spheres of society. Due to the limited choice of kindergartens in Karakalpak language and my parents' language choices for their children, they have decided to enroll me in a RMI kindergarten.

By critically analyzing the pedagogical and linguistic approaches of my teachers towards language and content knowledge, I would now argue how it was offensive and sad at the same time, as most of my friends back in kindergarten who could not speak the dominant language – Russian language – were neglected to use their mother tongue. Their proficiency in their native language was not counted. Teachers accepted the communication with children only in the Russian language. This pedagogical and linguistic approach has influenced my language orientation and language belief toward the Rus-

sian language. Since I was a child, I have accepted this linguistic practice and strong ideology towards the Russian language as it is. I was shy and felt guilty if I was speaking my mother tongue- the Karakalpak language with my friends while playing in kindergarten.

However, at home, my mother used to speak our native language, which is the Karakalpak language. This pro-mother tongue approach of my mother made me a natural bilingual child from my early years. Reflecting back on my childhood, I am thankful for my mother's approach to mother-tongue-based interaction within our family. It made me feel emotionally safe at home, that I do not have to speak Russian language to express my feelings or any other states of childhood. The above-mentioned two factors have started to develop and accelerate my bi/multilingual development and guide me through the years. In addition, at that time, I accepted that using the Russian language was for communication outside of the family (kindergarten, friends), whereas at home with my mother, we could use our mother tongue without being judged. This is how my bi/multilingual journey started from a young age.

My multilingual development in school

The school decisions my parents chose were based on external and internal factors of family language policy because there are seven siblings in my family, and my parents decided to send four of us to the RMI and three of us to KMI. Based on this decision by my parents, plus my previous experience in the RMI kindergarten, did not leave any doubts for my parents. Three languages were taught in our schools as subjects, namely the Russian language class and Russian literature for native speakers level, the Karakalpak language and the Karakalpak literature as a second language, and the English language class as a foreign language class.

My English language teacher had stringent rules and teaching methods in the classroom. If we (students) spoke a few sentences or words in our mother tongue, she would throw chalk or put us in the corner holding a chair as a punishment. All my classmates and I were scared, and that is how we studied the English language very well, particularly grammar and transcription of the words. Reflecting back on these strict teaching methods and the unacceptable behavior of teachers, many of my classmates forced themselves to study English; however, later, most of my peers quit studying English. The language teaching curriculum and methods were very teacher-centered and under rigorous conditions (considering the punishments we had to go through). Teaching Eng-

lish language and other foreign languages during the Soviet era hindered the development of practical language skills, cultural understanding, and oral practices in order to communicate effectively.

Among all these language classes, my favorite language class was Karakalpak. It is probably due to my mother's active position in our family for our mother tongue. In addition, the teacher of the Karakalpak language taught the classes in a very fun and relaxed way, so most of my peers were improving their mother tongue.

At school, my elementary teachers were experienced with the necessary pedagogical approaches that have impressed me. They were open and supportive to any school children who were weak in the Russian language and offered additional classes so these students would catch up with the rest of the students. However, I had a negative experience, too, that was due to some of my teachers who were obsessed with students speaking in her class in pure Russian. Critically analyzing the attitude or even strong language ideology of these teachers towards the Russian language has influenced many students to accept the power of the Russian language and put their mother tongue in second place. This negative experience also impacted my linguistic preference, where later I noticed that there was more language shift from my mother tongue to the Russian language, particularly when interacting with my friends. Unfortunately, many schoolchildren and people share similar linguistic neglecting (unequal linguistic hierarchy) due to language dominance of the Russian language over other titular languages during the Soviet era.

However, when I was in the 5th grade when the Soviet Union collapsed and Uzbekistan gained its independence, the language preference of the society started to shift from the Russian language to the Uzbek mother tongue of many. Citizens of Uzbekistan had positive views of practicing their language freely without being judged. The first President of Uzbekistan has taken initiatives to give the Uzbek language a higher status in the country and actively promote the Uzbek language as the official language in the country. In addition, the first President of Uzbekistan, together with the government of Uzbekistan, passed a law to Latinize the Uzbek alphabet, weakening the status of the Russian language. This reform was introduced as one of the approaches to internationalization. The mainstream schools all over Uzbekistan increased the number of the Uzbek language classes, and the number of the Russian classes decreased. These changes have influenced my linguistic

orientation, and I had an interest in learning the Uzbek language because there was a language shift towards the Uzbek language due to the political factors in our country. Our school also increased the number of the Uzbek language classes. My interest in the Uzbek language was due to my intentions and plans to enroll in the universities for the undergraduate program in the capital of Uzbekistan, Tashkent. As mentioned by Cenoz (2012), political and economic factors impact the bilingual or multilingual development of individuals. That was how my quadrilingual (Karakalpak, Russian, English, and Uzbek languages) journey started.

My multilingual development in the undergraduate program

After graduating from high school, I moved from my hometown to the capital of Uzbekistan, Tashkent, because I was accepted to the Uzbek State University of the World Languages in Tashkent for my undergraduate program. In the program, I took more classes in the Uzbek language, grammar, Uzbek literature, and Uzbek history; for me, they were very interesting, and the process of the acquisition of the Uzbek language was easier than I expected. The professors at the University had positive attitudes toward my mother tongue, which is one of the minority languages in Central Asia, and there was no linguistic discrimination during my undergraduate program. If I had some minor grammatical or pronunciation inaccuracies during assignments, they asked my peers, who were native-speaking Uzbek students, to help me. The major I chose for my undergraduate program was English language, and my minor was German language. Due to this choice and specialty, my English also improved daily in Tashkent, as I signed up for additional speaking classes within the University. Learning and improving my English language skills was based on extrinsic motivation. However, I was not motivated to improve the German language because of the overwhelming schedule, and the focus was more on improving English language because of the economic and sociocultural factors.

As cited by Shohamy (2014), the trend to learn English is increasing due to sociocultural and economic factors. My multilingual development during my undergraduate program in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, was more enjoyable because I was exposed to a Uzbek-speaking environment most of the time and also focused on improving my English. However, I also experienced a new language which was German. This is how one more new language was added to my linguistic repertoire. However, when I spoke these new languages and tried to com-

municate, I could feel that I was a different person as if my identity changed with the languages in my linguistic repertoire.

My multilingual development in the Graduate Programs For my graduate study program, I applied to many foreign countries, namely Japan, the UK, Australia, and South Korea. Among all these countries, I got a full scholarship only to one of the South Korean universities. This University accepted my IELTS certificate; the score was 6.5. Most of the classes in my MBA program were conducted in English. Only a few were conducted in the Korean language, which was hard for me at the beginning of the semester. All the international students had to take Korean language courses for two semesters in the program. I made good progress while learning the Korean language in my Finance and Statistics classes. However, in the monolingual society of Korea, I felt unwelcome because of the origin of my country, Uzbekistan, which, for most of my Korean classmates, was still a third-world country. The American or European groupmates did not feel the same as they were more welcomed, and their attitude towards these students was much friendlier than to the international students who come from developing states. The following scholars' work (Jon et al., 2014; Kim, 2016) evidence the presence of racism and other challenges that international students faced during their studies in South Korea.

After facing a number of negative experiences in South Korea as an international student, I was demotivated to improve the Korean language. However, the teaching methods of the Korean language were much better in terms of modification and innovative methods than my school experience of learning the English language. In two semesters of studying Korean and living a total of seven years in South Korea, I became fluent enough in the Korean language, including daily exposure to this language and unique culture.

This is how my seventh language (Korean language) was added to my linguistic repertoire, and my multilingual development was enriched. In 2021, I decided to study another graduate program that is closer to my undergraduate field—the field of education, where I always wanted to continue and enrich my knowledge. At that time, we were already living in Kazakhstan for six years due to my spouse's job at Nazarbayev University. I was accepted to the program of Multilingual Education. During this program, my Kazakh language proficiency improved, as my mother tongue, Karakalpak language, is very close to the Kazakh language. For this reason, it

was easy for me and my family to adjust to the Kazakhstani lifestyle easily. However, during study hours, the Russian language was activated and dominant in my communication with my peers.

In other public places in Kazakhstan, I have observed the similar linguistic dominance of the Russian language despite Kazakhstan's independence from the Soviet Union for thirty years. For example, if I compare two contexts, namely Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, in the first country, the Uzbek language is the dominant language. In the Kazakhstani context still, the Russian language is quite dominant. Another important observation is that if you speak the Kazakh language, the majority of people in big cities like Astana and Almaty underestimate people who speak the Kazakh language. They hold a strong ideology that only educated and intelligent people speak the Russian language. Similarly, while living and studying in Kazakhstan, my local groupmates interact with me most of the time in Russian and Kazakh languages. Sometimes, communication in three languages (Kazakh, Russian and English) mixes up.

Studying in the Multilingual Education program has helped me to change my language ideologies and accept and celebrate multilingualism. In addition, I learned not to judge people who code-switched in many languages. This program turned my linguistic mind upside down. It positively changed my thinking and helped me to develop critical thinking about specific language policies in the contexts I have lived and studied.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in my multilingual development experience, I have faced both negative and positive experiences. Learning a new language in a different society and background or living in your own country and yet speaking the colonizer's language was the challenging part for me. In addition, my experience as an international student in South Korea was also a challenging experience in the monolingual context. However, my multilingual development journey has given me opportunities to get to know people with diverse backgrounds and expand my circle. I learned that each language I learned has granted me new chances, new friends, new horizons, and new values. My second graduate program experience in a multilingual education program has completely changed my worldview on how some language policies can impact certain societies' economic and sociocultural levels. Due to the program and courses in this program, I learned to accept and celebrate multilingualism, where all languages are equal.

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