

Critical Reflection Exploring Multilingual Identity: An Autoethnography Project

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Introduction

Language is a potent force transcending mere words; it influences our thoughts, actions, and identities. Multilingualism provides a distinctive perspective for individuals to traverse cultures and facilitate personal development. Garcia (2009), for example, contends that multilingualism undermines strict linguistic barriers, enabling individuals to navigate cultural and social contexts easily. This autoethnography examines my experiences as a Kazakh, Russian, English, German, Italian, and Polish speaker. Grounded in four theories, namely critical multilingual language awareness (CMLA) (Cummins, 2023), sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), language learning investment (Norton, 2013), and Garcia's and Kano's (2014) translanguaging theory, I examine how multilingualism has shaped my identity, relationships, and perspective.

Personal Language Background

My linguistic journey started in Aktobe, Kazakhstan, a location rich in cultural diversity. Born to a Kazakh mother and a Kazakh-Russian father, I was exposed to a bilingual environment early. My grandparents, who predominantly spoke Kazakh, significantly contributed to my profound appreciation for the language. Their passion for Kazakh literature and storytelling influenced my initial comprehension of the language's cultural and emotional importance. My father's Russian heritage exposed me to an alternative language dimension, reflecting Kazakhstan's historical connections to Russian as a lingua franca. These initial experiences highlight the relevance of Garcia's (2017) notion of translanguaging, which perceives multilingualism as a fluid process of employing all language resources for communication and self-expression. The duality of my upbringing—anchored in Kazakh tradition but shaped by Russian societal hegemony—demonstrates the intricate relationship between language and identity in multilingual contexts.

With age, my language horizons broadened. English initially entered my life as a school subject and rapidly evolved into a passion through engagement with music, films, and digital information. I then learned German at university, where it was incorporated into my academic curriculum. Subsequently, immersion experiences in Italy and Poland expanded my linguistic repertoire to include Italian and Polish. Every language presented distinct problems and benefits, influencing my self-perception and ability to engage with people. Norton's (2013) investment theory is a key idea in language learning research that sheds light on how learners' identities and social interactions influence their involvement with language acquisition. Language learning, according to the theory, is inextricably linked to learners' identities, goals, and the social structures that surround them, rather than being a neutral process. It offers a valuable framework for comprehending these experiences. That is, my endeavors to learn new languages were not

solely focused on skill acquisition but also on obtaining access to new social networks, cultural resources, and opportunities for personal development.

Early Language Experiences

Kazakh was the predominant language used at home during my formative years, primarily with my grandparents. This atmosphere established a robust foundation in Kazakh, which I found challenging to preserve as Russian increasingly dominated my interactions with my parents and broader social contexts. While I had a sense of linguistic belonging in my mainly Kazakh-speaking area, this changed during frequent family trips to East Kazakhstan, where Russian was widespread.

These changes illustrate the overarching sociolinguistic hierarchy in Kazakhstan, where Russian frequently occupies a dominant status in urban and professional domains (Manan & David, 2019). My proficiency in traversing different linguistic terrains underscores the adaptive characteristics of multilingualism, as articulated by Garcia (2009), who accentuates the fluidity with which individuals transition between languages in reaction to social and cultural difficulties.

Memorable Linguistic Moments

Specific instances are notable in my early language experiences, such as when I used the phrase “Аға, менде телефонымда қаражат жоқ” (“Brother, I don't have any money on my phone”) in Kazakh, astonishing my relatives with my lexicon. During a car journey in Oskemen, my spontaneous comment, “Какая чудесная корова!” (“What a wonderful cow!”), in Russian, became a comic incident that highlighted my bilingual proficiency by using two languages perfectly in such a young age.

These instances, though uncomplicated, exemplify the dynamic and contextual essence of multilingual communication. The theory of translanguaging (Garcia, 2009) elucidates these occurrences, emphasizing how bilingual individuals use their complete linguistic resources to convey their authentic selves in many circumstances.

Educational Journey

Kazakh-Medium Education and its Challenges

My father's choice to enroll me in Kazakh-medium schools sprang from a need to preserve our cultural heritage. However, this option created obstacles because of my weak skills in academic Kazakh, which hindered my ability to keep pace with my contemporaries. I frequently encountered difficulties with language and vocabulary, adversely affecting my academic achievement. This experience illustrates the disparities emphasized in Garcia and Kano's (2014) translanguaging theory, wherein monolingual educational systems inadequately address the needs of multilingual learners. Notwithstanding these challenges, I devised techniques to mitigate my shortcomings. I solicited peer assistance, utilized bilingual dictionaries, and engaged with Kazakh literature to en-

English has been fundamental to my academic and professional development. My earliest exposure was through official education, but my enthusiasm for the language intensified through extracurricular activities, including regional Olympiads, where I excelled in English competitions. Volunteering as a translator for Education USA events enhanced my confidence and proficiency in utilizing English as a worldwide communication medium. These experiences correspond with the findings of Hajar and Manan (2024), which indicate that multilingual learners frequently perceive English as a pathway for cultural interaction and professional progression.

Social Interactions and Multilingual Identity

Peer Influence and Code-Switching

The linguistic conventions of my surroundings have influenced my social relationships. Conversations among Kazakh-speaking classmates frequently transitioned to Russian, mirroring cultural inclinations. During my master's program, I would integrate Kazakh terms into these encounters, challenging linguistic hierarchies and promoting enhanced inclusivity. My use of this technique can be explained with the theory of Critical Multilingual Language Awareness (CMLA), which underscores the necessity of confronting linguistic disparities in social and educational settings (Garcia, 2017).

Volunteering and Multilingual Practices

Volunteering has been a transforming experience, allowing me to utilize my linguistic skills in various significant ways. A notable contribution was the development of trilingual teaching materials in Kazakh, Russian, and English for a project. These resources, comprising vocabulary flashcards and instructional videos, were created to assist students from multilingual backgrounds. This endeavor necessitated meticulous planning to guarantee equal representation of all three languages, thereby preventing bias towards one over the others. Translanguaging, an essential element of my methodology, enabled me to integrate language resources to render content accessible and exciting for learners (Mendoza et al., 2023). Another notable volunteering engagement entailed instructing children in English throughout the Covid-19 period. Most of my students were native speakers of either Kazakh or Russian, prompting me to modify my instructing approach to use both languages as frameworks for presenting English principles. For example, while teaching intricate grammatical principles in English, I would initially provide examples in Russian or Kazakh to ensure understanding and interest before shifting to English. This approach reflects Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, emphasizing the significance of scaffolding in language acquisition via social interaction (Cummins, 2023). These experiences highlight the transformative potential of volunteering to cultivate linguistic equity and advance inclusive learning settings. Utilizing my multilingual skills, I facilitated the establishment of environments where learners from diverse linguistic origins were acknowledged and appreciated. Garcia (2009) contends that translanguaging is a teaching instrument and a social practice, allowing individuals to utilize their complete language repertoires to create meaning and establish connections.

These efforts enhanced my linguistic abilities and enriched my understanding of language's significance in education and society.

Significant Experiences

Immersion in Italy

Living in Italy during exchange programs was a crucial phase in my multilingual development, providing immersion experiences that enhanced my linguistic skills and cultural understanding. For six months, I lived in Genoa, Italy, immersed in a largely Italian-speaking culture. Daily encounters, including ordering food at local cafés, requesting directions, and utilizing public transportation, necessitated my rapid adaptation to the language. Initially, my proficiency in Italian was basic; nonetheless, necessity proved to be the most effective instructor. I utilized translanguaging for communication, frequently employing a combination of English and gestures when my Italian lexicon was insufficient. Throughout translanguaging, I was able to bridge gaps, which enabled me to handle these exchanges while progressively enhancing my confidence in speaking Italian (Garcia, 2009).

A particularly notable instance occurred when I proficiently ordered a complete meal in Italian at a local trattoria. What appeared to be a straightforward assignment was, in reality, the result of weeks spent refining speech, acquiring vocabulary, and analyzing local communication methods. This event solidified my conviction in the efficacy of practical, task-oriented language acquisition. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory posits that language acquisition is most efficacious within genuine social contexts (Cummins, 2023), a principle exhibited during my time in Italy.

These immersion encounters enhanced my linguistic abilities and contributed to my personal development. I developed greater adaptability, empathy, and sensitivity to the nuanced dynamics of multicultural communication. These lessons have endured, influencing my language acquisition strategy and underscoring the significance of multilingualism in fostering intercultural connections.

Broadening Perspectives Through Multilingualism

Engaging with European peers throughout my exchange programs provided a transforming insight into the global aspect of multilingualism. I encountered students who effortlessly engaged in multilingual conversations, transitioning between their original languages and English with proficiency. The capacity to adapt linguistically and culturally was both exciting and humbling. It illustrated the fluidity of multilingual identities, wherein language serves as a communication tool and a medium for articulating various aspects of one's personality and cultural heritage.

In Poland, I experienced a comparable atmosphere of linguistic flexibility. Students exhibited their heritage through music, cuisine, and storytelling in their home languages during a virtual cultural evening at the institution. Observing Polish students use English in their presentations for inclusivity while simultaneously instructing the audience in essential Polish words served as a compelling reminder of the unifying capacity of multilingualism.

Motivated by their example, I presented Kazakh songs and explained their meanings in English, employing Russian where needed to facilitate comprehension. This event enhanced my awareness of my linguistic background and underscored the significance of multilingualism in recognizing cultural diversity.

The conversations with European peers demonstrated the importance of the linguistic identity mobility (Hajar & Manan, 2024). Many peers articulated how different languages elicited unique facets of their identities. A German acquaintance conveyed that speaking English made her more extroverted and humorous, whereas Spanish facilitated greater emotional expressiveness. This is profoundly connected with my experiences, in that Kazakh links me to my cultural heritage, Russian provides clarity and authority, and English facilitates comedy and worldwide connectivity.

Witnessing this mobility motivated me to perceive my multilingualism not as an obstacle to surmount but an asset to be cherished. It motivated me to redirect my emphasis from attaining perfection in a single language to valuing the diverse variety of my linguistic palette. This corresponds with Garcia's (2009) notion of translanguaging, wherein individuals utilize their language arsenal to derive meaning and establish connections in fluid, multilingual contexts.

Language and Identity

Emotional Connections to Languages, Belonging, and Alienation

As already mentioned, every language I speak elicits unique emotional reactions. Kazakh embodies valor and cultural pride, Russian denotes clarity and authority, while English promotes comedy and worldwide connectivity. German appears intellectual and systematic, whereas Italian evokes my dynamic and creative nature. The emotional connections illustrate De Costa et al.'s (2023) ecological perspective, which emphasizes, the relationship between language identity and emotional expression.

Although multilingualism has expanded my identity, it has also resulted in instances of estrangement. During lectures at the University of Genoa, I frequently experienced exclusion when teachers transitioned to Italian. These experiences highlight the difficulties of linguistic hierarchy and the necessity for inclusive practices in multilingual environments (Cummins, 2023).

Challenges and Aspirations

Overcoming Barriers Through Pedagogical Strategies, Future Goals

Acquiring German grammar and perfecting Italian pronunciation presented considerable difficulties. Employing Krashen's material hypothesis, I concentrated on intelligible material, like German news podcasts, to acquire grammar more intuitively. Phonetic instruction in Italian, which involved listening to native speakers and imitating their accents, enhanced my confidence in pronunciation (Cummins, 2023).

In the future, I intend to enhance my academic proficiency in Kazakh and my conversational skills in Italian while delving into other languages. These ambitions embody my belief in perpetual education and the transformative potential of multilingualism in cultivating connections and promoting inclusivity.

Conclusion

This autoethnography has examined the interconnections of language, identity, and culture in my multilingual experience. By reviewing my experiences using CMLA, translanguaging, and investment theories, I have emphasized the impact of multilingualism on both personal development and societal dynamics. My narrative emphasizes the significance of accepting linguistic diversity to promote justice and connection in a progressively globalized world.

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