A Case Study of a Multilingual Individual

Yoana Ivanova Dancheva

University of Essex

Abstract

Research into multilingualism has discovered multiple linguistic phenomena in the past years. It has been found that multilinguals have the incredible ability to use their languages in ways that monolingual people never could. Through the exploration of the background of a multilingual individual, the current study looked into how their language learning history and beliefs about their language abilities are shaped based on their life experiences. A questionnaire and a follow-up interview were used for the data collection in this study. It was found that the level of exposure and use of the languages, as well as the age of acquisition and the ways of learning the languages, play an important role in the level of proficiency that a person has achieved in their languages. The metalinguistic awareness of the individual was demonstrated to benefit their language learning abilities and their sensitivity to crosslinguistic differences and similarities. In addition to that, it was discovered that the individual's language learning beliefs were shaped by their life experiences.

Introduction

A multilingual individual's mind is fascinating. Many people who speak three or more languages can switch between different languages mid-sentence and not get confused. Many say they find it a lot easier to learn additional languages since they already know how to study languages (Haukås, 2016). This paper looks into the life and beliefs of a multilingual individual, who has been exposed to a variety of languages from different language families, and tries to answer the questions:

A Case Study of a Multilingual Individual

1) What are the individual's language background, proficiency in the languages they know, language learning history, and patterns of language use?

2) What are the participant's views and beliefs about their language learning ability, the role of crosslinguistic influence in their language learning and use, and whether they have experienced any perceived positive language interactions?

Finally, the findings from the above-mentioned questions would help uncover the possible links between the participant's background and their views and beliefs are.

Methodology

The data in this project is qualitative and it is collected through means of a questionnaire and an interview. The questionnaire consists of multiple questions regarding the background of the participant. They are asked to explain what languages they use at home, what languages they know and in what situations they are used, how they have acquired those languages and to what extent they are fluent in each of their languages based on the four main components usually used in language tests – speaking, reading, writing, and listening. The following are some example questions that have been included in the questionnaire:

1) For how many years did you learn the language? When did you first start learning it?

2) How did you learn this language?

3) How well do you speak the language and in what situations?

The interview is a follow-up to the questionnaire, as it asks the participant to elaborate on the answers provided in the questionnaire and it additionally requires the individual to talk about their language use and multiple beliefs regarding their language learning abilities, positive and negative interactions between languages, and preferred language learning methods. Such an interview is useful as a follow-up to a questionnaire, as the participant can provide the basics about who they are as a multilingual individual and then expand further on their supposed abilities, beliefs, and views. Some example questions asked during the interview are the following:

1) Do you believe that you would learn a language better in a classroom setting than by exposure in a foreign country?

2) Do you think that the languages, which you already know, influence your ability to learn other languages?

A Case Study of a Multilingual Individual

Findings

1.

The participant comes from a bilingual background – they were born in Ukraine and their mother tongue is Russian. The language is widely spoken in this Eastern European country, but due to political circumstances, Ukrainian has become the nation's official language (Kryzhanivsky *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, the participant had to learn Ukrainian in school and had to speak the language with other citizens of the country. With their mother and relatives, the participant speaks in Russian, but would occasionally use Ukrainian words as well. Answers provided by the participant in the questionnaire show that Ukrainian is nevertheless not one of their strongest languages – the speaker claims to be excellent at reading and understanding but speaking and listening are not part of their strongest abilities. The participant had lived in Ukraine for ten years, after which their family moved to Cyprus, where they learned Greek and English. The participant was admitted to an English-speaking school at the age of ten, where they learned English. They used the language at school, due to all subjects being in English, and spoke English with school friends as well. Nevertheless, the participant still lived in Cyprus, where the official language is Greek. Since people who spoke in Greek surrounded them every day, they learned the language to be able to communicate with the natives and so that they could understand the culture better. They learned Greek grammar in school, but for the most part acquired the language from exposure in the environment they lived in – they had made Greek-speaking friends, with whom they spoke in Greek, they had taken on a job, in which they had to talk in Greek with customers. The participant states that they are a proficient English speaker and a fluent Greek and Ukrainian speaker.

In a study by Johnson and Newport (1989), which looked at immigrants moving to a foreign country and acquiring the language of the state there, it was shown that humans learn languages better in the earlier stages of their lives, regardless of whether the language being learned is their L1, L2, etc. If the language is acquired during childhood, it will develop fully (Johnson and Newport, 1989). The participant in the current study had moved to Cyprus and had started studying English and Greek at the age of ten. An explanation as to why they had learned these two languages so well is that they were exposed to them constantly and were still young enough to learn them fully fairly easily. The answers from the questionnaire show that the participant is a very good Greek speaker in all areas of language

3

learning, but their Greek is still not perfect. This could be explained by the fact that they learned Greek mostly to live in the foreign country and to understand the people, and the language was not the main one used at their school. An explanation as to why Ukrainian is not one of the participant's strongest languages would be that they had left Ukraine at a fairly early stage of their life, which prevented them from being exposed to the language constantly. Language attrition is the "result of a long-term lack of stimulation" (Köpke, 2007, p. 125). It is extremely common in immigrants since the L1 is not easily accessible (Schmid and Keijzer, 2009). The participant claims that they speak Ukrainian only when they have to in conversations with their mother or their other relatives. Aside from those situations, however, they use mainly Russian.

The participant uses Russian and Greek with their closest family members – they speak in Russian with their mother and switch between Greek and English when speaking with their siblings. They claim to insert English or sometimes even Ukrainian words whenever they are explaining something to their relatives in Russian. Since they went to an English-speaking school and the main language of teaching at the university they currently go to is English, the participant has learned the vocabulary used to explain numerous topics only in this language. This puts them in a position, in which if they do not know a word in the language of the conversation, they would either have to explain in detail what exactly they are trying to say, or simply switch to English for the words that are unknown to them. It has been shown that multilingual children tend to have smaller vocabularies than their monolingual peers (Bialystok, 2001). This comes from the fact that multilinguals know fewer words in each of their languages because their developing cognitive capacities impose limitations on the number of words known in each language (Bialystok, 2001). This could be the case with multilingual grownups as well. Regardless of age, it is very probable that a multilingual individual has learned different topics in separate languages, in which case the words they associate with each topic are in a certain language. As the data collected from the participant in the current study shows, this could pose limitations as to how much a multilingual can say in one language on a certain topic. Additionally, there can be a positive effect of L2/L3/Ln on L1 only if the speaker is exposed to their L1 at an appropriate level; otherwise, attrition in L1 may occur (Kecskes, 2008). Kecskes (2008) additionally states that in cases where the L2/L3/Ln is being used for academic development, continuous exposure to the L1 has to be maintained. The context in which the languages are used is also more important than the quality of exposure (Kecskes, 2008). Otherwise, it would be highly possible for the individual to be a proficient speaker in

some areas of the language, but not in others, which is exactly the case with the participant in this study.

Sullivan *et al.* (2017) state that multilingual adults have slower lexical access. This could potentially lead to code-switching. The participant in the current study claimed to switch between Greek and English when speaking with their siblings and stated that they tend to insert English or Ukrainian words when speaking in Russian with their relatives. Since the speaker knows an abundance of languages, they tend to find it easier to switch between the different languages they know in a single utterance, rather than to stick to monolingualism. With their friends, the participant speaks mostly in English, regardless of whether the group of people they are talking to consists of Greek-speaking individuals or people from other countries. The participant says that most of their friends know English proficiently – they either went to school with them or met them at university in England. Code-switching is a prominent feature in their daily speech, as they switch between different languages not only when they speak with their family, but when they are communicating with their friends as well – if they know Greek, they will include Greek slang in their speech as well. Code-switching is a very intricate process, which requires a great understanding of both the pragmatics and the grammar of the languages involved, and it demonstrates the ability of the speaker to correctly select the appropriate language depending on the context of the conversation and its topic (Meisel, 1994). While code-switching can also be prompted by a lack of knowledge of words in the language, it generally happens in order to overcome obstacles to communication (Ngussa and Lyimo, 2019).

While still in school, the participant had decided to study French and German as two additional foreign languages. French was a language they had started studying at the age of ten (along with Greek and English), and then they had started studying German at the age of thirteen as well. Currently, they are studying both French and German at university and have additionally started taking Spanish as their seventh language. The participant says they have a good understanding of all three languages that they are studying at university. Regardless of their beliefs about how well they know those languages, the participant is currently studying French and German at C1 level and Spanish at A2. They use all three languages in a classroom setting but do not feel confident enough to speak the languages with native speakers daily. Many learners of foreign languages feel anxious when they have to talk to native speakers. This can come from the inability of the learner to present themselves in a way that is consistent with their self-image (Kralova, 2016). The participant states that their abilities in both

A Case Study of a Multilingual Individual

German and French are not perfect. A possible explanation as to why they still find those two languages difficult even though they have been learning them for a while is that the languages were being learned simultaneously. When a person starts studying a new language while still learning another one, the learning process could be temporarily interrupted (Roehr-Brackin, 2020a). The participant had to learn four languages in the span of just three years when they had moved to Cyprus, which could have led to some complications in the learning process. The languages they had been learning had been quite different syntactically but also very different in their word roots – Greek, French, English and German come from three different language families. While the participant had the initiative to learn English and Greek well in order to live adequately in Cyprus, German and French were purely two subjects, which they were taking at school. Therefore, the exposure they had in those two languages could have been only from language classes, TV series, movies, and music. The difference in the motive for learning all these languages furthermore plays an important role in how well the participant has acquired them. According to Gardner (1985), the desire of a learner to be able to communicate and to be integrated into the society of their foreign language plays an important role in how well they learn the language. Nevertheless, Gardner (1985) also states that the motivation of a person to learn a language for the pragmatic gains of foreign language proficiency, such as being able to do well in the classroom, is also an important factor in language learning. It is possible, however, that the ability to integrate into society is a stronger force for success than the desire to do well in class.

The participant says that they sometimes get confused when they are speaking in one language and immediately after have to switch to another. They add that this confusion is especially prominent with French, German, and Spanish. Bialystok *et al.* (2011) claim that multilingual adults are slower at accessing their languages. Additionally, multilinguals demonstrate slower first response times on verbal fluency tasks (Sandoval *et al.*, 2010). This corresponds with the findings from the current research since the participant claims to find it harder to switch from one language to another, which essentially increases their response time. The participant is fairly new to learning Spanish, but the confusion that comes from having to quickly switch from French to German and vice versa could come from the task being more resource-intensive.

2.

The participant believes that they are a good language learner, and adds that for them, learning a language is a lot easier when they are exposed to the language fully, for example, by being in the

country where the language is spoken. Learner's beliefs shape their behaviours and choice of learning strategies (Tanaka and Ellis, 2003), which could sometimes appear to be disadvantageous. In the case of the participant in this study, the inability to go to a host country to learn the language could slow down the learner's acquisition of the language. The participant believes that learning grammar is beneficial for them in a classroom setting, as a language teacher can explain to them how specific grammatical rules are used, but they state that learning vocabulary, slang, and generally feeling more comfortable speaking the language comes from living in the foreign country.

The participant believes that their proficiency in English and their good understanding of French aid them in the studying of Spanish. They, however, state that Russian, Ukrainian, and Greek do not help them in the learning of other languages, as the language families, to which those languages belong, are not connected to French or Spanish. The participant believes that none of their languages helps them with the learning of German, which for them is the hardest language out of all the ones that they have learned or are currently studying. According to Kellerman (1979), the greater the typological distance between two languages, the lower the interference. This would, therefore, explain why the current study's participant claims that their L1, L2, and L3 do not play a major role in the acquisition of their other languages. Nevertheless, it can be argued that despite the participant's beliefs, all of their languages aid them in the learning of new ones. Despite their L1, L2, and L3 being typologically distanced from the rest of their languages, the individual still possesses metalinguistic awareness. This ability to focus on languages as objects and consequently to dissect and reflect on them (Jessner-Schmid, 2015) must help them when they learn new languages, as they can reflect on the syntax, phonetics, etc. of their other languages and compare them to those of the language, which they are currently studying.

The participant, just like many other multilingual individuals, has experienced perceived positive language interaction, in their case, with the learning of Spanish. They state that French and English help them with vocabulary learning and with grammar as well. The reason why they are learning Spanish so efficiently could be due to their metalinguistic awareness, which provides them with the ability to make comparisons between languages and thus learn new languages easier and better (Roehr-Brackin, 2020a). There are also many similarities between Spanish, French, and English in terms of word roots and sentence structures, so this could additionally be aiding them in the learning of Spanish. Regardless of how close the languages are, the participant's metalinguistic awareness is a key

factor in the easier learning of Spanish. It heightens their sensitivity to any crosslinguistic differences and similarities (Roehr-Brackin, 2020b), many of which they have found between these three languages.

3.

The participant believes that learning a language is easiest when one is living in the country in which the language is spoken. The participant has a history of learning foreign languages due to the living circumstances. Firstly, they had to learn Ukrainian because it was the official language of their homeland and it is the language they were being taught in at school; then, they had to learn Greek because they had moved to Cyprus, where the natives of the country speak Greek, and English, due to their school subjects being taught purely in English. The participant has learned half of the languages they know today because they have had to move and have had to adapt to the new environment. Their core beliefs have been shaped by the living circumstances, which have also proven to be beneficial in the acquisition of foreign languages.

Conclusion

The multilingual in general is a complicated individual, whose perception of the world is being shaped by the languages they know. The different life opportunities shape the person's core beliefs and make them a unique individual. The languages in the mind all work with one another, influence each other, and create unique patterns for each multilingual person. The current study, which explored a single multilingual individual, was able to discover an abundance of findings in relation to their beliefs and experiences. Firstly, it was found that the participant possessed metalinguistic awareness, which helped them with the learning of new languages. Their language proficiency was affected based on the age from which the individual had started learning the foreign language and the type and quality of exposure that they had in said language. The participant had experienced language attrition as a result of a lack of language input after moving to a foreign country. They possessed the ability to code-switch in their daily speech as well. It should be made explicit here that while code-switching is a process used to overcome communication barriers, it is also an ability that proves that the multilingual individual is highly knowledgeable of the syntax and pragmatics of their languages. Finally, it was found that the belief that language learning is easier when living in a foreign country was an outcome

of the participant's own experience with having to learn a language due to moving to a foreign country.

Since the current research examined a single individual, the findings cannot be generalised for all multilinguals. Nevertheless, the outcomes from this study serve as an explanation for certain experiences which some multilinguals might have gone through and certain beliefs which they might have. A suggestion for future research would be to examine a larger group of multilingual participants and ask them similar questions regarding their thoughts and experiences, which would further help in the investigation of this research topic.

References

Bialystok, E. (2001) *Bilingualism in development: language, literacy, and cognition*. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Bialystok, E., Luk, G., Peets, K. F. and Yang, S. (2011) 'Receptive vocabulary differences in monolingual and bilingual adults', *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, *15*(2), 397–401. https://doi.org/10.1017/s136672891100040x.

Gardner, R. C. (1985) *Social Psychology and Second Language Learning: The Role of Attitudes and Motivation*. London: Edward Arnold.

Haukås, Å. (2016) 'Teachers' beliefs about multilingualism and a multilingual pedagogical approach', *International Journal of Multilingualism*, *13*(1), 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2015.1041960.

Kellerman, E. (1979) 'Transfer and Non-Transfer: Where We Are Now', *2*(1), 37.

Jessner-Schmid, U. (2015). Multilingualism. *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 65–71. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.53035-9.

Johnson, J. S. and Newport, E. L. (1989) 'Critical period effects in second language learning: The influence of maturational state on the acquisition of English as a second language', *Cognitive Psychology*, *21*(1), 60–99. https://doi.org/10.1016/001002-85(89)90003-0.

Kecskes, I. (2008) 'The effect of the second language on the first language', *Babylonia, 2*, 30-34. https://www.albany.edu/faculty/ikecskes/files/babyloniaproofkecskes.pdf.

Kralova, Z. (2016) *Foreign Language Anxiety*. Slovakia: Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra.

Kryzhanivsky, S. A., Stebelsky, I., Hajda, L. A., Zasenko, O. E., Yerofeyev, I. A and Makuch, A. (2021) *Ukraine*. Available at: https://www.britannica.com/place/Ukraine (Accessed: 9 June 2021).

Köpke, B. (2007) *Language Attrition: Theoretical Perspectives*. John Benjamins Publishing Co.

Meisel, J. M. (1994) 'Code-Switching in Young Bilingual Children', *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *16*(4), 413–439. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0272263100013449.

Ngussa, B. M. and Lyimo, N. S. (2019) 'Correlation between code change strategy, teaching modalities and learners' competence-based abilities: A Case of Arusha Technical College, Tanzania', *International Journal of Educational Policy Research and Review*, *6*(3), 54–62. https://doi.org/10.15739/IJEPRR.19.008.

Roehr-Brackin, K. (2020a) *Lecture 4: Metalinguistic awareness in multilinguals*. LG216: Multilingualism.

Roehr-Brackin, K. (2020b) *Lecture 2: Multiple languages in the mind: A bilingual advantage?*. LG216: Multilingualism.

Sandoval, T. C., Gollan, T. H., Ferreira, V. S. and Salmon, D. P. (2010) 'What causes the bilingual disadvantage in verbal fluency? The dual-task analogy', *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, *13*(2), 231–252. https://doi.org/10.1017/s1366728-909990514.

Schmid, M. S. and Keijzer, M. (2009) 'First language attrition and reversion among older migrants', *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, *2009*(200), 83-101.

Sullivan, M. D., Poarch, G. J. and Bialystok, E. (2017) 'Why is lexical retrieval slower for bilinguals? Evidence from picture naming', *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, *21*(3), 479–488. https://doi.org/10.1017/s1366728917000694.

Tanaka, K. and Ellis, R. (2003) 'Study-abroad, Language Proficiency, and Learner Beliefs about Language Learning', *JALT Journal*, *25*(1), 63–85.

Thompson, A. (2009) Background questionnaire - includes original question for PPLI [Database record]. Retrieved from IRIS. https://www.iris-database.org/iris/app/home/detail?id=york%3a815148&ref=search.

Yates, L. and Piller, I. (2011) *Semi-structured interview* [Database record]. Retrieved from IRIS. https://www.irisdatabase.org/iris/app/home/detail?id=york%3a927151&ref=search.