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Voicing Bilingual Youths' Situated Knowledge: An Introspective Inquiry into Migration, Schooling, and Language Transitions

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Abstract: This article presents an introspective and participatory exploration of bilingual youth experiences with migration, schooling, and linguistic-cultural transitions. Drawing on individual interviews and a joint discussion with two siblings of different ages and genders from the same migrant family, the study foregrounds the situated, emotionally charged knowledge of young people as expert informants. Their narratives reveal divergent, yet intersecting pathways of adaptation shaped by age, gender, educational shifts, and cultural negotiation. Through a sensitive anthropological lens and a reflexive, autoethnographic approach, the researcher acts as both observer and facilitator of introspection, supporting youth-led meaning-making. The youths' voices are placed at the centre of analysis, illuminating how emotional and social dimensions of language learning and identity formation are lived and articulated. This contribution exemplifies decolonising, youth-centred research within applied linguistics, advancing sociological and ethnographic understanding of multilingual migration experiences.

Keywords: Participatory research, bilingualism, culture, migration, youth, children

Introduction

The globalised world sees more and more mixed couples and mixed-heritage children being born. There is also more and more international migration (Livingston/ Brown 2017; Statista 2024a,b). 7.5 % of the Polish population is of foreign origin. The Main Statistical Office of Poland (2024) registered that almost six thousand mixed-nationality marriages took place in 2023, which constituted 3,8% of all marriages. In 2023, 6.7% of children were born to foreign mothers in Poland and 107 thousand foreign students enrolled onto Polish universities in 2023/2024. This probably lags behind the US, where 27% of students speak a language other than English at home, and over 400 languages are spoken in the US schools (NCES 2023); however, the trend is also on the rise in Poland. There is a growing population of people who are bi- or multilingual, and their identity formation and feelings of belonging are of great interest to the scientific community (Robinson 2024; Copeland 2015; Crippen/ Brew 2007). According to Erikson (c.f. Stevens 1983), the fifth stage of human development falls between 12 and 18 and is labelled as "identity vs role confusion". It is an interesting time to ask about self-identification and experiencing living in-between two cultures and two languages. A participatory approach was chosen to enable honest and unbiased transmission of knowledge, deriving from free narratives led by research participants themselves.

1. Method

The interviews were carried out with two bilingual siblings of British and Polish descent, currently living and studying in Poland. A girl, age 19 and a boy, age 16. Both the youths and their parents gave informed consent for the discussions to take place one-on-one and for the materials to be used in this article. The purpose of the interviews was to gain a greater understanding of their lived experiences related to being bilingual and transitioning between 2 (boy) or 3 (girl) countries in their lifetime. Interviews (Cresswell 1998) took place in the home environment of the interlocutors at the time of their convenience. They knew the theme of the interview a few days ahead. The interviewer was simply a facilitator of deeper reflection, which ultimately was led by the research participants at their own pace and in their own, individually chosen directions. Both youths declared that their perceived language acquisition and language fluency in both languages are at the very same level. Both interlocutors chose to do the interview in Polish when the choice was offered, but the older one instantly suggested that codeswitching may be required if she feels she can express herself better in English on a given topic. She felt that sometimes she could describe something more precisely in English. In order to safeguard the anonymity of the family, additional contextual details cannot be disclosed. The authors recognise that fuller information regarding the family situation and circumstances might facilitate a more nuanced interpretation of the empirical materials by external readers; however, ethical requirements and commitments to participant confidentiality preclude this.

In the data collection process, Denzin's decolonisation efforts were adopted by using critical personal narratives (cf. Denzin/ Lincoln 2005: 386) for sensitive anthropological meaning-making. Sensitive anthropology is a research approach that prioritises not only data collection but also a deep understanding of participants' experiences, emotions, perspectives, and social contexts (see Caskey/ Rosenthal 2005; Shah 2004; Konecki 2019). Building on this perspective, one can speak of a "sensitive research process," especially when working with groups whose age or social vulnerability demands heightened ethical attention and protective protocols – even if the topic itself is not inherently sensitive (Caskey/ Rosenthal 2005; Shah 2004). This approach is framed by the concept of sensitising ideas, discussed in detail by Konecki (2019: 32–36). Jackson (2002) highlights the central role of empathy and dialogue within anthropology as a methodological practice. In this context, the researchers adopted an attitude of humility, openness to participants' needs, and an acknowledgement of their own lack of prior knowledge. This stance was met with trust and a willingness from participants to share their experiences. Full anonymity and the right to withdraw at any stage – including after giving informed consent – were guaranteed. The research topic proved to be both engaging and meaningful to those involved.

2. Methodological scope and limitations

This article is intentionally grounded in a narrow empirical base, consisting of two in-depth narrative interviews with bilingual siblings. Rather than aiming at generalisation or empirical verification of existing quantitative findings, the study adopts an exploratory, qualitative case-study perspective. The analytical value of such an approach lies

not in representativeness but in its capacity to illuminate processes, tensions, and meanings as they are experienced and articulated by young bilingual individuals in specific socio-educational contexts. The narratives presented here should therefore be read as situated accounts that exemplify possible trajectories of bilingual development and identity negotiation, rather than as evidence confirming or refuting broader patterns established in large-scale research.

3. Voicing Youths' Situated Knowledge

Both interlocutors felt that having a second language enables them to be more private in the public sphere when they have a secret message to convey and they do not wish for the others to overhear it. It felt like a certain advantage to them and something special that distinguished their family amongst others.

> My very first memory of when I noticed I was bilingual was when I was 3 and my mother was very angry with me at bath time, when I was mixing 2 languages. She told me that I must stick to one language in one sentence, or no one (apart from her) will understand me. This way she was pushing me to remember more words and not to choose the shorter/easier ones, which was what I did as a baby. […] Also when a girl in Saudi Arabia teased me, tricked me and made me eat hot chilies from the bush, I was distraught, and my mum said just to tell her in Polish that she is a 'stupid cow', so that she would not even know what you are saying but I would know and make myself feel better…F19.

The female interlocutor also felt that fluent knowledge of another language elevated her social status in the classroom, but on the other hand, people could have been intentionally unpleasant towards her, through some sort of jealousy of this "superpower". She told me that it is very hard for her, she does not identify 100% with any of the two nations/cultures. She feels she does not fit in either because of this language difference. She identifies with both cultures the same, but feels she does not fully fit with either and that people notice this. One of the examples she gave was the sense of humour and the lifestyle. Moreover, she claims that she does not fit in with national/cultural values, that she renegotiates them internally, and in each nation, sees them, understands them, but does not agree with them 100%. Moreover, she feels that because currently at her home English is the family language, she does not express her feelings and emotions well in public space in Poland. In Polish, emotional states and feelings are much less discussed in open, and therefore she often does not how to express her emotional states in public, so that they are efficiently conveyed and understood by others. She concluded that sometimes she does not fully understand the "social cues" [English expression was used: code switching]. She does not know if this is her personal feature or if this comes with her migration experiences. When she entered elementary school in Poland, she has already completed 2 years of primary school in English in Saudi Arabia. The place in Poland the family moved to was new to all of them, so mother did not know other mothers, whilst they knew each other from school, and all their children played together since birth. This created a barrier in entering these closed ties.

> Being always on the edge of the social circle, I was not always certain what was normal and what was not in this new culture, but I identified it and was aware of this

> problem I have. I considered many behaviours of others as a possible norm, overlooked negative behaviours, I was very open for things that were considered by others as outside of social norm, as I was not aware it was not acceptable. This made it difficult for me to decipher if someone likes me or not and if what they say means what they say. I often do not know if someone deliberately tries to offend me, I just take it for granted that it is just a cultural misunderstanding…..F19.

The female interlocutor claimed that her experiences were far more negative than those of her brother. She felt that because her brother entered the same institutions she attended before, people had time to get used to their difference and were more accepting of it. Also, younger children had more exposure to the English language at a much younger age, due to the increase in internet use and the use of computer games from an earlier age. The same applies to ethnicity. In my brothers class there were two black girls. They were Polish with an African father. Both the school and the kids did not make a fuss about it, as they had before, when there was the first black girl in the village who attended my school 3 years earlier. At her time she caused a sensation and many uncomfortable comments and questions. By the time younger girls entered the school the situation was normalised, and their transition to this school was much more pleasant.

The 16-year-old male sibling felt that good command of English helped him academically, with easier search for information online, easy achievements in English classes, easier acquisition of new languages, which in his view are somewhat similar to English. He studied German in primary school and now he studies Spanish. He does not remember what language his dreams are in, as he never remembers them but he feels more connected with Poland, as he spent most of his life here. This does not mean he does not feel British. He claims to feel absolutely fine in both countries and in both language environments. Like his sister, he thought of English as more private language and Polish as the more public one, due to current schooling and circle of friends outside his family. He noticed that it is easier for him to express emotions in English and sometimes he mixes up the words, or cannot find the equivalent word in the other language. He finds Polish harder to learn due to complicated cases and sentence structures. During the interview it was observed that the boy often used English way of building sentences in Polish and also used direct translation of the idioms from English to Polish, which was contextually a little confusing for someone who is not used to dealing with mixed-language environment. He was aware of this 'weakness' in his Polish, and also aware that people notice that he is different, starting with his English name and half of his surname. He said it never bothered him that people were just curious about this and when he explained his situation they were always ok with it. Polish teachers, however, always underline how it will be impossible for him to speak and write 100% properly in Polish and highlight his difference, although the boy thinks he can always communicate with anyone in any language with no problem. He claims to know a massive amount of words in both languages and notices that he speaks honestly and does not use metaphors when confronted with difficult, emotional situation but speaks the truth and how it is from his point of view.

The focus on difference is, in his view more acknowledged by teachers and older people; his peers do not pay attention to it, they do not care. In his view Polish society in general is less open than the British one. Less open to diversity, religious differences

and the skin colour. He observed that it is hard for many Poles to have a concept that someone can have dual nationality. However, when explained in detail they seem to understand it at the end and are ok with it. Male interlocutor pays far more attention to national symbols than his older sister. He observed that in England there are usually no national emblems or religious ones in schools and classrooms, whilst in Polish schools, they are very much present and cultivated. He feels attached to symbols from both countries and has deep patriotic feelings for both countries, yet when comparing himself to his peers, he reflects that perhaps he is less attached to being surrounded by symbols when compared to his Polish friends and more when compared to his British acquaintances. Additional reflections pertained to globalisation of food. He felt that through availability of many international products, the world shares more and more access to regional tastes, flavours, spices and food habits. He thinks that it is a very good phenomenon that increases culinary imagination and, therefore, cultural awareness. He thinks that openness to other types of cuisine is very much related to individual and not national taste. Whilst pondering on differences he remembered that Polish people use many diminution of nouns, and that they are less strict with the rules that are not enforceable. He claims it is a West-East divide to not obey road restrictions and traffic regulations.

Furthermore, there is more attitude towards us vs. the state, instead of us and the state. However, it often depends on people's socio-educational environment, which my interlocutor called: background (*tło*) which was the direct language. He used many similar contextually incorrect language calques, usually associated with non-native speakers. When asked about it, he said that many of his friends speak like this, that there is more and more loan translations as they are often quicker, easier to make "mind shortcuts" as he called them. He often wonders about the future and having his own children. He ponders what language he would like to pass on to them, and it much depends on the circumstances, such as wife's nationality and their residency. He thinks it is probably because of his own situation that he gives this a lot of thought. If his wife was Polish it would be his job to teach his kids English and vice-versa. He would also pay attention to the transmission of cultural values from both nations, which merge in his family home. He highlighted that English speakers, particularly from the UK, love sarcasm and that Polish people are often less willing to joke about themselves, and can sometimes misinterpret friendly banter as intentional offence. He also knows that Polish people are not big smilers when it comes to walking down the street. He says, when he walks downtown, he tries to keep a neutral facial expression like the rest of the population. He thinks that foreigners interpret it as sadness or even aggression, which is not the case.

In stressful situations, the female interlocutor uses code switching to privatise her emotions and depending, in which country she is, she chooses the opposite language to the one widely spoken. Depending on where the family lived, the language spoken at home became the private one, in opposition to the one spoken outside in public. In England and Saudi it was Polish in Poland it is English. The interviewee often wonders about languages, and ponders if the language does not have an impact on our culture. She gave an example of Inuit who have hundreds of expressions to describe different types of snow. She felt that sometimes she takes the language context from one language and uses it in the other or looses the sensitivity required in the language. For instance people

in Poland perceive her as brutally honest, very blunt. She knows that in Polish culture, some things are not said as it creates a cultural faux pas. So some people take it as offensive when she states the obvious and names the elephant in the room. In England, British people noticed that her language is more formal and less 'young', which makes them think that she is extremely polite and educated. Whilst this is due to contacts with family members who are all adults. She sometimes has an impression that she speaks English better than the locals, more grammatically correct, more advanced, with more nuanced vocabulary. I avoid errors that are in daily use. Maybe it is because she reads a lot of books, where the language is more formal and more poetic. Even her father is sometimes in shock how well she can phrase things and at what level.

> I use more English when I speak to my animals, but I switch to Polish when I am really cross with the dog, when the dog embarrassed me in front of someone. […] With my brother we switch, in conversations and in writing sometimes we do it in Polish sometimes in English, there is no rule. Sometimes it is hard for me to set my brain back into English when I just come back from long-time interaction with the Polish environment.

She thinks it maybe because she learnt both languages as separate codes and separately, so she does not translate words in her head from one to another. A word, a sound, a written representation connects in her head with the correct image of the item named in either language. "It is the same for me with other new languages, my friends translate everything and their base is Polish, I do not. I make a connection of the sound in my head with the item… I think with images and a sound has a meaning connected to the image in my head, words create images in my head…". She thinks it makes it more intuitive for her to use another language.

The female interlocutor felt that she is more open to an average person and also it can be a problem in interpreting situations. If she has an argument with someone she feels that this person has a reason why they think or do something. She accepts that everyone has a personal reason for actions, so it annoys her if someone wants her to explain her own reasons for actions, it should be taken for granted that there is a reason, and the reason is important to her as it is to that person.

> If something looks like it makes no sense, I know deep inside it has a sense to someone who is doing this. I do not need to question them. Of course it is all subjective but it must be true to that person. Because of this need to explain actions all the time, I feel I do not have the same values as the Polish people in general. For instance my friends think a lot about religion, even if they are non believers, and more people have religious symbols in their home and in their possession. Although my own family is religious and has religious traditions, items, and religious memorabilia have much less meaning or importance to me." "Honesty and transparency are the core British values, being honest, saying the truth, and facing its consequences. It is also very normal to talk to people you do not know and will never meet again. British people are open and chatty, so I also have less barriers to share information with strangers, with others. I could not cheat at exams or use illegal methods to reach the goal. I observe this trade amongst my Polish peers, they are very resourceful in that way. F19

The female interlocutor felt that it is very easy for her to make shallow acquaintances, but more profound, meaningful ones are difficult for her to foster, because there is limited understanding. “I have an impression it is difficult for others to accept something they do not understand or did not experience themselves...”. On the other hand, her brother felt that his difference makes it easy to start a new connection. Being bilingual can help in making a conversation, it is interesting in itself as a subject of a conversation. Also, the majority of people nowadays understand English, and when they come across someone from abroad, they expect them to speak it.

> I never had any problems with speaking to people and making new friends. I feel that the majority of my meaningful, deep friendships are here in Poland, but this is because I live here and new contacts outside of Poland are more shallow, less intense. Also online. It is very individual I think how we create new ties but I think that my experience makes me more open to differences. I think that British culture is more open and tolerant, more accepting of migrants and other religions. I like people from other countries, because they give me a wider perspective and they are very interesting to talk to and to get to know their experiences and points of view. I must admit I feel more adequately spoken in English rather than in Polish, yet I can get by in both languages without an inferiority complex. M16

The girl passed the CAE at 100% in each category, she was also A+ student in the Polish language with 96% score in extended A levels exams (*Matura*). She knows that she thinks differently in both languages, she dreams in both, but separately, she thinks some school subjects are easier in one language or another. For instance, in her view maths and physics are much easier to understand in English as the vocabulary and the explanation of processes is simpler, more logical, more precise and more refined. In her view English has more words specific to these areas of expertise. In Polish the same words are used in too many areas, which makes it confusing. She gave an example of words MOC (potency/power) and FORCE (*siła*). She said she does not know how to describe the difference but force is more appealing to her to understand it. Could it be that the first two formative years in English school set her brain to think mathematically in English?

She likes languages, she has absolute hearing, is very musically talented. She finds languages fascinating. She thinks she can hear more differences between sounds and has no difficulty producing correct sounds in either language. Her friends do not hear subtle differences in sounds specific to certain languages. In her view Polish has a much nicer, soft sound to English, the simmering and shushing noises are very beautiful, but English is easier to sing in. She thinks she could not sing a patriotic song in English, in Polish yes, maybe the matter of schooling. She ponders that she shares deep patriotic feeling towards Poland – more than her peers. She is always very protective of image of Poland abroad, always ready to defend and to show positive aspects. She is ready to collect other people’s rubbish, so it does not shock foreigners – the mess in the woods – she smiles at foreigners so they do not think Polish people are unfriendly and said.

> My peers criticise Poland, are unwilling to give a sincere smile to a stranger asking for directions, think I am crazy collecting other people’s rubbish from the road.

When abroad, she claims to be Polish. However, when the question is posed about her roots, she wonders do they mean "where I was born (England), where I live now (Poland), where I have ever lived (Europe and Middle East), what my citizenship and passport are (dual), what nationality are my parents". It is not a simple question and not a simple answer for her.

> I am personally very curious if I would have answered differently if we had chosen English for the language of the interview, and I honestly do not know. If you want, we can try in a few weeks. I must add that when I cannot resolve a complex problem or find an answer to a complicated question, I give it a go in the other language, and it often helps. One more thing, I know my friends are disgusted with my drinking nuclear strong tea with milk in it, but I am not keen on English breakfast, Fish in batter, or Sunday roast for example…. And they are also English traditions and I can hardly believe people actually eat it with pleasure. F19

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Touching on the high academic achievements of both research participants, with a significant linguistic advantage in learning both (and additional) languages to the highest standards by the female interlocutor, corresponds with the consistent female advantage in language acquisition has been widely documented across decades and diverse populations. A large-scale meta-analysis by Willingham and Cole (1997), encompassing data from four million students over a 30-year period, demonstrated that girls consistently outperformed boys in language-related tasks, particularly in writing and the use of grammatical conventions, expression, and spelling. Although differences in reading and verbal reasoning were smaller, they still favoured females (Hyde/ Lynn 1988). Numerous studies reinforce this gender gap across different linguistic contexts. For example, Burstall (1975) and Davies (2004) found British girls outperformed boys in French language acquisition.

Similarly, Pae (2004) noted superior reading comprehension in Korean EFL female learners, while Boyle (1987) found Chinese female students achieved higher English proficiency scores. Cross-national research by Lietz (2006), Rosén (2001), and Wagemaker (1996) also confirmed a global trend favouring females in linguistic performance. Gender differences are evident early in life. Girls tend to develop communicative skills earlier than boys, with broader vocabularies and more complex sentence structures (Ramer 1976; Huttenlocher et al. 1991). These patterns extend into formal education, where boys and girls respond differently to instructional strategies and learning environments (Pires et al. 2017).

Van der Slik, van Hout, and Schepens (2015), in a study of over 27,000 adult learners of Dutch as a second language, found women consistently outperformed men in speaking and writing. This raises questions about potential gender-based motivational, social, or cognitive differences. While immersion is typically associated with improved fluency, male migrants in this study did not surpass their female counterparts, possibly due to traditional gender roles, cultural expectations, or stronger female adaptability to linguistic identity shifts.

Supporting this view, Lobodzinska (1985) found Polish women in mixed marriages were more successful than their American husbands in adjusting to new cultural and

linguistic environments. Elsner and Lohe (2016) further argued that gender stereotypes in language education – such as the predominance of female language teachers and societal perceptions of female linguistic aptitude – may reinforce girls' greater success in language learning.

However, in this particular case study, it is the younger, male research participant who chose to speak from a position of power and perceived advantage (cf. Boggs 1984) whilst the female interlocutor, despite excellent linguistic skills that camouflaged her bilingualism, felt much less fitting with either of the cultural groups she represented. It is hard to tell if this is due to greater emotional sensitivity (Alsaker/ Kroger 2006), reflectivity on the verge of the impostor syndrome (Langford/ Clance 1993), or the age gap presented that placed both of the siblings at the age of vulnerability (Coleman 2010).

The feelings of distinction, of being different and not fitting in, in either cultural group, although self-identifying with both (that have been experienced by the female interlocutor), correspond with the prior research, which predominantly portrays states of 'betwixt and between' in identity construction as unsettling, given the ambiguity and uncertainty they raise (Turner 1974). However, in Turner's rite of passage, this interim state is temporary, whilst in the case of our study, it appears to be a permanent state. Interestingly, this state appears to be more upsetting to the female interlocutor, who also takes the role of the outside observer of both groups, reflecting on their attitudes and behaviours from an external point of view.

Experiencing being the outsider is quite common for migrant children and for dual-heritage people (Purpuri et al. 2024). The process of code-switching and standing out as linguistically or culturally different among single-language peers is not only a normal phenomenon in bilingual language development but is also supported by key theoretical frameworks and empirical research in applied linguistics and sociocultural learning. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) provides a critical lens for understanding this process. Within the ZPD, learners advance from what they can do independently to what they can achieve with guidance from more knowledgeable others (Eun 2017). For bilingual students, this includes navigating two linguistic systems, often relying on their first language (L1) to scaffold understanding in their second language (L2). Code-switching in this context is not a deficit or confusion, but rather a strategic and cognitively complex tool that enables learners to operate within their ZPD.

Moreover, research has documented a range of normal developmental processes in second language acquisition, such as interference, interlanguage, silent periods, code-switching, and even temporary L1 attrition (Roseberry-McKibbin 2002). These stages reflect the internal negotiation and experimentation bilingual students undergo as they build competency in a new linguistic and cultural system.

The works of Garcia and Ortiz (1988) and Collier (1989) further highlight the interrelationship between first and second language development, suggesting that progress in one language can support or interact with progress in the other. This idea aligns with Cummins's (1979, 2000) Interdependence Hypothesis, which posits that there are entire areas of shared, non-linguistic knowledge – common underlying proficiency – that develop through mutual interaction between languages and form the foundation for a child's overall language development.

This interconnected growth often distinguishes bilingual learners from their monolingual peers, leading to visible differences in classroom interaction, learning strategies, and identity expression. The interview data reinforces these points through a qualitative, youth-centred investigation of bilingual youths. Their narratives reveal how emotional and social experiences, shaped by migration, schooling, age, gender, and cultural negotiation, intersect with their language development. The very act of code-switching or standing out linguistically becomes part of their identity formation and adaptation, highlighting a complex, situated process rather than a deviation from the norm. In sum, the presence of code-switching and perceived difference among bilingual learners should not be pathologised or seen as abnormal. Rather, they are integral components of multilingual identity development and linguistic adaptation, deeply embedded in socio-cultural and developmental contexts.

The engagement with a broad body of literature in the concluding section is not intended as empirical validation derived from the interview data, but as a contextual and interpretative framework within which the participants' narratives can be situated. References to established findings on gender differences, bilingual cognition, or identity development serve to highlight points of convergence, tension, or divergence between individual lived experience and dominant scholarly discourses. In this sense, the study does not claim explanatory sufficiency across all discussed dimensions; rather, it seeks to demonstrate how multiple analytical lenses may intersect within a single, complex biographical case. The breadth of themes reflects the participants' own narrative emphases and the inherently multidimensional nature of bilingual schooling and migration-related experience.

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