



Exploring Individual Bilingualism of Albanian Immigrant Children in Greece: what the Language Biographies Tell Us

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Abstract

Demographic and social changes caused by globalization have led societies from multiculturalism to super-diversity, demanding for a reconsidered conceptualization of the category of "migrant", whereas notions such as language, language speaker and competence are also reconsidered through revised approaches [1]. Within this framework, the "truncated" repertoires [2] of new migrants reflect their real life trajectories and as Blommaert [2] notes "The answer to the puzzle of our repertoires is in our biographies and the wider histories of the communities in which we live."

For countries like Greece where immigrants constitute 8,5% -11% of the population it is important for educators and curriculum planners to be cognizant of how the individual, and therefore the group he represents, is affected by the demands of globalization. The percentage of Albanian students comprises approximately 72 % of the total number of immigrant students in Greece. The policy adapted for these students is intercultural education. However, it often results in implicit assimilation into the host culture. In the meantime, Greek society has been affected by stereotypes due to several reasons: the media, which influenced public opinion on criminality and increased prejudice, the dire condition of the Albanian immigrants, the fact that for many years they came to Greece in illegal ways and that many remain undocumented until today. Added to that, the historical "traumas" of the past were brought back into the collective memory [3].

This paper investigates the effects of language contact between Albanian and Greek on the linguistic repertoire of bilingual Albanian children within a context of migration and, focusing on childhood individual bilingualism. It constitutes part of a larger qualitative study on the impact of L1 in bilingual immigrant Albanian students in the Greek primary school system. This paper discusses evidence from findings based on the subjects' linguistic biographies in reference to language choice and use within this specific group of second generation young immigrants. It finds that home is normally the only domain where Albanian is used in problematic patterns of communication while there is no real effort by parents to maintain or transmit Albanian. It also reveals signs of loss for these young immigrants despite their claims for the use of Albanian that stem from symbolic reasons.

1. Introduction

The present study investigates the linguistic effects of immigration on childhood individual bilingualism. Although the results are not to be generalized for all Albanian or all immigrant students, they aspire to expand our understanding of this particular group, and of the linguistic and social phenomena of language contact and shift and generally on the topic of bilingualism and migration. With this study of the micro-level of language the patterns of language use of the research participants regarding both languages, Albanian and Greek are investigated in order to seek answers to the following questions: what are the patterns of communication used by the participants with people of the same linguistic group within the home and school environment? What are the incentives, the rationales and the conditions these patterns of communication stem from? Which factors determine language choice for the group of young Albanian immigrants? How does the students' linguistic background affect second acquisition?

2. Research methodology

The approach of Language Biographies has been selected with the aim of shedding light into how the participants acquired the language and how they use it [4]. The importance of language biographies for this study lies in that they help the researcher obtain a better picture of the participants' background and identify their resources and needs. Moreover, they constitute significant resources of understanding how people experience second language learning, and this may expand our understanding on Second Language Acquisition. They offer insight into the participants' world, provide us with an insider's view of the processes of language learning or language shift. Therefore, they can shed light into the connections between learning procedures and learning phenomena and this in turn



might point to new directions of research [5]. Finally, they are important in data analysis as they constitute the intermediate level between the macro-level of sociolinguistics and the micro-level [6].

3. Data collection

The research participants are thirteen Albanian, immigrant, primary school students aged from 8 to 11. They are divided in two groups according to the time of residence in the host country: the early bilinguals (EB, five students who were born in Albania and came to Greece before the age of three) and the late bilinguals (LB, eight students who came to Greece at an older age). They all come from Albanian labour immigrant families and attend monolingual mainstream classes where they learn Greek.

The participants' language biographies were elicited through semi-structured interviews using a Data-Collection-Instrument (DCI), a document containing questions in order to form a specific framework for the interview. The interview questions were based on the European Language Portfolio and the participants were encouraged to elaborate on their responses. The questions were used as guides that were flexible enough so that the interviews could be modified when specific areas needed to be investigated for each participant.

4. Evaluation

4.1 The participants' patterns of communication.

To begin with, it does not go without saying that the participants' L1 is Albanian, in other words the parents' language or the language of the country of origin. According to the responses of the LB group, Greek was often considered the "mother tongue" and its prevalence over Albanian in the home domain was clear.

These second generation immigrants use Albanian to communicate with the first generation. However, in all their other interactions, whether in the home environment or school or elsewhere, the medium of communication is Greek. The dominance of Greek as the medium of communication is clear in one participant's comment when she stated that she wants to speak Albanian because she can only practice it at home whereas Greek is used everywhere else. For the group of EB, Albanian is used in communication with the parents and grandparents only, whereas siblings prefer to communicate with each other and with their Albanian immigrant friends in Greek. For the majority of the students, Albanian emerged as their first choice in the home domain, but careful analysis of the questions that followed indicated that the participants had difficulties communicating in Albanian and eventually admitted that they use Greek with anyone else apart from their parents or grandparents. Therefore, the participants meant to indicate maintenance of Albanian within a framework of symbolic use and pride for their origin, solidarity to their family, or reaction to the native population's xenophobia; the latter standing as an important indication of their own perceptions towards Albanian.

4.2 Factors that determine the participants' language choice:

It is important to note that in many cases preference for the use of Greek was initiated by the parents. Therefore, it remains to be researched deeper in the future *what* is transmitted and *how*. The possibility of total non-acquisition of Albanian due to lack of exposure remains a reality for some of the participants of the LB group. More specifically:

- one of them has no knowledge of Albanian at all
- three of them admit they use Albanian with grandparents only
- seven always respond to their parents in Greek
- three consider Albanian to be more difficult than Greek
- five have problems with their listening skills in Albanian
- all of them have problems with speaking, reading and writing skills in Albanian
- all of them use Greek mostly when they communicate with other Albanian immigrant children
- all of them prefer to use Greek

Therefore, transmission of Albanian has been obviously problematic for the participants of the LB group.

Language proficiency is an important factor of language choice for the research participants. The majority expressed lack of confidence in the use of Albanian. From the group of EB only one participant stated that he does not make mistakes when he speaks it. This student has come to Greece more recently than the others in his group (after finishing three first grades in Albania). However, while he can also read Albanian, he cannot write it and he clearly states that he prefers using only Greek with his friends while he also claims that he uses Greek to communicate with his father. As for the group of LB, for four of them, lack of confidence in Albanian could be considered as a significant factor of using Greek.



In addition, peer pressure affects language choice for these participants. The majority stated that their Greek classmates would probably make fun of them in case they spoke Albanian, thus revealing their own perceptions of the attitude of mainstream society towards Albanians. The use of Greek as a means of integration to the mainstream society is one of the factors that affect language choice for the participants. For the majority of them the use of Greek language has promoted the feeling of belonging and acceptance by their peers.

An issue that emerged from the participants' responses regarded the connection of preference for a teacher who can speak Albanian with their level of proficiency in the same language: only two of them stated that they would prefer their teacher to speak Albanian and for the following reasons: "in order to learn words I don't know in Albanian" and "to help us learn Albanian". One participant stated that she would not like her teacher to speak Albanian because she would not be able to understand anything. However, this statement was inconsistent with how she had self-rated her proficiency in Albanian previously -evaluating her knowledge of Albanian with 7 to 8 out of 10. In addition, she stated that she makes mistakes when she speaks Albanian and she does not understand everything when others speak it, while she also responds to her parents in Greek. Considering all these, I was able to reach the conclusion that self-rating was either arbitrary -and therefore inconclusive- or of symbolic function; the latter bearing its own significance on the issue of identity.

Group concentration does not really affect the maintenance of Albanian for this study. When this research started, the number of Albanian immigrant students at this primary school constituted a percentage of 23, 5%. More specifically, in the classes that the participants attended, the Albanian immigrant students constituted approximately 1/3 of the total number of students. However, maintenance of Albanian is not positively affected by the high group concentration rates of the immigrant student population. Greek is the language of communication between the members of this particular group even when the teachers or other mainstream students are not present, as the participants stated in the interview responses.

4.3 Other factors that affect the maintenance of Albanian:

Geographical proximity is a factor of motivation to maintain Albanian as young Albanians often visit their homeland with their families. Therefore, the need to maintain this language in case of returning to homeland in the future or visiting it during the summer holidays has been identified as one of the factors of motivation for the maintenance of Albanian for five out of the thirteen participants.

The Latin alphabet: Some of the participants stated that their developing knowledge on English - which is a mandatory subject in Greek primary schools - has enhanced their learning in Albanian regarding their writing and reading skills. This assumption is mostly based on the Latin alphabet which Albanian and English share.

The role of the television: An unexpected finding was the contribution of the satellite television that emerged as a factor of language transmission; some of the participants stated that they watch Albanian educational children's programmes and this has contributed to the development of reading and writing skills.

5. Conclusions

A final question remains: how does the students' linguistic background affect second language acquisition? First of all, characterizations and terms such as L1/L2, mother tongue, home language and competence are problematic in a migration context. Greek is the dominant language for these young immigrants; a type of asymmetrical bilingualism taking place, leading to subtractive bilingualism and eventually to language shift - also an outcome of how language status affects contact while peer pressure and higher frequency of input of the societal language play an important role. There are indications of shift as linguistic competence in Albanian is declining among these young immigrants due to age, educational reasons (lack of support of Albanian), psychological (reluctance to use Albanian because they identify with Greek culture, they wish to distance themselves from a stigmatized identity [7]), sociopolitical (rejection of the communist experience, stigmatization by the media /"the unwanted past"). Also, there is no real effort by parents to maintain/transmit Albanian, since Greek holds prestige as the language of social mobility. The use of Albanian is only motivated when children communicate with the previous generation only at home -although the participants meant to indicate maintenance of Albanian for symbolic reasons, signifying their need to express solidarity to their family and to the cultural/linguistic group. Still, lack of self confidence due to low proficiency in Albanian is a factor for using Greek. Last but not least, there is a difference between what participants think is happening -or are eager to admit- and what is actually happening and here lies the significance of the linguistic biographies as a method of research.



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