



“A language is a mentality”: A narrative, positive-psychological view of six learners’ development of bilingualism

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on bilingualism in light of positive psychology, which involves well-being and deals with human difficulties from the vantage point of strength rather than weakness. Based on in-depth narratives of six bilingual individuals, a number of interrelated themes arose: bilingual identity, emotions, peak experiences, motivation, hope, resilience, hardiness (existential courage), and learning strategies. The article helps elucidate processes by which individuals become bilingual, discusses ways to optimize positive psychology research, and provides implications for teaching.

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1. Introduction

Marco,¹ a participant in the narrative study described in this article, wrote, “A language is a mentality,” i.e., a way of thinking and being in a particular linguistic cultural context. Similarly, [Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov \(2010\)](#) described culture itself as a mentality, specifically the collective mental programming that distinguishes groups from each other and that influences thought patterns, meanings, and institutions. Marco understood different mentalities because he was bilingual, had bilingual parents, and had lived in two contrasting cultures.

This article presents a narrative study of the self-perceived experiences of six bilingual individuals, including Marco. The study’s four researchers, one from the United States and three living in Costa Rica, all university scholars, became a team after the first author, a Fulbright scholar, was invited to speak at a major international conference in Costa Rica. The research presented here is based on the researchers’ assumption that language learning is a complex dynamic system composed of many elements, interacting in complex ways and resulting in interrelationships that are holistic, organic, nonlinear, and dynamic ([Dörnyei, 2009](#); [Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008](#); [Mercer, 2011](#)).

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¹ All participants’ names are pseudonyms.

This study highlights interrelated themes from positive psychology that help to explain the development of bilingualism: emotions, peak experiences, motivation, hope, resilience, hardiness or existential courage, and learning strategies. Positive psychology emphasizes well-being rather than the distressing aspects that have often been psychology's focus (Lopez & Gallagher, 2011), and it faces human difficulties from the standpoint of personal strength rather than weakness (Linley, Joseph, Maltby, Harrington, & Wood, 2011). Positive psychology might be said to have existed for thousands of years in philosophical discussions of the good life, virtues, and happiness, but it has become a coordinated, scientific area only in the last 15 years (Diener, 2011). Humanistic psychology, which centers on individuals' growth and authenticity, offers theoretical roots for positive psychology (Linley et al., 2011; for a different view, see Waterman, 2013). Our study adds to the theoretical and research base of positive psychology and language learning (see also Gregersen, MacIntyre, & Mercer, *in press*).

2. Review of relevant research and theory

2.1. The narrative approach: making sense of life and learning

As noted, the study takes a narrative approach. Narrative or story is a framework by which humans make their existence meaningful (Oxford, 2011a; Polkinghorne, 1988). "Stories identify, unify, give meaning to. Just as music is noise that makes sense, a painting is color that makes sense, so a story is life that makes sense" (Martel, 2011, p. 15; see also Hardy, 1968). "[S]tories, with their format (beginning, middle, and end) and content (human experience), are a manifestation of the very essence of the human condition" (Pacheco & Meyers, 2012, p. 5). Narrative has been described as a reflection of multiple identities (Barcelos, 2008), with identity defined as a self-perception of one's own character, abilities, and attitudes, especially in relation to people and things outside oneself (Burke, 1991). "Every person is made up of a variety of 'selves' ..." (Pacheco & Meyers, 2012, p. 130). Although at a particular time the storyteller might intend to use a single narrative persona (Pacheco & Meyers, 2012), in actuality "personal identities are ... continually constructed and revised" (Moen, 2006, p. 5), negotiated (De Fina, 2013; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004), and transformed (Bell, 1997; Llovich, 1997) in narratives. Complexity expands because narratives are rooted in cultures and localities (Abram, 1996; Moen, 2006).

Other descriptions of narrative include a self-construction (Bruner, 1995, 1998); a key to one's place in the world (McAdams, 1993); a map (White, 2007); a primary mode of cognition (Lohafer, 1989); a glimpse into time (Ricoeur, 1984); a reflection of cultural politics (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992); a dialectic (Johnson & Golombek, 2013); a form of therapy (White & Epston, 1990); and a form of communication involving a teller, a listener or reader, a code (language), and a channel (in this case, a learner history) (Pacheco & Meyers, 2012). In some instances (e.g., Kalaja, Dufva, & Alanen, 2013), the code can be pictorial.

Compared to third-person observations of language learning, first-person learner narratives offer richer, more contextualized data and greater insights (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). "Narratives, such as learner diaries and learner histories, often provide much more contextualized information than many other... techniques. Learners tell their own stories of [language] learning in specific sociocultural situations, describe the strategies they used to handle specific learning challenges and needs, and explain how they felt in various episodes and instances" (Oxford, 2011b, p. 166). Narratives are thus an unsurpassed source of information for those who wish to understand language learners and the language learning process *in context* (see Barkhuizen, 2013). Appendix A lists selected sources of language learner narratives.

2.2. Bilingualism and identity

Bilingualism (Bhatia & Ritchie, 2004) is a major theme of the current study. The strictest definition of "bilingual" refers to a "balanced bilingual," i.e., "a person with *native-like* control of two languages" (Obler & Gjerlow, 1999, p.123, emphasis added). Other definitions of "bilingual" include "a speaker of one language who can speak in another language" (Obler & Gjerlow, 1999, p. 122), a speaker with "the ability to produce complete meaningful utterances in two languages" (Herschensohn, 2007, p. 4, in Dörnyei, 2009, p. 15), and individuals or groups attaining communicative skills with various degrees of proficiency in oral and/or written forms, in order to interact with speakers of one or more other languages (Mohanty & Perregaux, 1997). The last definition best describes this study's participants. More than half the world's population is bilingual or multilingual (Harding & Riley, 1999), so "human beings are more likely than not to be able to speak more than one language" (Ellis, 2005, p. 3). Except for those who learn two languages at exactly the same time, it is possible to refer to a native language and a second (or third, fourth, and so on) language.

Bilinguals' native language knowledge is typically not identical to that of monolinguals, and their minds work differently from those of monolinguals (Cook, 2001). Proficient adult bilinguals have particular representations, processes, and strategies when using either of the two languages (Costa, Miozzo, & Caramazza, 1999). In later adulthood, "bilingualism slows down the decline of cognitive control processes that comes with age" (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 17). Lifelong bilingualism, compared with monolingualism, might delay the onset of symptoms of dementia by four years (Bialystok, Craik, & Freedman, 2007).

Bilingualism is strongly related to identity. Identity is a complex matter even for monolinguals. Wolfreys (2004) stated, "Every time I enunciate 'I', even in my thought, an identity is assumed, and this identity is itself not simple, but a figure for a complex gathering of personal and impersonal stories, texts, discourses, beliefs, cultural assumptions, and ideological interpellations... It is not an artifact, but a process" (p. 95). Identity issues emerge when bilinguals (a) cross geographic, cultural, and/or emotional boundaries (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000); (b) experience language learning environments as sites of struggle

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