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‘They have a go at me, that I’m a good English guy. Well, I’m Polish as well’: how bilingual Polish adolescents in the UK negotiate the position of linguistic ‘expert’

Abstract: This paper explores the position of ‘linguistic expert’, and how being positioned as an expert affects the linguistic and ethnic identity construction of a group of Polish-English bilingual adolescents living in the UK. Findings indicate that while the participants are often positioned as experts in English and/or Polish, this may not correspond with their own feelings of linguistic competency. In the UK, the adolescents engage in language brokering, a practice which presumes an expert knowledge of each language that the participants do not always feel they possess. At school, the adolescents resist being regarded as fluent in English; when visiting Poland, they find their knowledge of Polish lacking. Closer examination of the participants’ narratives suggests that the concept of ‘expert’ is open to negotiation, and that the adolescents both challenge and exploit notions of expertise as they negotiate their own linguistic and ethnic identities.

Keywords: bilingualism; identity; language brokering; Polish adolescents

1 Introduction

The misconception of linguistic expertise as a prerequisite of bilingualism, whereby bilinguals are presumed to be both an expert and equally proficient in the languages they use, remains a common fallacy (Block 2007b). This paper argues that, despite perceptions of bilingualism having undergone substantive changes (Li Wei, Dewaele and Housen, 2011), such a misperception prevails. Moreover, that the position of (non)expert which is assigned to bilinguals may not correspond with their own feelings of linguistic competency, necessitating a negotiation of their bilingual identities and of the notion of expert itself.

The paper draws on my doctoral project exploring the linguistic practices of a group of

Polish-English bilingual adolescents in the UK. The study provided a valuable insight into how the participants were positioned – by themselves and others – as linguistic (non)experts both in English and Polish, and how this was imbricated with their identity construction.

The paper aims to address two questions:

- How does the misperception of a bilingual's level of linguistic competency manifest itself, that is, through which linguistic practices?
- What effect does this misperception have on the individual in terms of their linguistic identity?

To explore these questions, the paper first sets out the understanding of identity and the theory of positioning (Davies and Harré 1990) drawn upon in the research. The issue of language brokering is then presented, being a practice in which all those in this study regularly participated. This is followed by the research design and process of data collection and analysis. The subsequent section presents the findings of the study, drawn from the adolescents' accounts which describe their linguistic practices. It will be argued that these stories demonstrate how the identity of expert depended on context, and was salient in both a home and school environment.

2 Language identity

2.1 Understandings of identity

This paper echoes identity work in the field of sociolinguistics which draws on a post-structuralist perspective. Here, identity is considered mutable and contingent; changing across time and space, it requires renegotiation in different contexts (e.g. Norton 1997; Pavlenko

2001; Block 2007a; Early and Norton 2012) as individuals move between different societies, and as society itself changes.

This element of contingency is equally pertinent to linguistic identity, as Norton (1997, 410) theorised in her study on the ownership of English, where identity fluctuates in response to ‘changing social and economic relations’. This is later reiterated in Early and Norton’s (2012) analysis of multiple learners’ stories, where learners are seen to ‘imagine’ a linguistic identity that they wish to inhabit in order to facilitate their language learning.

Work on identity has also drawn on the theory of positioning (Davies and Harré 1990), whereby positioning is ‘a discursive practice’ (Harré and van Langenhove 1991, 398): that is, how individuals endeavour to position themselves and the way they find themselves positioned by others, both within discourses and also through the discursive practices to which they are allowed access. If identity is seen as contingent and negotiated through discourses (Foucault 1972), then the subject position of an individual is not constant, but continually under (re)negotiation undertaken through discursive practices (McKinney and Norton 2008). Identity is constructed linguistically not simply by linguistic practices in terms of what is said, and how, but in which language, and to what perceived level of competency; and also in relation to the values seen as connected to those practices.

Accordingly, the positioning of an individual as a linguistic expert may also be under negotiation, with expertise recognised differently in unfamiliar social settings. Migrant individuals may find their linguistic practices only allow them subject positions viewed as inferior within a certain society (Blackledge 2001; Pavlenko 2001), positionings which may be accepted or resisted (Vitanova 2004). This paper will argue that the linguistic positioning adopted by the adolescents in my research comes under constant challenge as they negotiate positions of expertise in their L1 (Polish) and L2 (English).

2.2 Linguistic expertise

The notion of linguistic expertise, which allows for a more comprehensive assessment of an individual's linguistic competency than merely an assumption of knowledge by dint of birth (Rampton 1990; Leung, Harris and Rampton 1997), may also be seen as subject to negotiation. For, while expertise relates to an individual's level of proficiency, it can also reflect whether a person's mode of speech is such that they are 'accepted by other users of the language' Block (2007a, 40). Key here is the notion of acceptance: what may be considered expertise in one setting, is not necessarily viewed as such in another.

This, in turn, evokes questions of legitimacy and authenticity as prerequisites of expertise. Bourdieu (1977, 650) defines the legitimate speaker as one who is allowed to speak in a given setting, and who speaks the 'legitimate discourse': language 'formulated in the legitimate phonological and syntactic forms'. The ideological stance that there exists a 'legitimate' or standard version of any given language underpins the idea of the native speaker, someone who has 'privileged access' to the language, endowed with a level of knowledge that is somehow taken to be instinctively acquired (Piller 2001, 2). That 'authenticity' is embedded in the language of a 'native' speaker (Piller 2001, 8), is echoed by Creese, Blackledge and Takhi (2014, 939), who note that the frequent perception of the native speaker is that of 'the authentic embodiment of the standard language'.

For Kramsch (2012), the distinction between legitimacy and authenticity lies in who may sanction the speaker. Legitimacy may be bestowed by an institution, such as school; however, the sanctioning of authenticity comes from members of a group, such as a national one, with whom the speaker seeks to identify. Both legitimacy and authenticity may be seen as especially pertinent in a Polish context, where the sense of an idealised linguistic standard continues to dominate (Jahr and Janicki 1995). Stemming from the way in which the Polish language came to represent a Polish identity when the country did not exist in a geo-political sense (see Obojska 2017), the use of standard Polish language and identity remain inextricably linked; to claim expertise, a speaker must be both legitimate and authentic.

2.3 Language brokering

One area where speakers may find themselves expected to demonstrate expertise, is through language brokering: acting as a translator or interpreter for family members or even strangers, a practice especially common amongst children of migrant families (Corona et al. 2012; Bauer 2016). Children may be asked to broker in a range of situations, including at school, particularly in the case of Polish-speaking children (Devine 2009, Cline et al. 2010). Moreover, beyond being translators of language, children are also often required to act as cultural brokers, or mediators between their parents and the new environment, even as such youngsters do not possess the knowledge of the adult world which they are being asked to discuss (Guo 2014).

Guo (2014) highlights the frustration felt by brokers at their inability to bridge the worlds they are being asked to inhabit. However, brokering also presupposes a level of linguistic expertise in each language which the young broker does not necessarily possess; children report feeling inadequate when they find themselves unable to translate adequately (Corona et al. 2012).

Thus, beyond theoretical questions of authenticity and legitimacy, in pragmatic terms, children are being expected to demonstrate a fluent linguistic understanding of everyday transactions being conducted between family members and the host community. Brokers are thereby expected to display an expertise in not only the customs and practices of the new world around them, but also an expert handling of the languages such brokering demands.

The research described in this paper builds on these questions of linguistic expertise: how expertise is (mis)perceived, and how it is interlinked with the way individuals construct their identity. The following section sets out the design of the study.

3 The study

3.1 Research Design

The research was conceived as a narrative inquiry, drawing on the potential of narrative as revelatory of an individual's identity (Georgakopoulou 2006), an approach increasingly used to explore the lives of migrant individuals (see Pavlenko 2001; De Fina 2007). In particular, the study drew on the more recent conceptualisation in narrative research of 'big' and 'small' stories (Bamberg and Georgakopolou 2008), and the notion that setting these different types of stories alongside can produce a more complete picture (Freeman 2006; Phoenix and Sparkes 2009). Conceptualised thus, big stories are seen as narratives elicited within settings such as a formalised interview (Freeman 2006), and taken to refer to accounts of 'specific life shaping episodes' (Phoenix and Sparkes 2009, 222). In contrast, 'small' stories are taken to be 'stories told during interaction' Georgakopoulou (2006, 222) which may occur beyond the organised interview schedule.

In the context of this project, 'big' stories were taken as those which explored major events such as the adolescents' arrival at school in England. The stories were elicited during interviews by an initial invitation to 'tell me about when…', for example, 'when you arrived in England', or 'when you started school'; these were then developed through prompts for further details, such as 'can you tell me more about that?' 'Small' stories emerged from informal exchanges as participants engaged in general chatter before and after the interviews.

Analysis of such impromptu conversations revealed fragments of narrative, which were then classed as small stories, and used to augment the big stories presented within the interviews.

3.2 Participants

The study was located in two semi-rural towns in South-East England: Fieldstone (population 60,000) and Steadton (population 15,000). The names of all locations and participants are pseudonyms.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling (Ritchie et al. 2013). The primary criteria were for participants to be Polish-born, and attending UK secondary school. It was thus more likely that the adolescents' knowledge of Polish would have come from home and that they would speak Polish there. Through attending UK schools, they were also used to functioning regularly in English. The adolescents were thereby regarded as Polish-English bilinguals, individuals who can converse in both languages, and do so 'on a regular basis, regardless of whether they are equally fluent in both' (Pavlenko 2001, 317-8).

The study comprised five girls and six boys, aged 11-16; they were recruited through their teachers at Grovesham, a state secondary school in Fieldstone that offers Polish classes, and from St. Ferdinand's, a Polish complementary school in Steadton. All participants were post-2004 arrivals from Poland; their time in the UK ranged from nine to two years. Their brief biographical details are set out below.

Table 1 Participants: brief biographical details

Participants (Male/Female)	Age	Migration trajectory	Family
Greg (Grzegorz) (M)	16	Left Poland age 5; 7-8 years in South-West England. 3 years in Fieldstone.	Father: factory worker. Mother: occupation not given.
Beata (F)	15	Left Poland age 13. 18 months in Fieldstone.	Father: builder. Mother: doesn't work. Brother: aged 8.
Anna (F)	14	Left Poland with mother and elder brother, age 5; 3 years in London. 6 years near Steadton.	Father: sells vinyls and CDs (Poland). Mother: English-Polish translator. Older brother: about to go to university.
Marek (M)	14	Left Poland with mother, age 5; America: age 6; Sweden: age 7; East England: age 8. 6 years in Fieldstone.	Father: factory worker (Poland). Mother: nurse.
Krystyna (F)	14	Left Poland age 9. 6 years near Steadton.	Father: electrician and fitter. Mother: beautician/ factory worker. Brother: aged 4.
Janusz (M)	13	Left Poland age 7; several months in Essex living with his aunt. 6 years in Fieldstone.	Father: fitter. Mother: cleaner.
Filip (M)	13	Left Poland age 11; some months in another nearby town. 2 years in Fieldstone.	Father: kitchen porter. Mother: hotel cleaner. Two sisters in their 30s: (UK/Poland).
Tomasz (M)	12	Left Poland age 4. 8 years in Fieldstone.	Father: lorry driver. Mother: post office worker. Sister: aged 5.
Ryszard (M)	12	Left Poland age 6. 6 years in Fieldstone.	Father: welder. Mother: surveyor.
Yamina (F)	12	Left Poland age 6; 9 months in Algeria; 5 months back in Poland. 5 years in Fieldstone.	Father: works in Burger King. Mother: doesn't work. Brothers: aged 8, 5, 3.
Sylwia (F)	11	Left Poland age 2; 4-5 years in Ireland. 4 years in Fieldstone.	Father: currently unemployed. Mother: Polish shop worker, now cleaner. Sister: aged 9.

3.3 Data collection

The study was conducted in January-May 2016. Ethical approval for the project was granted by the UCL Institute of Education; information and consent letters were signed by participants and their parents, and by the school heads in their role as gatekeepers.

Following restrictions imposed by the school timetables, data collection was organised into three blocks. The first consisted of three, hour-long sessions at Grovesham from January-February 2016, beginning with an observation of the Polish language class. This aimed to help establish rapport with participants (Eder and Fingerson 2002); it also allowed for an observation of their use of language. To develop greater trust between myself and the participants (Ryen 2006), session two comprised a group interview. Another large group interview was conducted in session three, followed by a shorter interview with the older students.

The second block of data collection comprised two 50-minute pair interview sessions at St. Ferdinand's in March; while block three consisted of three, hour-long sessions of pair and individual interviews at Grovesham in May. Drawing on Habermas and Paha (2001), who advise that shorter interviews are more appropriate for younger participants, these lasted between 10–25 minutes. Interviews were held in English; although the participants were offered the option of using Polish, none chose to do so. The interviews were audio-recorded; the data were transcribed immediately after each session, and preliminary analysis was undertaken.

3.4 Data analysis

Three types of analysis were applied to the data. Initially, the stories were coded using a thematic approach (Riessman 2005); through this, the participants' narratives were grouped under broad headings such as ‘family’ or ‘school experiences’; these were refined into sub-headings including ‘learning English’ or ‘language brokering’.

To facilitate a closer analysis of how the adolescents’ stories were constructed, discourse analysis methods were then applied. This drew on Van Dijk (2000, 35), who sees discourse analysis as a systematic way of describing ‘the various structures and strategies of text or talk’ and how they correspond ‘to the social […] or political context’. Accordingly, there was an examination of general themes, corresponding to the those identified in the initial stage of analysis; this allowed for a closer examination of the way topics found in the adolescents’ accounts reflected current discourses prevalent in the contemporary UK media, such as those relating to Polish migrants. This was combined with a more fine-grained approach to the interview data that borrowed from Bamberg (2004), who describes analysing narrative as examining details such as the tense or aspect used by the narrator of the story, or the use of pronouns. Examining the language used in the adolescents’ accounts in this way augmented the exploration of the narrators’ self-positioning within the stories they told, and how they saw themselves positioned by others.

4 Findings: Contingency and contradictions in (self)positioning as expert

This section presents excerpts from the narratives given by four of the adolescents. As outlined above, participants’ experiences were constructed through combining big stories, elicited during formal interviews, and small stories, which emerged from informal talk.

4.1 Tomasz: ‘I’m a good English guy, I should know this’

Twelve-year-old Tomasz was asked about his experiences on arriving in the UK and at school. Having come at the age of four, with limited English language competency, Tomasz described starting school in England as ‘very hard’: he presents himself as a non-expert in English, for whom learning the language was a ‘negative’ experience.

As Tomasz continues with his story, a change in his self-positioning emerges. In Year 6, he ‘used to translate for’ a boy in a younger class, and felt ‘good’ at being able to help someone with less expertise in English. Comparing himself with the younger boy allows Tomasz to change his own positioning to that of expert. However, when asked about his experiences of language brokering, Tomasz’s self-positioning undergoes another shift, as he expresses resentment at the way he feels his parents (‘they’) expect him to understand everything:

> if I don’t know something, they just have a go at me. That I’m a good English guy, I should know this, cos I go to a school here and all that. And it’s like, well, I’m Polish as well. So I don’t know everything.

Here, Tomasz insists that he does not feel able to translate, that it is unfair to expect such a level of linguistic expertise; this contrasts with his experience with the younger boy described above.

Several reasons could explain why Tomasz’s position as expert becomes contingent on who is asking for linguistic help. Firstly, the level of language required to help a younger student at school is potentially less complex than brokering for adults. Moreover, as a young teenager, Tomasz could simply be resisting his parents’ requests. Yet Tomasz’s story also chimes with King’s (2013) study of a migrant Ecuadorian-American family, where the mother expresses frustration that her daughter Diana still struggles with aspects of her English language acquisition. She feels that Diana should have quickly gained proficiency since coming to America the previous year, and views her daughter as ‘unsuccessful’ in her English language learning (King 2013, 55). A similar expectation appears to be at play in the way that Tomasz depicts his parents' disappointment when he does not display the expertise they expect him to have acquired through living and attending school in the UK.

Moreover, imbricated with this expectation is the question of identity. Now he is in England, Tomasz's parents feel he should be 'a good English guy', which includes being an expert in the language. Tomasz counters this expectation with his own statement of identity: 'I'm Polish as well'. In terms of language affiliation (Leung, Rampton and Harris 1997), Tomasz is arguing for his strong affiliation with a Polish linguistic identity to be recognised; moreover, he implies that this affiliation disqualifies him from being an expert in English. While Block (2007a) suggests that linguistic identities may change over time, here, Tomasz refuses to alter his allegiance: he rebuts his parents' assumption that he has obtained an expertise in English; and rejects the notion of any identity attachment to the language.

4.2 Beata: 'I feel like I take the responsibility for all the things I will say'

Fifteen-year-old Beata was also asked about her experiences as a new arrival at school. Having been in the UK for only eighteen months, she still receives additional EAL (English as an Additional Language) help at school; in mainstream classes, she is often assisted by the Polish teacher, who translates for her.

Beata also expresses concern about losing her Polish 'a little bit'; through intense exposure to English and less daily contact with Polish, she is undergoing a process of minor language attrition (cf. Schmid 2011). However, when asked to recount examples of brokering activities, Beata details the family language brokering that she undertakes daily:

> I'm helping my brother and he's just eight years old so he really need my help in school and my Mum as well. Every note I have to send to school, or to my brother or my school, I have to write it a bit for myself. Also for example messages when my Dad's

> sending them to his boss – I have to write them because he doesn't know how to actually write it in a formal way!

The range of brokering activities that she outlines, suggests that Beata also takes on the responsibility of being key to her family's ability to operate in the new environment. In writing notes for school, she may be regarded as adopting a quasi-parental role; while in composing her father's messages to his boss, she assumes the role of an adult. This resonates with by Bauer (2016, 27), who presents the example of a young girl required to complete her father's timesheet. For Beata, although her father has been in the UK for seven years prior to the rest of the family, he too positions his daughter as the expert in written English. This disregards the fact that she not only has limited competency in the language, but also little experience of the work context in which her father operates. Young language brokers are frequently asked to translate in situations that are beyond not only their linguistic understanding, but also their knowledge of the adult world (Dorner, Orellana and Jiménez 2008): this is exemplified by Beata's experiences.

Yet Beata is anxious to help: if she cannot help with the translating, then no-one else can 'solve the problem'. She further explains:

> I feel like I take the responsibility for all the things I will say and the things they saying, so I feel like I'm adult, and that's quite weird.

Such a heightened sense of familial responsibility is common amongst brokers, accompanied by a sense of uneasiness over the possible repercussions for the family if they do not succeed in the brokering task (Corona et al. 2012, Bauer 2016). The position of expert proves linguistically and emotionally demanding.

4.3 Anna: ‘an outsider Polish person’

Anna, aged fourteen, who moved to the UK at the age of five, and speaks Polish with her mother, gave an account of brokering activities which involve helping her English-speaking father to ‘learn Polish’. Acting as quasi-teacher to family members is recognised as one way in which adolescents may display their linguistic expertise, but this often focuses on the way that children help younger siblings (e.g. Obied 2009), rather than those who operate in mixed families and try to instruct one parent in their own home/heritage language. In doing so, Anna sets herself up as an expert, explaining how her father finds Polish ‘too hard’ and seems unable to learn even the basics.

However, Anna’s self-positioning as an expert is called into doubt when she describes visits to Poland, where she struggles to engage in conversation. Anna feels the way she speaks Polish colours the way she is perceived:

> when I talk, in Polish, it’s not – like, proper Polish, like I have an accent. So when people listen to me, they can tell I’m not Polish but I actually AM but – it’s a different accent […] it’s hard to like when I go to Poland, to like make friends and stuff because I just can’t really like talk like their way of saying, talking Polish.

In referring to ‘their’ style of speaking Polish, Anna draws on an ‘I/them’ dichotomy to distance herself from the people she encounters in Poland. Realising that her Polish does not reach the ‘proper’, idealised standard required, impacts on her sense of identity; she feels that:

> every time I’m with someone else Polish I don’t feel like completely Polish because of like the way I talk, and like, my accent and stuff.

Anna perceives that her use of Polish is judged through both her accent, and the way that she uses the language, indicating the importance given to standard Polish and the corresponding pronunciation rules (Jahr and Janicki 1995, 27; Duszak 2006). This also draws on the ideology whereby expertise in Polish is regarded a prerequisite of Polish identity (see Obojska 2017). Anna thus undergoes a change in linguistic identity position through space and time (Pavlenko 2001): no longer an expert, she feels delegitimised as a speaker of Polish (Bourdieu 1977), and that she cannot be ‘completely Polish’.

Yet Anna also demonstrates a shrewd awareness of the contingency of her linguistic positioning. At school, citing Polish rather than English as her first language, allows Anna to ‘blame it on the Polish’ when there is something she does not understand in class; she has realised that ‘if you put down Polish they’ll help you with more stuff’. Thus, while her Polish may not pass muster in Poland, when at school in England amongst non-Polish speakers, Anna strategically renegotiates the positioning of non-expert in English to elicit extra help. Thus, Anna’s position as (non)expert in Polish and English becomes context specific (see Pavlenko 2001).

4.4 Krystyna: ‘I’m just kind of really confused sometimes’

For Krystyna, also aged 14, currently in the third year of secondary school, such negotiation is unavailable. Asked about her experiences at school, she explains that, on arriving in the UK aged nine, she ‘had to pick up on everything’; secondary school marked an improvement in her language acquisition, where she ‘picked up on the English accent as well’.

Krystyna displays a contradiction in the way she positions herself linguistically. She feels that ‘if someone was to ask me what my first language was I would say Polish’, but maintains that her English language competency is now ‘equal’ to and not ‘behind’ her level of Polish. Nonetheless, Krystyna maintains that she still has problems understanding English fully:

> sometimes it takes me longer to understand things than other people, and in tests sometimes questions are worded in a way that I can’t quite understand it and I’m just kind of really confused sometimes.

Like Anna, Krystyna feels she requires additional help. However, her request to be granted extra time in exams has been refused: according to Krystyna, ‘because I’m in top set for science and English they said I don’t need it’. She protests that this ‘is unfair’, as she does ‘struggle in […] science tests sometimes’, with the time allowed and the way that ‘questions are really […] weirdly said’. Krystyna also expresses concern about her English exam:

> in English I know that we’re going to have to be like remembering loads of quotes for our exams and like we need to write like stories creative stories narratives poems and I don’t think I’ll have enough time to do English.

Krystyna’s protestations of non-expertise, however, require scrutiny. On the one hand, her complaint that the school will not sanction extra time for her exams indicates a contrast in the way she sees herself, and how she is viewed by the school (see DaSilva Iddings and Katz 2007). According to Krystyna, the way she is positioned as an expert due to her place in the top set for English does not correspond with the way she situates herself, even as she claims that her level of English is on a par with that of her Polish. Her justification that she is confused by the wording of questions, undermines this assertion. Moreover, it is unclear whether the problems Krystyna describes herself as experiencing, are related to English language, or whether they actually lie with the subject of the exam, be this science, or English as a subject.

The school’s refusal to acknowledge that Krystyna may still be experiencing problems with English, may stem from the practice of encouraging ‘‘transitional’ rather than ‘additive’ bilingualism’, which ‘has become normalised in educational policy and practice in England’ (Conteh and Brock 2011, 348). Rather than allowing for both languages to co-exist within a bilingual student, it is assumed that one language will gradually supplant the other, with the first language being ‘something to be overcome’ (Safford and Drury 2013, 70). Once the status of ‘expert’ has been attained, any residual interference in English language comprehension caused by L1 is negated.

5 Discussion

The findings of the study presented here suggest that the notion of linguistic expertise remains fluid and contingent. Expertise appears to be determined by a comparison with the individual competency level of others, and with the idealised standard language.

In comparison with their parents, the adolescents are taken to have greater knowledge of the host language, English, and are thus positioned as experts. However, they are expected to display not only a linguistic expertise, but also an expert understanding of the host culture and practices. This resonates with work by Cline et al. (2010, 108) who note that through ‘experience of the host community at school’, children frequently understand the new community’s ‘expectations and concerns’ better than their parents. Through their ostensible linguistic and cultural expertise, they are also assumed to have the ability to take on adult responsibilities (Dorner, Orellana and Jiménez 2008; Guo 2014; Bauer 2016).

However, the linguistic competency of the young broker does not always match the assumed level of expertise (King 2013), and parents may express dissatisfaction when the adolescents fail to reach their expectations, as indicated by Tomasz’s story. Moreover, the adolescents become embarrassed at finding themselves linguistically challenged when asked to help (Cline et al. 2010; Bauer 2016); Beata feels disappointed in herself when she cannot translate adequately. Krystyna evinces frustration that her self-positioning as non-expert is not recognised at school, and she is refused additional help. Her experience echoes the situation described in work on migrant and EAL learners in UK state schools that emphasises the monolingual ideology underpinning public educational practices (García and Li Wei 2014, 47), and how expertise in English, is seen as superseding a student's L1 (Safford and Drury 2013). It would also chime with Flynn's (2019, 79) findings that while teachers may have become more accepting in their attitudes towards Polish pupils, other are less accommodating, and that assessment is still predicated on 'a monolingual linguistic' model.

These responses to what is seen as a failure on behalf of the adolescents to demonstrate an adequate level of expertise suggest the continuing prevalence of erroneous assumptions not only about expertise and bilingualism, as highlighted by Block (2007b) over a decade ago, but also in regard to language acquisition. While the adolescents in this study convey an ease in English, as evidenced by their fluent participation in the English-only interviews, it is not always the case that children are automatically able to acquire 'a new language rapidly and with little effort' (Marinova-Todd et al. 2000). Nor, as Tomasz's account suggests, and supported by King's (2013) findings, does flawless acquisition simply happen once a person starts living in a particular country. Learning another language, even in a country where that is the dominant language, does not necessarily equate with absolute mastery: as highlighted by Schmid (2011) in her work on language attrition, L1 interference may persist. As Schmid argues, linguistic knowledge is not an absolute; it ebbs and flows, dependent on factors that include age of acquisition, age of usage and frequency of contact with the language. Yet the notion of expertise, as evidenced in the stories presented here, insists that language is seen as something wholly quantifiable, and that once a certain level is deemed to have been reached, the question of expertise becomes immutable.

These narratives also demonstrate how identity and associated linguistic ideologies are embedded in the question of expertise. The adolescents themselves display a keen sense of linguistic identity through language affiliation; they also appear to echo the prevailing discourses surrounding language expertise and identity. Anna's account of her experiences in Poland, evoke the notion of the legitimate speaker (Bourdieu 1977), the extent to which an individual may claim a certain identity if s/he is not considered fluent in the language associated with that identity. Despite being able to teach her father Polish, Anna feels herself unable to use ‘proper’ Polish, and thus re-positions herself as not ‘completely Polish’. This shift suggests that Anna has absorbed the dominant discourse whereby being able to use the standardised form of the language is a prerequisite of Polish identity. Obojska (2017, 32) emphasises how, in Polish, ‘the notion of the mother tongue […] is heavily laden and carries patriotic connotations’ that hark back to the country’s troubled history of occupation by foreign powers. The apparently indissoluble link between Polish identity and language is also evoked by Tomasz in his riposte to his parents’ expectations of his own expertise, where Tomasz demands to know how he can be expected to be an expert in English when he is ‘Polish as well’.

Yet Anna has also learned that in an English-dominant linguistic setting, she can exploit her Polish background and, unlike Krystyna, can manipulate this at school. As Flynn (2013, 349) notes, there may be a disparity between the ‘beliefs and dispositions’ of different teachers in regard to Polish pupils, to say nothing of different schools; this may account for the diverse experiences reported by Krystyna and Anna. Thus, expertise is again seen to be contingent, dependent on the setting and the individual.

6 Conclusion

The study described in this paper set out to examine the linguistic practices of a groups of Polish-English bilingual adolescents, and to explore how, through these practices, they positioned themselves and were positioned by others. Using a narrative approach, combined with discourse analysis, their stories were analysed to investigate how this positioning played out in different locations. Findings suggested how the adolescents’ (self-)positioning as expert undergoes constant negotiation, and is often contradictory. While expertise may be contingent on others, it could also be exploited by the adolescents.

A limitation of the study was that, since the focus was on the adolescents' perceptions, the data relied on self-reporting. Teachers were not consulted on student progress, nor on the way language is assessed at the respective schools. Beyond requesting consent for the project, there was no parental involvement, which may have added nuance to the adolescents' accounts of language brokering. Nonetheless, the stories presented suggest that the negotiation of the adolescents' self-positioning and construction of their linguistic identities are informed by the continuing misconception of expertise. That is, expertise continues to be to be assessed 'by an external barometer' (Block 2007b, 67), and predicated on apparently arbitrary rules, reliant on personal comparison and longstanding linguistic ideologies.

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