
The Language Transition Process and Its Influence on Language Use

LETICIA LENKIU

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Introduction

Consider completely losing your ability to talk from one day to another. You are still the same person: all of your knowledge and memories are still there. However, you are no longer able to express anything you have achieved in life so far. Your thoughts and feelings seem to disappear, but only because of the fact that there is a communication barrier between you and the ones around you. This happens daily to an enormous number of people. Many immigrants come to the United States without being fluent in English, and some do not know the language at all. Every person comes to the country for a different reason, but they all will have to go through the same challenging adaptation process. After being immersed into the completely different culture, the person will have to start getting used to all the different aspects of their new lives, a process that could take anything from a few months to a couple of decades.

During this long and challenging process, many people seek help and support from others who are from the same place as they are, people who know what they are going through. By doing so, English language learners end up forming important discourse communities where the level of language expertise varies immensely among their participants. James E. Porter defines discourse communities as being "a group of individuals bound by a common interest who communicate through approved channels and whose discourse is regulated" (400). In this case, the members of these discourse communities have the common goal of adapting into the new environment while also staying connected to their culture at the same time. The formation of these discourse communities is extremely important because people who just moved to the United States will have a support group of people who already went through the same situation to assist them during this delicate transition process.

Linzi Kemp builds on Porter's definition of discourse community by explaining that discourse communities formed of international students are even more effective, and serve as an essential learning environment. She defends the point that the most effective learning comes from those support groups because of the different perspectives that its members bring from their unique life experiences. Kemp states that the members' diversity and willingness to act as a support group make the learning community an "environment where learners are brought together to share information, to learn from each other, and to create knowledge" (63). Further in this paper, it will become clear how this plays an essential part in the transition process, not only in directly providing helpful guidance, but also through indirect learning that will come from variations of support provided by the group.

Although there are many different groups of bilingual people in separate discourse communities, for the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the language transition period of a specific group of people going from Brazilian Portuguese monolingualism to Portuguese-English bilingualism and how this group of English language learners communicate among themselves in the presence of the mentioned bilingual learning communities. The topic of this research was based on a personal observation that it is very common for English language learners (especially the ones who have recently moved) to switch between languages and combine Portuguese and English vocabulary words during conversations among themselves. In the article “A New Perspective on the Creation of Neologisms,” Ming-chang Lin states the importance of speakers to be able to manipulate their language in order to satisfy their particular communication needs (50). This paper supports Lin’s idea, and will provide examples of how this process of language manipulation allows specific members of the bilingual discourse community to fully express themselves by facilitating communication when talking to their bilingual peers.

Previous research has been conducted on the process of language transition and linguistic adaptation, including the process of code switching in second language composition processes. However, there are no studies relating both of those topics in the context of first-generation immigrants who are learning their second language at an older age. Therefore, by gathering Portuguese-English bilinguals’ personal statements about their language transition experience, this research will enable important topics to be analyzed together in order to better understand the complex process of linguistic adaptation in Portuguese-English bilingual individuals based on the influence of their communities. Observations will enable previous research topics to be applied in the language transition process, allowing us to see how those variables influence language learning.

Methodology

The data analysis of this paper focuses on the experience of three English language learners who are at different stages of their language transition process. Bianca ¹(age 19), Laura (age 18), and Manuela (age 19) are all originally from Brazil, but have been exposed to the English language for varying portions of time. I interviewed these specific international students because they are all in the same age group and have been through the same initial transition process. The only main difference between the three research subjects is how long they have been exposed to the English language, which is an important variable to consider when analyzing how those individuals approach the language as part of their language transition process. Also, I personally know Bianca, Laura, and Manuela well enough for them to feel comfortable sharing important details of their processes, details that are essential for the purpose of this paper.

In order to obtain significant and specific input about their language transition experience, I asked an average of seven open-ended questions, which varied between research subjects, to give them the opportunity to expand on their own unique experiences. I conducted the individual interviews through the app WhatsApp, which allows voice message conversations. I chose to use this phone app instead of conducting interviews in person due to the subjects’ busy schedules, but also to give them the freedom to answer the questions on their own time. I believe that giving them open-ended questions and the time to fully consider the questions was helpful, as it allowed me to receive more significant and insightful responses enabling me to better understand each individual’s perspective of the transition process.

In addition to giving the research participants enough time and space to consider the question and in order to make them more comfortable, I conducted the interview in the language I assumed they use the majority of the time. For example, Manuela has been living in the United States for over four years, so she would feel more comfortable giving the responses in English.

¹ Pseudonyms have been used throughout this article to maintain the privacy of interviewees.

However, Bianca and Laura have been exposed to English for a shorter period (seven months and two years, respectively), and for the same reason, their interviews were conducted in Portuguese. It is important to mention that since Laura and Bianca's interviews were conducted in a different language than the one used in this paper, the quotations might not be exact because of the translation process.

Interview: Bianca Campos

Bianca Campos is 19 years old and is originally from the city of Curitiba, Brazil. She moved to the United States seven months ago in order to start her college education where she would have more opportunities and resources. She is currently a freshman at Valencia College in Orlando, Florida and is still adapting to the new education system. During her interview, she mentioned that she does not speak as much English as she expected because of the Brazilian community she met and the Brazilian friends she quickly made at Valencia College. She claimed because of that she does not have as much practice and sometimes feels shy when having to use the English language in class with her professors and English-monolingual peers. She said, "Sometimes I feel limited by the language," and concluded, "I normally feel apprehensive because of my heavy accent when having to interact." Bianca also said that, as she met more international students, she felt more comfortable speaking English outside of their group because she saw that she is not the only one with an accent, and that an accent should not impair her learning process.

This part of the interview shows the importance of her support system, which goes back to the original idea that learning communities do have a positive impact on the language transition process. Bianca only felt comfortable exploring the new language after being supported by her international peers, and doing so enabled her to improve her English. Interestingly, a study done by Alejandro Portes and Richard Schauffler argues that there are certain expectations regarding which language (first or second) will become dominant, and social context is one of the expectations (645). Portes and Schauffler give the example that immigrants tend to experience a faster process of home language loss when they live in an area where native English speakers form the majority of the population, and rapid conversion process to English monolingualism. Their argument perfectly demonstrates the importance of communicating with native English speakers for language development, and Bianca was able to achieve that with the assistance of her bilingual peers.

When asked about language switching between conversations, she said that sometimes she does not remember a word in Portuguese but does in English. When that happens, she uses the English word instead and continues the conversation normally. She added, "There are words or expressions that I can better express in English; it seems that sometimes English fits better than Portuguese."

Interview: Laura Mendes

Laura Mendes is 18 years old, born in the city of Belem, Brazil. She lived in Belem her entire life. During the interview she mentioned that moving to a different country was very difficult not only because of the linguistic and cultural adaptation, but because she had to form new social relations away from her friends and family. Laura and I both moved to the United States two years and five months ago. Since we both went to the same high school in Boca Raton, Florida, I have witnessed her language transition process take place. I can say that Laura's English has improved a lot during this period, and I can relate to her experience.

During the interview, I asked Laura about the groups she was a part of when she first moved here, and how being a part of each affected her. She immediately mentioned an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) class she took during her first year in the United States: "The class didn't help me much with developing my English, but I saw other people going through the

same situation, and that made me feel better when I was facing difficulties.” Both Laura and Bianca mentioned the importance of the bilingual discourse community when transitioning into the practice of speaking a new language and how that helped them better their second language skills.

When asked about what language she usually speaks, Laura said she uses the languages very separately. She will speak Portuguese to Portuguese-speakers, and English to English-speakers. She concluded by saying, “Unless when I forget a word in Portuguese, then I say the word in English.” Laura continued, “It’s more common for me to change languages when I am talking to someone who speaks both languages, and I know that a phrase is going to sound better in one language compared to the other.” She gave me an example of when we were talking about majors. We were having the conversation in Portuguese, but we used the term “major” in English. Laura said she switched language because she constantly uses the term in English, so it was easier for her to use it in that form. It is important to note that Laura mentioned switching languages even before I started asking questions related to that topic, which demonstrates that it is a significant part of how she approaches language use.

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This event connects to research conducted by Donald S. Qi, who noticed in his study that language switching occurs more regularly when the person studied felt the necessity of expressing their “ideas most efficiently, expressively, and with the least possible interruption in the process of thought development” (420). The fact that Laura made that rapid connection demonstrates that she is successfully adapting to the new language, and is able to manipulate the language to her benefit.

Interview: Manuela Mello

Manuela Mello is 19 years old. She moved to the United States from Brazil with her family four years ago. Among the three English language learners I interviewed for this paper, she is the one who has been exposed to the English language the most, so her interview was conducted in English.

When asked about how she uses the different languages, Manuela said she usually speaks English with her siblings and Portuguese with her parents, but that it can change in some scenarios. She mentioned a few things that can “trigger” her to switch languages during a conversation. One of her examples relates to the environment she is in, she stated, “When I’m in the car with my sister and we are listening to a Portuguese song, our brain triggers and makes us speak Portuguese.” Manuela added, “I guess it is normal for everyone who speaks more than one language to get confused and feel the need to switch.”

Manuela’s idea of code switching varies slightly from Laura’s examples. Laura was only influenced by her own thoughts, while Manuela was also subconsciously influenced by the environment. It is possible that Manuela was influenced by the environment because she feels comfortable speaking in either language; therefore, her code switch would be more “sensible” than Laura’s code switch because she has no language preference. Further research would need to be conducted in order to better analyze the specific environment-related code switch event, considering that this study only analyzed one person in each phase of language transition and their unique experience.

Manuela, without realizing, provided a perfect example of how she uses code switching and her extended vocabulary to express exactly what she wants during the interview. Even though her interview was conducted in English, Manuela used two expressions in Portuguese when answering the questions. For one of the terms, she repeated the word in English right after she said it in Portuguese (“scrambled,” after saying “embaralhado,” when referring to a mix of ideas). By doing so, it shows that she decided to switch language because that specific word came to her mind in Portuguese first (this again supports Qi’s claim that bilinguals will use vocabulary that is easier to access) since that is the form that best fits with her idea.

Data Analysis

When analyzing all three participants, it is clear that even though their transition from Portuguese monolinguals to Portuguese-English bilinguals occurred in different ways, all three have been through similar situations. Based on the conducted interviews and observations, it is clear that code switching allows the Portuguese-English bilingual community to better express themselves when there is communication between members. Bianca, Laura, and Manuela all agreed that using different languages allows them to communicate better than if they were restricted to only one language. I was surprised with the responses because I was not expecting all of them to have so much to say about language switching. I found it interesting that both Bianca and Manuela made similar comments about the topic, even with the difference in language exposure. It is clear that this process is beneficial for the communication between all English language learners, not only the ones in early transition stages. However, this practice might not be completely harmless since English language learners cannot communicate in this way to everyone (they are limited to other members of their community). A possible further research inquiry would involve the limitations caused by this language manipulation when bilinguals are communicating with monolinguals, and how bilinguals would approach the situation considering how they cannot express themselves using the extended vocabulary and expressions through the use of code switching.

It is clear that the linguistic adaptation and language manipulation are interconnected and play essential roles in the process of language transition.

Based on the subjects’ insightful responses, it is also noticeable how other activities take place during the language transition process. The interaction with other members of the bilingual discourse community has demonstrated a positive impact on the confidence of English language learners going through challenging times. Although both Laura and Bianca said that the international discourse community was not helpful for learning the language directly, it provided them with enough self-assurance to practice and apply what they learned outside of the community, and better their communication skills to more effectively proceed with

the transition process.

The observations also provided concrete, specific examples for previously conducted research, which is important for applying ideas and a definition to the actual process of communication. Studies conducted by Linzi Kemp, Ming-chan Lin, Donald S. Qi, Alejandro Portes, and Richard Schauffler, all provided insight on separate parts of the language transition process. This paper brings together these scholarly insights, applying them to better understand the language transition period.

Conclusion

The information collected in this study is relevant since never before were such transition elements considered together. It is clear that the linguistic adaptation and language manipulation are interconnected and play essential roles in the process of language transition. The research subjects for this group represent a small sample, and expanding the sample could potentially lead to additional study material.

Moving from one country to another can be extremely challenging. I have personally noted that it is common for people to feel impaired by the language barrier, and underestimated by others. This paper, however, has demonstrated the complexity of the language transition process. I hope it provides some insight on a few of the many activities which take place during the adaptation period. Unfortunately, it is usually only the individuals who go through this situation who understand what it entails. It is important, in my opinion, that others appreciate and give recognition to people in this situation.

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Leticia Lenkiu



Leticia Lenkiu moved to the United States in 2014 and is currently a sophomore pursuing a bachelor's degree in biomedical sciences. She is very passionate about preventative health, and her goal is to attend medical school after graduation. She is the Medical Information Officer for Hearts for the Homeless where she trains volunteers to provide free blood pressure screening to the homeless population in Orlando. She is also responsible for Phi Delta Epsilon's health fair, where she coordinates a group of volunteers to provide free blood pressure, glucose, and BMI tests for UCF students at Market Wednesday.