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The perception of success in learning English as an L2 in the era of globalization – a multilingual student perspective

Resorting to ecolinguistic theories, underscoring the concept of (trans)languaging and methodologies highlighting the need for analytical contextualization (Steffensen, Fill, 2014), the author presents the understanding of success in learning English as an L2 among selected multilingual students of Applied Linguistics at his home university, for whom knowledge of English and other languages is to be a final product of a professional character. Data has been elicited via focus group interview methodology (Parker, Tritter, 2006; Lankiewicz, 2023) with the use of a semi-structured interview and thematic framework analysis. The research findings suggest that English occupies a special place in students' plurilingual repertoires and its pluricentric character helps them to be legitimate L2 users of their linguistic repertoires who do not measure their success by native speaker standards. The research undertaken offers insights into the process of the language learning evaluation of multilinguals via including their full linguistic repertoires to account for language learning processes.

Keywords: success in L2 learning, English language learning, focus group interview, multilingualism, plurilingualism, evaluation of multilingual competence, student perspective

Słowa kluczowe: sukces w nauce języka obcego, nauka języka angielskiego, grupy fokusowe, wielojęzyczność i różnojęzyczność, ocena kompetencji wielojęzycznej, perspektywa ucznia

1. Introduction

English has solidified its position as a means of global communication and consequently dominated education, which meets with criticisms pertaining to the application of neoliberal polices in the field of education, including language teaching (Lankiewicz, 2018b). This language has become a commodity, a necessary asset in the labor market, a skill which has ceased to be rewarded (Holborow, 2015). English as a lingua franca, might be construed as a colonizing language policy, applied in international corporations or educational contexts. As to the latter, the high position of American and British universities on the ranking lists, combined with the educational policy of accountability and internationalization, paved the way for the popularity of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in many countries in the world, including multilingual Europe (Macaro, Heath, 2022; Griffiths, 2023). Thus, it became both a unifying communication tool and threat to the status and robustness of national languages and national values.

The colonization of English has gained attention in the field of foreign language teaching (Rajendram, 2022). TEFL has been criticized for being dominated by enculturation paradigms, ascribed in language methodologies based on the communicative approach to language teaching, which dominated European language teaching in the 1980s and 1990s (Didenko, Pichugova, 2016). Research on plurilingual minds helped to redefine language pedagogies for bi- and plurilingual learners and substituted them with a multilingual approach, understood as a heteroglossic experience with discrete languages being subject to translingual practices, a natural consequence of making use of students' linguistic repertoires (French, 2019).

Measuring success, in a situation where the point of reference becomes dynamic (the existence of World Englishes, translingual practices by multilinguals) and the language pedagogy is supposed to be governed by the concept of autonomy, by means of traditional language skills evaluation needs a thorough redefinition. The Council of Europe recognizes plurilingual minds and multilingual practices (CEFR, 2018), yet it leaves teachers with little guidance pertaining to the evaluation process of multilingual practices. According to the document, the teaching process is to incorporate plurilingual repertoires, but language skills assessment is to follow very vague descriptors. Thereby, in this publication I try to delve into the problem of the evaluation of English language skills from the multilingual learner perspective, which allows for the fact that language competences are related, as posed in the notion of multi-competence (Cook, 1991), and the language learning process is distributed (linguistic repertoires are acquired in an asynchronous way in various contexts). Therefore, even if English is the focus of

attention in this article as a language of a particular status (lingua franca), considerations may pertain to any other language as a component of student linguistic repertoires. By employing, focus group interview methodology, I tried to disclose how plurilingual students define their success in language learning in a general sense, and how they relate their success in learning English to success in mastering other languages. It is to see whether the experience of learning a lingua franca of a pluricentric nature has an impact on learning/using and self-evaluation of other components of their linguistic repertoires and perceiving them in a heteroglossic way, which may have consequences for the recognition of their own agency and the legitimacy of their non-native language use.

The finding of this research offer insights for the evaluation process of students' multi-competence, which is pedagogically perceived in a monolingual way (languages are treated and evaluated as separate entities). In this way, the present research fills the gap in research dedicated to the perception of success in language learning by multilinguals and aspects thereof (e.g. measuring students' multi-competences, the related level of critical language awareness developed by plurilinguals with regard to the legitimacy of L2 language use), and discusses pedagogical implications entailed. Although there are publications dedicated to language awareness and multilingualism (Cenoz, Gorter, May, 2017), they do not refer directly to the perception of success in language learning by plurilinguals and the position of English as an element in a plurilingual repertoire.

It is important to accentuate at the very beginning that the problem of language skills evaluation[1] is approached here from the perspective of the plurilingual learner and the process of evaluation described in this article is not perceived as a systemic requirement by neoliberal accountability within educational institutions in a top-down way, or outside of them for comparing educational efficiency, but more as a natural component of any form of instruction and the learning process. Thereby, flexible evaluation with reference to *A Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches* (FREPA) descriptors is proposed here, as an alternative to traditional language skill testing, to explain the underlying multilingual communicative competence as a complement to the evaluation of discrete language skills.

In the following, I present different perspectives on conceptualizing success in language learning and the pedagogical feasibility of measuring its outcomes. Since plurilinguals are the focus of attention of the research part,

[1] Despite the fact that the research basically pertains to students' self-evaluation, I prefer to use the term "evaluation" since pedagogical implications derived from my study pertain to the evaluation of students' multi-competences in a general sense, including external grading procedures.

proper attention is given to measuring students' multi-competences. In turn, I focus on theories subscribing to the ecolinguistic perception of success. This allows me to underscore the ecolinguistic underpinning for the research, which is presented in the latter part of the article. Last but not least, pedagogical implications for the present research are articulated.

2. Perspectives on success and it measurements in L2 learning[2]

The concept of success in language learning is related to the evaluation of progress in language acquisition and ultimately pertains to an overall testing or measuring of language skills in the form of proficiency or achievement tests (cf. Johnson, 2008: 302ff, Brown, 2005). On the basis of assessment procedures, teachers judge whether or not students succeeded in language learning in the short or long term within various language skills, or in a particular language in general. The measurement of success has traditionally been perceived as within the responsibility of an external authority. Students' personal judgments have been perceived as subjective, worthless and the subject of excessive and, often, ungrounded self-confidence. However, with more learner oriented pedagogies, external measurement has failed to account for the diversity of learner types, students' positioning themselves in various interaction patterns, or social and cultural contexts, among others, so the concept of success in language learning has become problematized and construed as perceptual, rather than an objective measurement of somebody's linguistic competence.

Problematization of the notion of success in L2 language learning reflects different approaches to language teaching, which in turn, result from research on language acquisition and language use by non-natives. We have come a long way from a normative and compartmentalized perception of language in general and have developed new linguistic and pedagogical paradigms, which have informed language teaching methodologies and necessitated a revision or redefinition of the notion of success in this regard.

Historically, L2 teaching methodologies reflect different approaches to language and the process of language learning, promote different skills and accordingly define language competences (cf. Richards, Rodgers, 2001). Consequently, the concept of success in L2 learning has evolved with them. Due to space limitations, I reserve my considerations to more contemporary language teaching methodologies which underpin a personal perception of

[2] In this publication, the term an L2 encompasses both second and foreign language learning contexts.

success in language learning and offer certain generalizations for the concept of success. A review of professional literature (Brown, 2005; Liao, Ye, Yang, 2023; Cooker, 2015; Fang, 2017; Creese, Blackledge, 2011; García, Li, 2014) allowed me to delineate basic contexts for the conceptualizations of the notion of success in L2 learning.

Typically, success in language education may be understood as a combination of the effectiveness of pedagogical practices (teaching) and the result of the student's effort (learning). In other words, success pertains to the meeting of initially set objectives and it is normally measured by internal or external tests such as, achievement or proficiency tests (oral or written). They are to reflect students' linguistic or communicative competence within four skills, or language aspects such grammar or pronunciation, for example (cf. Brown, 2005, Liao, Ye, Yang, 2023).

In the context of the autonomization of the language learning process, the notion of success becomes problematized. In the reactive version of autonomy, objectives are established by the institution and the task of the student is only to achieve them in their own way. In the proactive version of autonomy, the student takes over the learning process, negotiating goals, methodologies, materials content and progressions, and evaluation (cf. Benson, 2001). Additionally, learner-centered pedagogy opens a discussion with regard to learner types, their expectations and motivations (cf. Wilczyńska, 2002). While in the reactive version success may be measured in an objective way to some extent (e.g. regarding achievement of the set goals), in the case of proactive autonomy, all elements of the evaluation process are subject to discussion and subjectivity, rather than external measurement. The use of any external proficiency test may be questioned for the reason of a mismatch with students' needs and expectations. Autonomy relies more on students' formative self-assessment as a tool for learner development in a general sense, beyond linguistics outcomes (Cooker, 2015).

The concepts of World Englishes, International English, Globish, and English as a Lingua Franca accentuate the subjective nature of success in learning English as an L2 since the very concept of English is questionable (Fang, 2017). The lack of reference to a standard dilutes linguistic features and makes them subject to cross-linguistic influences and personal predispositions and choices. A pedagogical standard becomes questionable for different reasons, including those pertaining to the issue of power relations, such as colonization, for example.

Cook's (1991) contribution to second language acquisition in the form of the notion of multi-competence, standing for an interconnected system of linguistic repertoires, ultimately, buried the concept of the native speaker as

a point of reference for research on bi-, pluri- and multilingualism[3] and allowed us to perceive plurilinguals as legitimate L2 users. The measurement of success in L2 learning on this spectrum is controversial since basically the point of reference (the monolingual competence of a native speaker) does not apply here. Worth pointing out is the fact that the language learning process has been equated here with language use and typically Cook and people doing research in the area of bi-/pluri/multilingualism prefer the notion of L2 users, rather than language learners. Entangling language learning with its use with little respect to the concept of a standard renders the evaluation of the process of L2 learning dubious, if not impossible.

Research on the language use and communication of plurilingual minds and multilingual communities calls for a departure from monolingual paradigms and accentuates heteroglossic approaches to the problem of pluri- and multilingualism (Creese, Blackledge, 2011; García, Li, 2014). In most common terms, the linguistic repertoires of plurilinguals are not to be construed as discrete systems but more as a common underlying, ever-changing semiotic system for the construction of meanings. Evocative of this are translingual practices (semantic, grammatical, pragmatic and phonological hybridity) pertaining to the processes of intercomprehension (cf. Gębal, 2016). If pluri- and multilingualism is not the knowledge of discrete languages by the user/learner, but an "uneven and changing competence" in the form of "a single, inter-related, repertoire that they combine with their general competences and various strategies in order to accomplish tasks" (CEFR, 2018: 28), then it is basically intercomprehension or translanguaging. The former can refer to at least three phenomena: (1) an ability to understand related languages, (2) a communication practice used by plurilinguals, for example, to read in one language and speak in another, or (3) a pedagogical approach to develop linguistic sensitivity and raise language awareness (cf. Gębal, 2016). The latter stands for a set of practices from code-switching to language mashing and producing linguistically hybrid forms which transcend the combination of existing structures and meaning (cf. Li, 2017, Mazak, 2017). In this approach, any measurement of language success, with recourse to traditional means of evaluation is doomed to failure.

It can be construed from the above that a more contemporary learner-centered pedagogy conceptualizes success in language learning as a psychological phenomenon pertaining to self-satisfaction that results from the realization of goals related to L2 learning. Therefore, success in language learning may be considered with areas pertaining to eudaimonia – the state

[3] To avoid terminological confusion, in this article plurilingualism stands for the psycholinguistic reality of an individual knowing more than one language, while multilingualism denotes the sociological functioning of more than one language in a given community.

of happiness and welfare: self-acceptance, personal development, life objectives, relations with other people, personal autonomy and environmental mastery (cf. Nowak, Szulc-Kurpaska, 2022: 93). In other words, learning a language is about "flow", not about striving for a questionable perfection.

Considering the perception of success in language learning among plurilinguals, it is also essential to evoke the issue of the critical language awareness (CLA) of the language learner/user (Lankiewicz, 2015). As my own research findings suggest, language learners/users who are aware of power relation issues tend to be more autonomous both during the language learning process, as well as in language use, flouting native speaker norms.

Concludingly, the notion of success in language learning is basically a fuzzy and subjective concept, related to its magnitude, its dynamic nature and its temporal instability (Widła, 2014) and personal variability (whether in the form of self-evaluation or external evaluation). Criticism of the CEFR constitutes an argument for the subjectivity of the language skills assessment process (Foley, 2019), another might be the application of neoliberal polices to foreign language education (Lankiewicz, 2018b).

3. Measuring multi-competence – towards the metaphor of the ecosystem

The move away from a monolingual approach to learning foreign/ second language in favor of a heteroglossic understanding of multilingualism (cf. Creese, Blackledge 2011) questioned the validity of measuring language competences for discrete languages separately, since this does not account for the dynamic fluidity between emerging interlanguages in space and time for the reversal transfer (the influence of newly acquired linguistic systems on learners' L1 or other languages in mind). This fact is recognized by the CEFR (2018: 157). Nonetheless, this document is not very informative about how to measure the general underlying communicative competence of plurilinguals. An evaluation of one language system, for example English, may occlude essential aspects of other linguistic repertoires at play in the communication act of a plurilingual person.

If native speaker language and communication norms are not very informative about a plurilingual person's communicative competence, they should be looked for in what L2 users do in a successful communication. This claim legitimizes idiosyncratic use of a non-native language for the benefit of speaking one's mind and communicating personal goals (Wilczyńska, 2002). However, in an educational setting, success in language learning is still measured monolingually, separately for discrete languages. Informative

in this regard may be the document titled *A Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches* (FREPA, 2012). I will refer to it in the further part of the article. Yet, its application would necessitate a thorough reform of language teaching curricula, allowing for the fact that languages do not have to be taught as discrete entities.

An ecological (ecolinguistic) approach to language learning problematizes the possibility of measuring success in language learning (cf. Lankiewicz 2018a, 2023). The precariousness of any evaluation derives from a general assumption of the non-fixity of language codes, the potentiality of language signs (affordances), as well as the agency of language learners/ users (van Lier, 2004). The application of the metaphor of the ecosystem for considering language issues, accentuates the critical slant of ecolinguistics. This makes any evaluation of language learning success entangled in power relations. Hence the process of L2 learning and its evaluation is criticized for conforming to neoliberal accountability (van Lier, 2004: 11; Lankiewicz, 2018b), for example, teaching directed towards testing, instead of allowing the learner/user to speak their minds according to personal objectives and exercise a level of critical language awareness (Lankiewicz, 2015).

The language learning evaluation process also needs to account for societies of "Liquid Modernity", as defined by Bauman (2000), which consist of individuals that are uncertain about their identities and their place in societies. In this perspective, mobile plurilinguals are the incarnation of individuals unable to construct durable linguistic identities. Yet, this does not have to be construed pejoratively. As argued by Bauman, postmodernity offers individuals an opportunity to take full responsibility for their lives. Thereby, semiotic activities of plurilinguals go far beyond monolingual codes into the hybrid of linguistic repertoires and non-linguistic means to produce ecolects[4] that are contained to very small social groups. There is no way to get control over this linguistic insecurity and there is no need to do so, neither from the perspective of an individual nor in the educational milieu.

Multi/plurilingual approaches to language teaching (*approches plurielles*) are deeply engrained in the European culture and have obtained different pedagogical applications (cf. Gębal, 2016: 78–82). Important in this regard is *A Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches* (2012) with its French acronym *CARAP.* The document presents competences and strategies for concurrent learning of many languages, which go far beyond competences typical of approaches that promote isolated teaching of various languages (*approches singulières*) and underline mediation strategies and intercomprehension.

[4] What is understood here by an ecolect is the language of a family or a small social group, for example a classroom, sharing similar linguistic resources and meanings (Lankiewicz, 2013: 22–24).

Thereby, the monolingual language teaching typical of communicative language teaching (CLT) becomes a thing of the past in conceptual terms. Yet, formal education still finds it difficult to abandon for different reasons. One of these is pedagogical practicality. While defining success and evaluation of language competence in the monolingual approach finds support in various testing materials, an assessment of plurilinguals' multi-competence cannot be done by a standardized test, since it pertains to an individual context. On the other hand, it requires linguistic sensitivity and intercomprehension abilities on the part of the teacher, whose education may not have prepared them for this challenge.

4. Research project

4.1. Research methodology

The methodology adopted in this research is the focus group interview (Morgan, 2001; Rabiee, 2004). In professional literature there is a general disagreement regarding the nomenclature related to this methodology (cf. Parker, Tritter, 2006), which is referred to as an approach or method and further called focus groups, focus group discussion, focus group interview or otherwise (cf. Lankiewicz, 2023). It needs to be mentioned here that my research is basically framed within the ecolinguistic paradigm, underscoring, among others, the need for analytical contextualization (Steffensen, Fill, 2014). In the field of multi- and plurilingualism, this approach allows language learners to be perceived as empowered users, rather than incompetent L2 learners. I posit elsewhere that focus group interview methodology matches both the dynamic nature of ecolinguistic research and its phenomenological epistemology based on intersubjectivity, as well as ecological validity (Lankiewicz, 2023).

4.2. Research context and research objectives

Inspired by personal experiences as a teacher, my earlier research, and professional literature on pluri- and multilingualism[5], I decided to delve into the problem of how plurilingual learners/ users perceive their success in learning English as an L2 and how it features in their multi-competence in order have a better insight into the problem both as a teacher and as a researcher.

[5] Despite the difference in the understanding the two notions (cf. CEFR 2018), "researchers in Europe … can be found using both or either of these terms, often interchangeably" (Erling, Moore, 2021: 524).

English has been selected for two reasons. It is a language of a special status as a *lingua franca* of international communication, surpassing other languages by far in terms of popularity as an L2, with 1.5 billion learners in the world and 95.7 percent of learners choosing it as a main foreign language in Europe (Eurostat). Additionally, its pluricentricity (multiple varieties) contributes towards problematization of the existence of a standard which would be followed by L2 learners. This opens the chance to empower its L2 learners as legitimate users of the language. Thereby, parallel to the claim of Robert (2011), I hypothesize that it may occupy a special place in users' multi-competence.

Since my research is perceptual and declarative, my objective is to define the position of English and the influence it exerts on respondents' plurilingual repertoires and how this may shape the perception of success in learning other languages. To specify, I pose the following questions: (1) What is the position of English in students' multi-competences? In particular, how do plurilingual students see their success in learning English in comparison to other languages of their linguistic repertoires? (2) How does the knowledge of English influence their multi-competence? In particular, does the status of English as the language of international communication have an impact on the evaluation of their competence of this and other languages of their multi-competence? (3) How do multilinguals perceive their multi-competence and related linguistic repertoires? In particular, do they see it in a monoglossic or heteroglossic way?

4.3. Research participants

The recruitment procedure was based on voluntary participation. My announcement for potential research participants (subjects of the research) who speak more than three foreign languages addressed at graduate students of Applied Linguistics at my home university was met the answer of nine females. All of them had completed BA studies in Applied Linguistics before and at the moment of research continued their education in MA courses, with 5 of them attending the first year and four others the second year. To specify, the duration of BA studies is three years, while MA courses last two years. They were 23 to 24 years of age. At the University of Gdańsk an Applied Linguistics student is exposed to language and subject matter classes in English and German in equal proportion with the expected learning outcome to be at least at C1 for English and B2 for German of CEFR for the BA level. Students choose an additional foreign language (Spanish or Italian) to be completed at least at B2 level. For the MA level respective outcomes are

C2 for English and C1 for German. Their mother tongue is Polish. The verification of language repertoires during the research session disclosed that my respondents were exposed to other languages in their lives, learned during traditional language courses outside school, some self-taught, others picked up during longer sojourns abroad. These were Greek, Dutch, French, and Russian. Participants declared different competence levels of languages from A1 to C2. The respondents declared knowledge of from 3 to 5 foreign languages. For the focus sessions respondents were divided into two groups consisting of 5 and 4 students, which is in line with recommendation for the selected methodology (cf. Krueger, Casey, 2000). They remain anonymous throughout the data presentation. Occasional quoting of respondents' opinions and utterances will be marked by their initials as follows: LU, AP, WM, KD, JC for the first group and SK, TS, MN, ML for the second.

4.4. Research procedure

The study was designed according to focus group interview methodology (Rabiee, 2004; Lankiewicz, 2023). I prepared a list of individual questions to define the plurilingual profile of the research respondents and a set of discussion prompts in the form of statements to elicit respondents' opinions and beliefs regarding the pre-established research questions. Both tools were semi-structured, based on a set of open questions to allow discussion. Thus, they functioned as a basic framework, supported with additional questions and clarification requests on the part of the moderator. For some of the questions respondents were to subjectively rate their language competence according to the CEFR system, or define satisfaction with the attained level of language competence at the university on a scale (1–10) with 1 standing for total dissatisfaction and 10 to total satisfaction.

The two meetings consisted of 109- and 103-minute sessions respectively. Since the meetings were organized via the MS Teams communicator, they were recorded with the permission of all participants. The sessions were moderated personally by me, as the author of the present study. All the material was transcribed for further analysis.

4.5. Data analysis

In this research, I decided to apply Krueger's analytical framework (1994) to reduce a potential bias of interpretative subjectivity. Ritchie and Spencer (1994, cited in Rabiee, 2004: 657) mention the following stages of this analysis: "fa-

miliarization; identifying a thematic framework; indexing; charting; mapping and interpretation" which according to Rabiee (2004: 657) "…allows themes to develop both from the research questions and from the narratives of research participants". It needs to be accentuated here that to minimize the potential bias and increase the rigor of the study, the emerging themes and categories were consulted with another researcher from my home university. She was instructed in the system of coding and asked to code the data for main themes and categories by herself. Our findings were compared and discussed. Having secured more objectivity of the study, I could proceed to the next steps of data analysis.

4.6. Findings and discussion

For all my respondents' multi-competences English is the dominant L2, mostly due to the length of language exposure (an early start from kindergarten private classes via primary and secondary school). For most of them it has always been a priority L2. Two of the students were exposed to bilingual English medium instruction in their high schools. Interestingly, students ascribe formal academic education as having an important impact in the development of English language skills. When asked directly to mark their satisfaction with the attained level of language competence on a scale form 1 to 10, with the latter standing for total satisfaction, the scores ranged as follows: German (3–6) Italian (5–8), Spanish (2–5), English (7–10+). Students' additional languages are not featured here since they are not offered at our unit. What may come as a surprise is the very low evaluation of their competence of German, which is rated on a par with an additional language taught basically from scratch. Satisfaction with English, in some instances, exceeded students' expectations, a fact which is indicated by the 10+ score. Students' comments are significant in this regard, "The level of English which I came across here was more than I ever expected. I thought I knew English before but I realized that one should never be satisfied with what one knows"[6] (AP), or "I wish I knew other languages the same way as English" (KD).

Interestingly, the original research questions triggered themes and categories. Below, I present reoccurring themes and categories which are contained within the research questions as they emerge from the data. The most prominent themes saturated with the intensity of comments are: (1) what defines success in language learning in general and (2) what facilitates success in English.

[6] All comments have been translated from Polish since the sessions were in this language.

Success in language learning (theme 1) is perceived by students mostly in communicative terms with reference to the ease to express themselves in a fluent way and being understood by the interlocutor. Culture related issues embedded in the language of the target culture are of minor importance in defining success. Respondents claim that globalization processes and mass media contributed to cultural uniformity, "the world has been Americanized, we all live by American standards" (SK). Within this theme I identified the category of (a) individual or relative perception of success in language learning (b) little attention to linguistic standards. Rather than being guided by linguistic normativity, students relativize national standards, as they argue, "Why should I try to speak like a typical English or German, everybody speaks differently" (LU), "Very few people speak correct Polish, I personally sometimes do not know which form is correct, and the same thing refers to other language users. Nobody is perfect" (KD). They say that success in language learning depends on one's expectations, personal features or the point of reference. To illustrate, "I am fully satisfied when it comes to Italian, starting from zero, I am able to function in Italy without any problems [she refers here to her stay in a language school in Viareggio] but I came with a knowledge of German and I did not develop my competence of this language much, or at least I think so" (JC). In general, students place great weight on formal language instruction in defining their success in a proportion ranging from 30 to 80 percent of the impact on their success. Yet, they accuse formal language education of being too attached to standards and correctness, which intimidates language use in the classroom and demotivates students, with big discrepancies between students' self-evaluations and that of their teachers, with the match ratio fluctuating between 30 to 60 percent, depending on the respondent.

In turn, within theme two the following categories were identified: (a) the popularity of this language (English), its ubiquity in everyday life and (b) good teaching practices. As to the former, students even claim that English does not seem to be a foreign language to them anymore. They imply that its omnipresence on TV, the Internet, in commercials, in films, in everyday conversations, etc. makes the process of its learning resemble L1 acquisition. In contrast, learning other languages is more based on what is included in the syllabus, and learned mostly at school. As one says, "Materials are not easily accessible and one needs to make some effort to find them" (LU). In other words, students indicate that while learning English may be partly based on socialization processes, other languages are taught through instructed language acquisition. Success in learning English is also ascribed to better teaching practices and teaching materials. The intensiveness of students' criticism allows me to claim that they are mostly dissatisfied with the

way German is taught, "I do not know why the books used for German are so strange and boring" (MN), "German and English class are worlds apart" (WM). I refrain here from citing more radical voices exemplifying the methodological inadequacy of German teaching to avoid the possibility of identifying it with particular teachers at my home university. Interestingly, this criticism is not limited to the university level.

Although English is the medium of international communication, my respondents are still infatuated by the British RP pronunciation paradigm. They indicate it as their "accent" of preference for many reasons, one essential being the alleged exposure to this version at school. Nonetheless, they refrain from evaluation their own performance of English within this variety of English. They claim their version of English is influenced by the popularity of American in mass media and by their native language, which is Polish. Yet, they are not eager to classify their English as Globish, International English or English as a Lingua Franca, since, as they claim, these are simplified versions of English, while they try to conform to some "mixed language standard" (ML). In one of the groups in this thematic area generated by the moderator, students claimed that "English can be learned on the level of the native speaker" (WM). Nonetheless, discussion in both groups saw many turning points and opinion changes.

Other themes that emerged from students' discussions are: the problematic reference of native speaker for users of English as L2 and English as a hub (theme 3), the point of departure for learning other languages (theme 4).

In reference to theme three, students ultimately admitted that English is very different since it lacks a reference culture. For other languages, it is easier to ascribe them to a particular culture or a nation (even if it is worldwide spread Spanish). English is problematic in this regard since it is used by so many people in so many different contexts that the definition of nativeness may be doubtful. To illustrate, "a good non-native student may speak it more fluently than nationals and may know words that a native speaker has never heard of" (AP), "I do not understand uneducated Brits, but I understand the royal family" (JC), "one of my English teachers was British, but I thought she was a well-educated Polish speaker of English because she spoke so clearly" (TS). Eventually, they agreed that the knowledge of English has nothing to do with accent, as there are so many native varieties of English that establishing accepted educational varieties of English would be difficult, especially if L2 users are flooded with so many native and non-native variants. As mentioned above, in spite of a preferred British RP standard, none of them conforms to it. One of the comments of the students may be very informative in this regard and may testify their level of critical

language awareness which allows them to see themselves as legitimate users, rather than incompetent learners of English, "My English is a mixture of the accents of all my teachers and my language contacts, and my Polish. I do not care if people notice my Polish accent, of course I try to be perfect, but I will never be… my Polish is not perfect either" (ML). Success in learning English does not connote the existence of a standard, or nativeness, or any perfectionism, it is rather communication effectiveness that they drive at: "I am able to quarrel in English, insult people, deliver witty repartees or make friends with them, just as in my native language and this is what I mean by success" (AP).

It seems that critical language awareness and reflection upon English exerts an impact on the perception of other languages (theme 4). The participants treat English as their real L2 (not a foreign language, as in the case of other languages). When asked about mutual interferences between languages they admit that at this level of language competence (close to C2) it is English that influences their Polish, while earlier it was the other way round. Most translingual practices (hybrid forms consisting in code meshing) involve English. It also seems that the way English was taught is so impressive that students expect other languages to be taught in a similar way. Within this theme students' responses can be classified in two different subcategories: (a) strategic use of English and (b) enhanced reflection of what it means to be an L2 user. The former pertains to the fact that English helps them learn other languages and contributes to intercomprehension of other languages, "I easily guess the meaning of some words in Italian, or sometimes German, because of the knowledge of English and I recognize similarities between grammar constructions. Polish is not that much help in this" (WM). This corroborates with some of the claims in the professional literature pertaining to intercomprehension (Robert 2011). While the first category may be framed within language awareness (knowledge of lexicogrammatical aspects), the latter highlights students' level of critical thinking and critical language awareness (power related issues). As they divulge, "If I can be an authentic speaker of English, I can also be a Polish user of German without much shame" (SK). In other words, it seems that success in learning English and its position as a *lingua franca* for which the "native speaker is dead", makes them less intimidated as potential learners/users of other languages.

Although academic education keeps the languages as separate entities, students stress that in the "real world" it is far from this. They mention numerous examples of mutual influences between languages in their linguistic repertoires, underscoring the primary position of English as a source of influences on their native and other languages. Nonetheless, they see

the dynamics of the translingual process and easily mention examples of other languages having an impact upon each other. Moreover, they complain that during speaking classes teachers perceive any language calques as a sign of language deficiency and make haste to correct, "sometimes, I have the feeling that for the teacher more important is how I say something, than what I have to say to them" (JC).

The recurring claim is that it is better to know many languages in a communicative way than to be a native bilingual. This is supported with the argument that knowing many languages necessitates language mixing, as in this opinion, "I cannot help keeping my English and Polish away from Spanish and French" (MN), which may suggest that the student's plurilingual mindset is basically heteroglossic.

An additional theme five accompanying the relations between plurilingual repertoires (multi-competence) is that of the pedagogical underrating of plurilingual potential by teachers. Looking for differences and similarities helps students understand the linguistic systems in general and build language awareness, as well as facilitating the acquisition processes. Significant in this regard is, for example, this comment: "Comparing Italian and German I can see both differences and similarities and this way I remember grammar aspects better. For example, the fact the reflexive verbs in German go with *haben* in the past tense and with *sein,* well actually with *essere* in Italian. This is my strategy to keep language systems separate" (LU), Other students complain that teachers try to keep a language class only in the target language regardless of students' linguistic competence, "the teacher of German explains German words in German but I would remember them better if they were explained in Polish, and then there comes a translation class and I do not know the Polish equivalent " (KD).

Closely related with the above is theme six, pertaining to the inadequacy of the evaluation of linguistic competences of plurilinguals, as exemplified in this comment "teachers do not appreciate the fact that I show understanding by commenting in my native language or another language I know. This is unwelcome, I should stick to the target language only" (TS). Most evaluation is absolutely monolingual and teachers forget that mediation for plurilinguals may be also cross-linguistic.

The focus group interview methodology has its potential bias, which I tried to overcome with the application of a rigorous and systematic data analysis method. In the interpretation stage, I tried to pay attention to "words; context; internal consistency; frequency and extensiveness of comments; specificity of comments; intensity of comments; big ideas", as suggested by Krueger (1994, cited in Rabiee, 2004: 658). Nonetheless, my research involves only two focus groups and the obtained data may lack theoretical

saturation (the emergence of clear repetitive patterns, ibid., 656), but sometimes we have to rely on convenience samples (availability of respondents).

The study findings seem to conform with main theoretical reflection dedicated to pluri- and multilingualism and the available empirical research (e.g. Widła, 2014). Success in language learning does not seem to be associated by the students with linguistic perfection or native speaker norms (Lankiewicz, 2018). The themes and categories in this study are also compatible with my own research dedicated to ideologies (attitudes) towards plurilingualism, in which the concept of success emerges as one of the themes with categories such as (a) communication authenticity, (b) the adequacy of pedagogical practices and (c) code mixing (Lankiewicz, 2023).

5. Conclusion

Theoretical considerations pertaining to multi- and plurilingualism and the present research findings permit the claim that the evaluation of success and language competences of plurilinguals should reach beyond monolingual models with a native speaker frame of reference. Language courses are kept discrete (taught monolingually), but it is difficult to expect a plurilingual mind to keep language competences separate (Cook, 1991, Li, 2011). Therefore, language interferences, or language creativity in the form of hybrid forms and code meshing should be perceived more as the sign of learning, than as a deficiency, similarly to the methodology applied in Error Analysis, save that this time it is used to define the interlanguages which constitute the student's underlying multi-competence. My personal teaching experience and research (Lankiewicz, 2023) suggests that students learning more foreign languages rarely aim at native-like proficiency and do not intend to imitate native pronunciation patterns, nor do they try to conform to any grammatical or pragmatic standards. Their use of English seems to be marked with the international status of this language and its pluricentric nature. The so-called national accent (be it phonetic, grammatical or pragmatic) of many Polish multilingual students of the English language is of no concern to them and does not influence their perception of success as language learners of this language. This claim is corroborated by other research findings regarding students' attitudes towards accent in the foreign language, in which plurilingualism was considered an important variable. Accordingly, plurilinguals "show greater tolerance for variation" (Jamet, 2022: 30) and in general evaluate themselves more positively in terms of accent (Arroyo Hernández, Paschke, 2022: 107).

The present study also indicates that in cases where English constitutes a part of the plurilingual repertoires, perceived competence in this language among learners is basically high and they seem to be satisfied with the language competence attained. They see English as very useful and of primary importance, nonetheless they appreciate other languages in their plurilingual repertoires and seem critically aware of the assets of knowing more than one L2 (both in personal and professional terms). Yet, while other languages seem to be marked by the enculturation paradigm (learning language related aspects seem to be important to them), English is treated a little differently, as a "culture free" means of communication.

The research respondents communicate their dissatisfaction with monolingual evaluation of their language competence and are frustrated with teachers' criticism regarding the "sloppiness" of their pronunciation. They admit that they are unable to follow one specific version of English. They point out the fact that their language creativity in the form of borrowings or linguistic hybridity is usually perceived by teachers as deficient and incorrect. This, in their opinion, stands in contrast with plurilingual communication in the real world. They argue that communication effectiveness in multilingual societies reaches beyond one linguistic system and is different from the standards assumed for academic contexts. Therefore, teachers' perception of their success differs from the students' personal evaluations. Hence, it is worth considering how to make academic evaluation match students' personal assessment, keeping in mind that language success for plurilinguals cannot be measured only in the classroom context (Widła, 2014) within the realm of one language. A more holistic approach to developing students' critical language awareness (Lankiewicz, 2015), or self-evaluation as part of the savoir-être (Smuk, 2016) would be more welcomed by students than any form of assessment based on doubtful perfection.

Lastly, students admit that most transfer and interference happens from English and their native language to other languages. Certainly, it is never unidirectional, but English may function not only as a lingua franca that presents a threat to other languages (cf. Dzik, 2019: 156–157), it may also offer a potential for developing intercomprehension of Romance languages. Robert (2011) sees it as a bridge to this group of languages due to lexical and morphosyntactic similarities. As it turns out, intercomprehension reaches beyond the same language group. Romance and German language have much in common, e.g. the Italian past tense *Passato Prossimo* seems to be the equivalent of the German *Perfect*. Thereby, English by nature may be a language of departure for intercomprehension of many languages, and consequently success in English as an L2 may be a gateway to raised language awareness. But for this to happen teachers need to recognize the fact

that plurilingualism is inherently heteroglossic, full of translingual practices generated by the translingual instinct (Li, 2011). Consequently, for plurilingual minds linguistic success cannot be monoglossic. Nonetheless, students report that the academic reality is far from this and the evaluation of language competences is often kept discrete. Hence, for the evaluation of the linguistic success of plurilinguals and their multi-competences, it would be worth considering the descriptors of *A Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches* (FREPA), to get a better understanding of how these apply to students' linguistic repertoires.

Taking into account the popularity of English in the educational contexts (it is usually the language of the first choice for the majority of students), observable success in its learning (almost every young person in Poland speaks it) and its international status, it may be construed that this is an L2 for many Polish learners. With the application of the ecolinguistic analogy to these qualitative research findings, this timid study may additionally suggest that plurilingual students of applied linguistics seem to show a higher level of critical language awareness, in the sense that they try to accentuate their non-native voice, rather than follow any language standard (cf. Lankiewicz, 2015: 104; 2023: 228ff), as compared to students studying only one language, who, for example, declare the willingness to learn native pronunciation and the same time exhibit a low level of native pronunciation conformity (cf. Baran-Łucarz, 2019: 13).

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