

Becoming Multilingual': Empowering College Students to Learn and Maintain Languages for Life

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Abstract : This research presents insights from a questionnaire study and autobiographic narrative analyses about the language and cultural backgrounds, challenges, interests, and needs, as well as perceptions about bilingualism and language learning of undergraduate students at a Public University in the southwestern United States. Participants were 650 students, enrolled in college-level general education courses, entitled "Becoming multilingual: Learning and maintaining two or more languages" between 2020 and 2024. Data were collected via pre- and post-course questionnaires administered online through the Qualtrix XM platform and complemented with analyses of excerpts from autobiographical narratives that students produced as part of the course assignments. Findings, for example, show that course participants have diverse linguistic backgrounds. The five most frequently reported L1s were English (about 50% of course participants), Spanish, Arabic, Mandarin, and Korean (in that order). The five most frequently reported L2s were English, Spanish, French, ASL, Japanese, German, and Mandarin (in that order). Participants also reported on their L2, L3, L4, and L5 if applicable. Most participants (over 60%) rated themselves bilingual or multilingual whereas 40% considered themselves to be monolingual or foreign language learners. Only about half of the participants reported feeling very or somewhat comfortable with their language skills, but these reports changed somewhat from the pre- to the post-course survey. About half of participants were mostly interested in learning how to effectively learn a foreign language. The other half of participants reported being most curious about learning about themselves as bi/multilinguals, (re)learning a language used in childhood, learning how to bring up a child as a bi/multilingual or learning about people who speak multiple languages (distributed about evenly). Participants' comments about advantages and disadvantages of being bilingual remained relatively stable but their agreement with common myths about bilingualism and language learning changed from the pre- to the post-course survey. Students' reflections in the autobiographical narratives and comments in (institutionally administered) anonymous course evaluations provided additional data on students' concerns about their current language skills and uses as well as their perceptions about learning outcomes and the usefulness of the general education course for their current and future lives. It is hoped that the presented findings and discussion will spark interest among colleagues in offering similar courses as a resource for college students (and possibly other audiences), including those from migrant, indigenous, multilingual, and multicultural communities to contribute to a more harmonious bilingualism and well-being of college students who are or inspire to become bi-or multilingual.

Keywords : autobiographic narratives, general education university course, harmonious bilingualism and well-being, multilingualism, questionnaire study

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