

# MOBILITY AS PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT. THE CASE OF LANGUAGE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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## *Abstract*

The study continues our deep research in the field of language autobiographies (including self-expression, making sense of one's own language learning experience, the language of emotion in language autobiographies, critical thinking – with focus on intellectual perseverance, as well as the identification of factors that trigger demotivation in language learning and using a foreign language). It concentrates on the multiple perspectives of analysis offered by mobility, interpreted in terms of personal development. That is, the individual's mobility from one stage of life to another, from one place/moment in time to another - a process that involves not only physical movement, but also a desire of confronting changes (allowing for new experiences), of overcoming obstacles and learning new things. This type of mobility involves physical and mental flexibility and adaptability, self-awareness, as well as growth of mind-set and leads to improvement of knowledge, abilities, behaviour, along with the cognitive and emotional intelligences; in other words, to personal growth/development.

We consider that language autobiographies, as a “personal account/narrative/story” of the individual's “journey” through linguistic experiences, can be an informative research instrument, within the framework of a hybrid approach: thematic narrative inquiry, with elements from discourse analysis.

**Key-words:** *mobility, personal development, language autobiography, thematic narrative analysis, linguistic journey.*

## **Introduction**

Our deep interest in language autobiographies helped us identify a large display of aspects that individuals disclosed in their accounts: on the one side, elements with applications in the field of deep personal insight (self-concept, self-expression, making sense of one's own language learning experience, the language of emotion in language autobiographies) and, on the other side, in the field of education (critical thinking – with focus on intellectual perseverance, the identification of factors that trigger demotivation in language learning and using a foreign language). The present paper is going to have application in the field of language learning, lifelong learning, as well as in the field of personal development.

## 1. Framework of analysis

### a) Personal development

Personal development is conceived as a conscious dynamic process, made up of a set of steps (active work) one takes, through which they improve themselves from different perspectives: physical, cognitive, emotional, relational, cultural and professional. This means, in fact, acting/working so that they could enhance personal qualities, personal skills and overall-being. It has the role of aligning the individual's multiple selves (facets of identity) – emotional, cultural, professional, social, spiritual, etc. – a process that is supported by emotional intelligence and adaptability. It often involves changes, consisting in new roles, habits, contexts of action and interaction.

The process is influenced by a number of interconnected factors, among which physical and mental health, environment and social influences (small and large communities – family, peer group – in which the individual lives, learns and works), access to resources (a real support for personal growth), type of education, continuous learning, as well as home and workplace culture.

It requires a healthy mind-set and an attitude based on self-assessment and self-awareness (understanding beliefs, values, strengths, weaknesses) that help identification, through critical thinking, of own beliefs and values (that can guide decisions), of own raw potential and skills or attributes, as well as setting clear goals (able to offer direction of development and meaning to all efforts involved). It also requires motivation, self-discipline, skills of time management, as well as conscious reflection on and critical analysis of life experiences (challenges, strengths and weaknesses, success, failure, mobility across time and space and cultural exposure), while pursuing the accomplishment of goals. According to Bandura (1986), it is influenced by internal factors (emotions, thoughts, values, abilities, time management, etc.) and external ones (various environments or social interactions).

### b) Mobility

Mobility is a concept that sends us to different meanings, according to the context in which it is used.

Out of a large list of meanings, as the term is used in different areas of study and activity, we have chosen the ones that fit the topic of analysis: “ease or freedom of movement”<sup>6</sup>; “the ability to move or walk around freely”; “the ability to move from one job, place, social class, etc. to another”<sup>7</sup>; “the ability to change one's social or socioeconomic position in a community and especially to improve it”<sup>8</sup>. Among the most frequent synonyms of the concept, there are

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<sup>6</sup> Oxford English Dictionary – available at: <https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=mobility>

<sup>7</sup> Cambridge Dictionary – available at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/mobility>

<sup>8</sup> Merriam–Webster Dictionary – <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mobility>

a) motion, locomotion, movement, (the act of) moving – all for physical movement –

b) advancement, development, empowerment, evolution, personal growth, progress, self-improvement, transformation, upward mobility – all are related concepts, fit for social, professional, or personal advancement.

The concept of mobility goes hand in hand with that of movement. An interesting idea is issued by Torres (2021), who considers that

Mobility is just as central to the human experience of the world as place. While including movement, mobility is about the potential or ability to move and the meaning, practices and experiences of moving.

Mobility enables movement and movement reflects mobility.

Mobility → ability to move  
→ possibility to move

Mobility includes movement, understood as a relationship between three elements:

Movement language journey,      action  
 transition  
 change      } what actually happens during the  
 in different contexts

c) **Language autobiography**

A form of personal narrative, the language autobiography – named by Pavlenko (2007: 164) linguistic autobiography, language learning protocol or language learning account – offers its author the opportunity to describe his/her “journey” through the experiences he/she had with languages during his lifetime, along with the processes of becoming bi- or multilingual in different circumstances, be they linguistic or social.

Personal and reflective, a language autobiography offers information about language development (what stayed the same and what changed), identity development (who one is – forming and understanding the sense of one's own self) and personal development (self-actualization). In other words, the process of improving self-awareness, skills, potential, the quality of life, thus shaping the identity over time, along the social experiences that individuals pass through during their moments of language learning and language use. It may include family and social (even political) background and explores personal and cultural language growth and the multiple possibilities through which one's linguistic background shaped their sense of the self.

Language autobiographies have an important role in personal development. Through self-reflection, they contribute to one's understanding of the way in which learning languages influenced their becoming in life, despite difficulties (fear, shame, marginalization, trauma, temporal failure). They also help individuals notice and understand the stages of their rising way as individuals through (personal and social) identity transformation. That is because language

learning is a complex act of transformation and, at the same time, progressing in language learning helps discovering new layers of identity, along with the learner's cognitive strength, resilience, degree of perseverance, emotional depth and cultural belonging. The changes in individuals' lives, related to languages, emotions, places and identities are described and explained (*how and why*) they occurred. Summarizing the ideas, we can say that language autobiographies explore not only the steps in language learning and use, but also the process of identity formation.

## 2. Literature review

### a) Personal development

In order to understand the journey towards a holistic personal development, we had in view a theoretical framework that brought together ideas from various theories and models.

Their presentation might start with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1970). Maslow mentioned the hierarchical needs that motivate people and personal development. This indicates the fact that personal development follows a progression of five "steps" – starting with basic physiological needs and ending with self-actualization, that is, going up to the level at which the individual is pursuing own goals. In order to accomplish their goals, individuals need "to move" themselves; that is, to be driven by motivation.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) defines both intrinsic and extrinsic sources of motivation (in both cognitive and social development and, at the same time, it also identifies three psychological needs that are inherent in human nature: autonomy (one's need of feeling in control of one's own actions); competence (one's need of feeling themselves competent and effective) and relatedness (one's need of being connected with others).

Once accomplishing these needs, the individual becomes aware that it is necessary to develop at different levels: cognitive, emotional, societal, behavioural, or spiritual. The cognitive-emotional development represents the core idea of Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1997); this happens when individuals start reflecting on their knowledge, values, assumptions or beliefs; they engage in an active process that is made up of five stages: pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance and termination. This process will, in Mezirow's conception, produce the individuals' transformation: a change of their frames of reference, based on critical reflection and experience. The focus of interest of the theory is represented by adults and the way in which they change their frames of reference through critical reflection, as well as through experience.

The growth cannot be achieved without a growth mindset – suggests Growth Mindset Theory (Dweck, 2006) – that is, the individual's belief in the possibility of personal development, through continuous learning, effort and perseverance. This idea had also been expressed by Humanistic Theories (Carl Rogers, 1961). Rogers brought into focus the importance of self-concept, personal strengths and resilience, along with positive emotions and positive regard in personal development; Bandura in his Social Cognitive Theory (1986) expressed the same idea, insisting on the role that one's belief in the ability to succeed has

upon behaviour and motivation, as well as on the idea that individuals can learn and develop while observing the others. This hints at the idea firmly supported by Bandura, according to which human behaviour is the result of not only personal factors (cognition, values, emotions, beliefs, behaviour), but also of the environmental influence, including the interactions with the others.

Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory (1950) insists on the role that social and cultural factors have in shaping the individual's personality development over time, through gaining of virtues (in 8 stages): hope, will, purpose, competence, fidelity, love, care, wisdom, meaningful relationships. The theory is also interested in the relationship between language and the concepts of belonging and self-expression, mentioning the fact that once individuals master a language, they develop their self-expression ability, along with decision-making one. This, together with the manner of language use and shared cultural references, will contribute to their establishing and handling relationships with the others more easily.

### **b) Mobility**

For the understanding of the concept of mobility, we had in view two distinct perspectives, as offered by Bauman and Massey. Bauman's sociological view on mobility is strictly linked to the flux of the contemporary life (somehow, the individual's instability in time and space is, in other words, a characteristic feature of modern identity), which redefines constantly, along the individual's move and various opportunities for re-adaptation and reshaping. In this sense, Bauman talks about "liquid modernity" (Bauman, 2000; 2005), whose best examples of beneficiaries are those belonging to the group, seen as "globally mobile"; they have to take the responsibility of their own paths (as this involves risks), to adapt to new structures, new languages, contexts and experiences.

Language autobiographies represent a good example of opportunities, experiences, struggles, efforts, transformations that individuals pass through during their "journey"/mobility in language learning.

Massey (1994), talking about places (seen as dynamic intersections of flows of goods, ideas, people) and spaces (seen as being relational – that is, constructed by interactions, journeys and stories) enhances the idea that mobility represents an important constant factor in the dynamic process of shaping and reshaping identities. In other words, mobility does not only mean changing physical locations, but also the necessary element that offers individuals the opportunity to reshape the way in which they view themselves and the way in which they are seen by the others.

### **c) Language autobiography**

Autobiographies have been approached from different perspectives. Pavlenko (2007) identified three of them: cognitive (the focus is on meaning-making); textual (insisting on a variety of voices and discourses); discursive (considering autobiographies as interaction-oriented productions).

Dancygier (2015), although not explicitly focusing on language autobiography as a tool for personal development, while investigating the way

stories are mentally formed, reaches the conclusion that narratives are both a linguistic and a cognitive phenomenon; that is, language has a double function: that of a tool for communication and that of a way of constructing and making sense of our experiences. Hence, the conclusion that, from a personal development point of view, our personal stories/accounts of our life journey, become important for our understanding, evolvement and definition of our identity.

Barkhuizen (2013) offers an analysis of language autobiographies from a narrative inquiry perspective.

Murphey (1998a, b) considers language learning histories as metacognitive tools that build identities through narrative, illustrate identity transformations and describe challenges in language learning, motivations, as well as strategies along the learning process.

Pavlenko mentions some important aspects brought by the analysis of language autobiographies, thus focusing on the way in which language autobiography is linked to personal development:

- a) the relationship between second language learning, self-discovery and personal reinvention (1998)
- b) the relationship between linguistic desire, gender and identity (2001a)
- c) identity negotiation beyond cultural norms (2001b)
- d) the shaping of emotional development and self-expression (both reflective and relational) through language (2006)
- e) the influence of bilingualism on overall cognition (2014)
- f) autobiographical self in multilingual contexts

### **3. Personal development and mobility (along with movement) – concepts and theories – and their relevance to language autobiography**

The table below shows the relevance that personal development theories have for language autobiographies and for their analysis

<b>Personal Development Theory</b>		<b>Language autobiographies</b>
<b>Humanistic theories</b>	<b>Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs</b> Key ideas: personal needs help personal growth	Language autobiographies are an opportunity for learners to explain the reasons that lie behind their motivations for learning a language (satisfying different needs: belonging; safety, esteem, self-growth), making progress in language learning and even changing strategies of learning
	<b>Carl Rogers</b> Key ideas: self as central to personal growth; language learning as a transformative process	Language autobiographies allow learners to reflect on personal language journey experience, while highlighting their self-discovery and identity, as well as the transformative process they are passing through

<p><b>Self Determination Theory</b> Key ideas: autonomy, competence, relatedness</p>	<p>Learners identify intrinsic and extrinsic motivations guiding their journey with languages; they also mention their gaining competence in using the language, or their coming and feeling closer to the people around by means of language mastery</p>
<p><b>Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1997)</b> Key ideas: individual cognitive transformation; changing one's worldview</p>	<p>Learners identify and reveal educational and social helpers and barriers in learning a language, "give voice" to different emotional associations with certain languages and they also rethink cultural identity while using the language in a multilingual world</p>
<p><b>Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura)</b> Key ideas: learning by observing others; reciprocal determinism; self-efficacy</p>	<p>Language autobiographies reveal learners' modelling behaviour and the degree of self-efficacy in different stages of the learning process. They also reveal the way in which their learning strategies need to be changed, due to the learners' social interaction, as well as to their personal reflection.</p>
<p><b>Growth Mindset Theory (Dweck, 2006)</b> Key ideas: emphasis on effort and resilience; attitudes toward challenges and progress; learning from mistakes (viewed as part of the learning process)</p>	<p>Language autobiographies become real and valuable radiographies of the learning process, with all its "ingredients", such as effort of learning, errors, setbacks, perseverance along with attitudes towards all these</p>
<p><b>Psychosocial Development Theory (Erickson)</b> Key ideas: personal development occurs in stages; language learning and language use have influence upon individuals' identity formation; social roles are influenced by language learning</p>	<p>Language autobiographies reflect learners' struggles with identity formation, especially when learners act in multilingual contexts</p>

As far as the concepts of mobility and movement are concerned, their relevance to language autobiographies may be illustrated as follows:

<b>Mobility</b>	<b>Language autobiography references</b>
<p>Key ideas: geographical or social movement of people; movement of languages; movement of cultural practices across time and space; access/freedom or constraints of getting to or using the language</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• information regarding (personal, social or political) causes or opportunities for individuals' gain or loss of access to languages</li> <li>• how language skills can be used in different contexts</li> <li>• evolution of language choices (when one crosses borders), while being exposed to new contexts and new languages</li> <li>• the way languages turn into important tools for education and career opportunities</li> </ul>
<p><b>Movement</b></p> <p>Key ideas: shifts in language use; emotional and psychological change; movement between linguistic styles, between identities or modes of communication within communities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• events or moments when language is acquired or changed</li> <li>• shifts (over time) in language practices</li> <li>• steps in language learning</li> <li>• moments of overcoming difficulties</li> <li>• transformation of setbacks into opportunities</li> <li>• the actual movement from language to language</li> <li>• acquisition of a new dialect</li> <li>• movement from one register to another, according to context</li> <li>• language as enabler of personal identity change</li> </ul>

#### 4. Research questions

The research questions of the study may be summarized as:

- 1) How does language biography reflect one's cognitive, emotional, social or professional mobility?
- 2) How do different types of mobility influence self-discovery, self-awareness and self-development?
- 3) In what ways does reflecting on language experiences lead to identity transformation and personal development?
- 4) In what ways do individuals perceive the role of language learning in their personal development?
- 5) Does mobility represent a catalyst for personal development?

## **5. Methodology of research**

### **a) Participants**

The participants to the study (n = 15 - all females) were teachers of English from Bacău county, former students of the Faculty of Letters, “Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău. Participation was on a voluntary basis, within the international project PLURI-LA – Language autobiographies after they had been contacted via e-mail or face-to-face discussions.<sup>9</sup>

### **b) Method of research**

We considered that narrative inquiry and discourse analysis could better help us navigate through the topic. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) viewed language as one's way to express and shape not only experience, but also identity by making sense of life through personal story. Therefore, memory, lived experience and personal identity (implicitly, personal growth) can become the key words of our analysis.

We also used elements of discourse analysis, giving accounts of how language reflects change, power and identity.

### **c) Data collection**

Data collection was a process that passed through different stages. First, we had a meeting with participants who got information about Language autobiographies (objectives, structure, content, benefits for learners and teachers). We advised respondents

- to look back in time and try to identify all the encounters they had with languages (dialects, variants of different styles and registers, foreign languages), people and cultures along with the process of language learning
- to give accounts of the language learning stages they passed through in and out of school experiences
- to identify the factors (helpful or hindering ones) that contributed to their acquiring languages
- to give accounts of the emotions, feelings accompanying the language learning process
- to mention moments of geographical mobility
- to identify internal and external factors contributing to their formation of identity and personal growth

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<sup>9</sup> An European project, within Lifelong Learning Programme. Grundtvig (ID 2012-1-FR-GRU06-35650 3), having three main objectives: educational, pedagogical and social. The autobiographies were gathered and included in one of the final products of the project: Strungariu, M., Galita, R., Bonta, E., Romedea, AG. 2014. *Reflections on language autobiographies/ Reflexions sur les autobiographies langagieres*, Bacău: Alma Mater.

#### **d) Data processing**

We got the consent from respondents that data collected could be processed on a name coded-based methodology (R1 – R14), in order to ensure anonymity. We then read all the language autobiographies and, although respondents proved, through their narrative, certain paths in their personal development, we decided to choose only seven of them, in order to accomplish the objectives of this study in a more effective way. Their accounts illustrated a clearer example of personal development through language, starting from the first meetings with languages and ending at the moment when, according to narratives, the respondents decided to build a career on the basis of language knowledge development across time and space. The chosen ones, coded again as R1– R7, were based on a common element: the respondents gave accounts of their language experiences, from the early age, up to their becoming university teachers.

### **6. Findings and discussion**

As language learning accounts, language autobiographies become real and valuable radiographies of the learning process, with all its “ingredients”, such as effort of learning, errors, setbacks or perseverance, along with attitudes towards all these. The collected language autobiographies offered various instances of mobility – making steps in the process of language learning and language use, changes in ideas, values, contexts of learning, attitudes or strategies of learning, as well as in learners’ identity.

Learners identified and revealed educational and social helpers and barriers in learning a language, “gave voice” to different feelings and motional associations with certain languages; they built confidence, perseverance, flexibility and competence; they also rethought cultural identity while using languages in a multilingual world.

When analysing the language autobiographies we started from three ideas:

- a) language autobiographies often reveal how learners' identities evolve (identity transformation) through mobility and language use;
- b) there exists a deep connection between identity (who we are) and personal development (the process of becoming);
- c) mobility allows for learning opportunities, challenges and experiences – all being meant to allow and shape one's personal development.

Identity and personal development influence each other; in fact, they shape each other. Identities shift over time and across contexts, especially in different language learning situations. On the one hand, identity acts as a guide for our personal and professional goals, choices and actions (seeking opportunities, responding to challenges, handling emotions, building relationships, interpreting experiences). This means that it shapes personal development. On the other hand, as individuals learn, experience life and grow (through education, hard work, travel, relationships and reflection), their identity

is shaped; they adopt new roles, change beliefs, adopt new values, become more self-aware or socially aware of the world around them. Identity and personal development are also influenced by the cultural context, the people individuals come in contact with and, very important, by their own reflections on personal experiences.

Personal development may be achieved through diverse types of mobility, which can be organized into two large groups:

- a) literal (educational mobility; geographical mobility; travel mobility; professional mobility)
- b) metaphorical mobility (cognitive mobility; intellectual mobility; social mobility; cultural mobility; emotional mobility).

A general remark – regarding findings in the language autobiographies under discussion – is that these types of mobility intermingle (their elements remain distinct but interact with each other/one another) and, in almost all examples offered by our respondents, the emotional element accompanies each type of mobility.

Personal development means one's growth in skills, confidence, attitude, behaviour, identity and worldview; mobility fosters a mindset growth and lifelong learning. This makes us understand that mobility is more than "ease or freedom of movement"<sup>10</sup> – triggering only physical/geographical movement. Besides this type of mobility, there are other movements/acts/abilities, which, in their turn, trigger ideas connected with other concepts, in a relation of direct or complementary synonymy (thus, becoming key concepts to personal development).<sup>11</sup> This makes us understand that we are dealing with mobility as a multidimensional concept. Thus, in the analysis of the seven language autobiographies, we identified:

### **1) Cognitive mobility. The act or the ability to change or adapt**

It has been proved that cognitive mobility is made up of

- one's mental-set ability to restructure thought, to change strategies on the basis of new information, to switch tasks when the situation asks for this, to shift between ideas, to think critically, to make decisions, to take risks and step out the comfort zone and, even, to see the world differently
- one's cognitive flexibility, that is, one's being open to new ideas, challenges, rules, approaches, perspectives, skills or changes
- one's flexibility to "move" between different cognitive or cultural frameworks
- one's emotional-cognitive adaptation, which means handling emotions in cases of setbacks, fear, shame, shyness, stress or uncertainty and adjusting reasoning according to these emotions

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<sup>10</sup> Oxford English Dictionary – available at:

<https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=mobility>

<sup>11</sup> Adaptation and completion of material offered by <https://www.wordhippo.com/what-is/another-word-for/mobility.html>

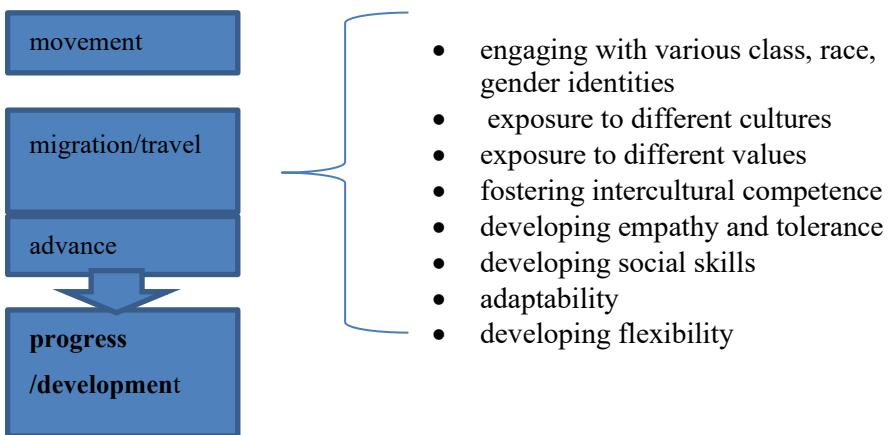
- one's ability of reflecting over their own progress, the need of adjustment in learning, the need of adjusting goals and accepting and learning from failures



## 2) Movement (the act of moving), through language experiences and reflections, across time and space.

This refers to linguistic ability, with focus on its dimensions: **social, geographical and cultural mobility** (along with rethinking cultural identity).

Geographical mobility (moving across physical space while changing living environments) encompasses people and languages travelling across national regions or countries, along with the development of social skills, resilience and adaptability. It goes hand in hand with travel mobility (travelling for pleasure), social mobility (class or status mobility) and, sometimes (very often nowadays), social and cultural mobility. Graphically, it could look like the following:



## 3) The act of or ability to move between different educational, professional and social levels

This act is linked to educational mobility and it is brought by hard work, training, as well as by various opportunities. The complementary synonymous concepts can be



- adopting a reflective behaviours
- recognizing limiting behaviours

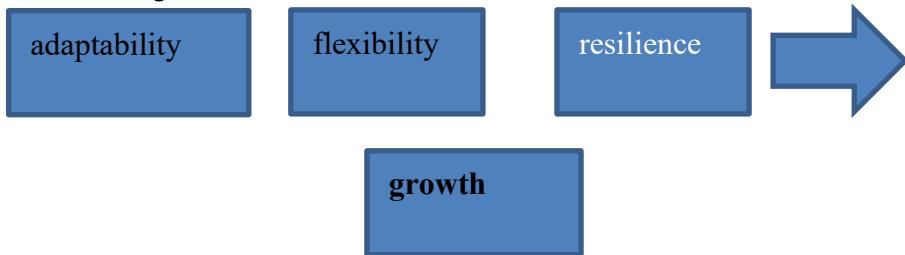
- trying to change behaviours
- becoming more emotionally flexible
- embracing possibility
- aligning actions with long-term goals

The concept of forward movement refers to the consistent progress the individual makes while pursuing the goal(s) in order to accomplish it/them. It is based on hard work and maintenance of good habits through various challenges, along with building discipline and routines and bit-by-bit improvement of skills.

Upward movement (a possible outcome of personal development) indicates progress/ growth at a higher level, position or status; in our case, the mobility is at educational level (from higher school to university), career level (movement to a higher status within the profession; a change in the professional rank) and social level (the position allows for a greater recognition). Educational level prepares the individual for professional level.

#### 4) Emotional and psychological mobility

In this case, reference is made to the individual's ability to move between different emotions and mental states in an adaptive way. This presupposes developed emotional intelligence – that is, enhancing self-confidence, overcoming negative emotions, managing emotions in new contexts and building resilience. Developing emotional intelligence — learning to manage, express, and adapt emotions in different situations — enhances relationships and self-understanding



According to Norton (2000), individuals invest in language learning once they see it as a means of gaining access to desired identities, jobs, cultural capital, social recognition and social networks. Norton's concept of investment (rooted in social and historical contexts) is an alternative to the traditional psychological concept of motivation (seen as an internal, individual trait). For Norton, identity and investment are dynamic in nature, while motivation is seen as static.

There exists a deep interconnection between language learning, investment and personal development; thus

- language learning (deeply connected to ones` identity) is a process which requires, builds, develops, uses and demonstrates one's cognitive mobility; it develops cognitive flexibility and can also be a product of cognitive mobility;
- cognitive mobility helps and reinforces adaptation to new learning environments – that can shape new identities – and enables switching

between linguistic frameworks; it also facilitates investment (the acquisition of linguistic structures) and, at the same time, the ability to understand pragmatic use of language;

- investment gives account of the effort, time and emotion that one devotes to language learning, as great investment leads to sustained language learning; it is often driven by imagined identities.

The analysis of our corpus disclosed various types of **factors** that affected the respondents' investment in language learning, thus leading to their paths towards personal development:

**a) factors that encourage investment**

- **supportive learning environment** (encouraging teachers)

The learning environment had a very important role in learners' personal development due to the conditions it could offer so that learners may feel safe, understood, confident, appreciated, valued and motivated. Teachers played the decisive role. Their professional skills and attitude towards learning and learners contributed to learners' access to resources, their emotional safety and their opportunity to develop a mindset culture.

*It was Ms. R...., who made me want to become a teacher of English, due to the manner in which she taught every lesson, but especially to the attention and support I received from her whenever I wanted to know more. (R5)*

*From the very beginning, she was very patient with us, not jumping on mistakes, encouraging us all the time. I have always appreciated all the teachers that forced me to give explanations in English, helping me practice my speaking skills. (R7)*

- **peer and family support**

In most cases, the first contact with a foreign language took place in the family. Respondents mentioned parents, siblings or other relatives as models, advisers, guides, supporters all along their language journey. Their support constituted a factor with direct consequences on the respondents' motivation and persistence in language learning.

*I remember that my mother, being an English teacher, started to teach me easy words and sentences in English when I was 3 or 4 years old. She is also the one who always supported me in my journey through languages. (R3)*

*[...] my father...taught me some words in Russian – a language, which in communist era had been extensively studied - and encouraged me to learn more... (R6)*

*My father really wanted me to learn English; so, he took me to private classes... (R5)*

- **awareness that stirs desire to consciously learn**

Awareness is considered to be the spark that makes one motivated and eager to learn more. Feedback from others, positive emotional experiences, recognizing a knowledge gap or comparing current self with the desired one are the factors that bring one's awareness and can trigger a desire to transform oneself into a better version. The respondents mentioned such instances of awareness:

*I fell in love with English from the very first classes due to the fact that, suddenly, an entire universe, unknown until then, was beginning to open in front of my mind and eyes: I was beginning to understand poetry lines, song lyrics, world proverbs and stories. (R1)*

➤ **imagined communities** (learners imagine themselves in future roles)

Internal or external factors made respondents imagine in future roles, including a more developed self, with a new, empowered identity. It is the case of R7, for example, who mentioned this explicitly:

*[...]learning more about Big Ben, the Royal family, traditional food, manners and mannerisms seemed exotic to me and only made me want to learn more, learn English better, so I could become articulate and read about all these things myself. I can say that all these and my teacher – as a model – made me want to become a teacher of English... (R7)*

➤ **access to resources**

It is a fact that investment and personal development is closely linked with one's access to tools, materials and resources. Without them, progress is slow and frustration may become a dominant feeling. Our respondents mentioned these resources as opportunities that helped them stay curious and inspired, take actions and get confidence and strength: they identified English books, TV programs (especially soap operas; cartoons; non-formal education).

*I bought English books; some of them were abridged versions for various levels of English language learning, but some were the original complete versions.....so, I could read and improve my reading skills... (R1)*

*When telenovelas became fashionable, I took Spanish lessons at the Children's Palace and I really liked it. (R4)*

➤ **lack of constraints and access to new opportunities**

Respondents, having lived during the communist regime (a serious barrier for foreign language learning – in terms of opportunities, of having access to resources and contacts with native speakers of other languages), identified the moment of the country's revolution as a major turning point in language learning, a moment that was promising a constraint-free country. That presupposed open doors to resources in foreign languages, to other nations, to their languages and their cultures.

*It was immediately after the 1989 revolution when cable TV gave us the possibility to watch cartoons which were not, as most are today, doubled. So, with the curious eyes of the child, I was watching cartoons and associating images with words, and managing to catch some meaning. R6*

➤ **personal traits**

Respondents mentioned personal traits that positively influenced their motivation for learning; hence, their appropriate behaviour (personal development). Among them, curiosity and willingness to get out of the box had a decisive role:

*At that age, I was curious to know what they were saying in that "other" language... (R2)*

*Sometimes, the titles of the shows were in Moldavian / Romanian written with their specific alphabet. This experience enriched my vocabulary with few common*

*Russian expressions, but it made me curious to read about the Russian writers and culture. (R5)*

Summing up the positive factors influencing investment:

supportive learning environment	access to resources and opportunities
peer and family support	lack of constraints
awareness that stirs desire to consciously learn	personal traits
imagined communities	

**b) factors that discourage investment**

➤ **limited/lack of access to target language** (limited or no real opportunities to use the language in meaningful ways)

Respondents, having lived during the communist regime, had very little access, during school period, to materials in foreign languages or the possibility of meeting native speakers.

*During secondary school, my “encounters” with native speakers of English were limited to writing; I had some “pen-friends” – children of my age from England – with whom I exchanged a few letters on general topics such as free-time, hobbies or school. (R3)*

➤ **political/economic/time constraints**

From this perspective, most respondents mentioned the political regime of the country as an important constraint in their journey with foreign languages:

*Learning English was not always easy. As a communist country, Romania was rather reluctant towards the idea of opening to other cultures and peoples. There were not many possibilities to get in touch with the real English, that is, English spoken by natives. (R1)*

*In my childhood, in communist Romania, I did not have any contact with foreign languages in kindergarten or primary school. (R6)*

*My linguistic experience was also marked by the political regime which influenced our interaction with our neighbours, Republic of Moldova. (R5)*

➤ **personal traits**

Respondents mentioned personal traits, which, somehow, hindered their contact, relationship (of acceptance, appreciation, of love) and desire to learn, as well as the investment in language learning.

➤ **resistance to feedback**

*I never liked....to be corrected too often ...being a sensitive child, I took the corrections too personally, considering that I was not good at English, and these fed my shyness and all this wasn't helping me progress. (R3)*

➤ **personal feelings**

*My first consciously acknowledged encounter with a foreign language in use was at around the age of 5, when I spent my summer in Brasov, at my grandparents. The feelings of anger (“Why should they speak differently in my presence?”) and of frustration (“Why can't I understand them?”), instead of pushing me towards learning Hungarian, made my stubborn ego refuse any*

*attempt that my grandmother had to teach me. To this day, I do not know a single word in Hungarian. (R3)*

Summing up the factors that discouraged investment

negative school experience	personal traits
marginalization	resistance to feedback
limited/lack of access to target language	personal feelings
political/economic/time constraints	

The way to personal development in the context of language learning was a long one; it often required being adaptable, learning new skills, and adjusting one's approach to life's challenges. It also required changes of decisions, movements or strategies and feelings accompanying all these; in other words, it was a real full "struggle" with language learning and was based on hard work.

The triggers for action were represented by the time that learners took in order to reflect on their choices, actions and emotions. In this sense, movement refers to an internal shift, toward self-awareness and self-improvement. Curiosity, perseverance and resilience were the necessary "ingredients" of this journey. The respondents' language autobiographies "caught" these, as clear as possible. Three important ideas, as disclosed by respondents, stood at the basis of our analysis:

- a) the fact that personal development is a process that occurs in stages
- b) the process of transformation (through various types of mobility and movement) is often triggered by a crucial event such as a personal limitation (shyness; insecurity; fear of failure; "endangered" positive face in front of others) or realization (realizing things such as: beauty or usefulness of a language; the inner power of overcoming difficulties; one's passion for a new career)
- c) transformation can be a continuous process of evolving into a better version of oneself

Thus, the respondents' language autobiographies gave account of:

#### **lack of awareness**

*My experience with English goes back to the 3rd or 4th grade when the opportunity to learn English seemed a great novelty and challenge. Of course, back then we had no idea how important this learning opportunity would prove to be. (R2)*

#### **observational learning (learning by observing others) and getting encouragement**

*My first contact with foreign languages started with films on TV or at the cinema in my early childhood. First, I was just listening, until I was able to read, then reading subtitles and finding their correspondent in Romanian, obviously just guessing at first. My sister did the same and being older, she was my guide. (R5)*

#### **a less confident or knowledgeable state at the beginning**

*All along the camp I couldn't overpass these feelings. I did not learn much during that camp and I remember that I came back feeling a little bit frustrated by my incapacity of exercising French. (R3)*

#### **glimpses of language awareness**

*It was in the first year of study when I realized that knowing grammar rules and reading comprehension skills were as important as listening and speaking. (R5)*

#### **self- actualization**

*I remember having become aware of my love for the grammar of Romanian language...Since then, I gave much attention and devotion to it. (R6)*

#### **taking decisions towards growth, based on critical thinking**

*Once it was clear in my mind that what I liked best was learning and studying languages, I could gulp almost anything: in addition to English and French, there was also the Latin..., I became a self-taught learner of Italian .....because I could prove that I know it better than my ten cousins who dropped school at different ages to work in Italy. (R4)*

#### **assumed “struggle” with language learning process and with all that it implies**

The “struggle” is made up of steps, which, in the analyzed language autobiographies looked more or less similar. The process encompassed many challenges and strategies to cope with them:

##### **1. marginalization (learners experienced instances of racism or exclusion)**

Respondents identified cases in which they felt marginalized or even excluded by others, from different reasons and this hindered their forward movement:

###### **❖ lack of ability to understand a particular language**

*My grandparents, being from Transylvania (...) had grown up bilingual, fluently speaking both Romanian and Hungarian. The feelings of anger (“Why should they speak differently in my presence?”) and frustration “Why can’t I understand them?”), instead of pushing me towards learning Hungarian, made my stubborn ego refuse any attempt that my grandmother had to teach me. (R3)*

###### **❖ their belonging to a different religion**

*My frustration in point of language was also related to religion. At school, I was sometimes too shy to speak or read some text because I often heard the label “catholics are ceangăi” used by pupils around me. (R2)*

###### **❖ their belonging to a different nationality (against the background of a particular political situation).**

*When I was 10 years old, we moved to a different neighbourhood; therefore I lost contact with all my German friends and began having contacts with Romanian children. During that period time I began attending the courses of a German school, which took place in the building of a former Romanian school. I remembered how at first the Romanian children used to throw stones at us, because they thought we wanted to ‘invade’ their territory (it was the period of decolonisation due to the Communist regime). (R7)*

In these specific contexts, frustration became their dominant feeling:

❖ in their own country

*There were a few cases when, though in Romania, I had to use English or body language in public institutions because the employees, people living in Romania, did not know/want to speak Romanian. Or, even worse, I was discriminated and ignored (I repeat, in my own country – the Transylvania region) because I spoke Romanian instead of Hungarian. All these happen because of an endless historic quarrel on the matter of Transylvania's belonging to Romania or Hungary. (R3)*

❖ abroad

*When I travelled to foreign countries like France or Italy, people treated me nicely as long as I spoke their language. In the airport, when I tried to communicate in English the smile quickly turned into a frown and sometimes people even refused to lend a helping hand. Obviously, it was frustrating because I could not obtain the information I needed and this made my journey more difficult. (R2)*

**2. identifying challenges**

➤ **fear of making mistakes**

*[...] no matter how hard I tried in my mind to phrase and rephrase my own questions to ask her (in order to have a complete dialogue) I was too shy to utter them. I was afraid not to make mistakes or to have a bad accent in English. (R3)*

➤ **difficulties of learning**

*[...] it was while learning the basics of French that I felt the difficulties of learning a foreign language, it was then that I became truly aware of the fact that a foreign language had grammar and pronunciation rules, and subject-verb agreement, whereas learning English had always felt like a natural thing to do. (R2)*

Difficulties in learning and using the language, as well as in understanding others, accompanied by negative emotions and feeling were mentioned openly. Identifying difficulties and reflecting upon them (evaluating, making comparisons, drawing conclusions) were signs of the respondent's individual cognitive transformation. The process was taken to a higher level by the (positive; proactive) attitude they took toward challenges, thus helping growth and personal development. In this respect, we identified:

**3. intensifying work as answer to challenges**

*[...] I drew very close to the humanistic side and formed a taste for reading and participated in school competitions in the Romanian language. The lexical acquisition during this period was huge; I was reading novels and critical works, as I was avid for knowing as many words as I could. (R6)*

**4. getting a higher degree of awareness**

*While studying French I began to realize what learning a foreign language really means: you have to obey grammar and spelling rules, you have to observe the exceptions to the rules, you have to make connections between your native language and the new one.” (R3)*

**5. seeking continuous learning driven by a desire to grow** (acquisition of new knowledge and skills)

*I thought....I would definitely like to perfect any of the languages I have ever come into contact with and say that I can speak them fluently at least at the level of family conversation. (R6)*

## **6. adaptability**

The process of language learning also presupposed – among learning strategies, directly linked to learners' attitudes and actions– **adaptability** at different levels (of values, contexts, new ideas or new relationships). Movement, in this case, was represented by the learners' flexibility and the ability to change in response to new challenges, environments, or life situations. Adaptability took different forms:

➤ **saving the positive face of the self** (Goffman, 1967)

One respondent remembered one of her English pen-pals writing to her; she didn't know too much English, but she tried to cope with the situation, doing the best she could, out of her desire of preserving the self-image.

*I did my best to prove my English skills to him, so as not to make a fool out of myself. (R1)*

➤ **changing strategies of work**

*I remember working with a primitive dictionary by Andrei Bantaş, but I was very proud of it and of my list of new words, which I compiled at the end of the notebook in which I was writing the translation. (R6)*

➤ **understanding and accepting limitations**

*I remember not knowing even words such as “pot holder”, but I was at the beginning. Later, I started the reverse operation – translating some stories from Romanian into English. (R6)*

➤ **setting creativity into motion and being proud of results**

*I had initiated my own dictionary in a notebook where I wrote the new words I came into contact with together with their definitions. They were most of them neologisms or words specific to the elevated style and I was very proud of knowing them and of being able to use them in various contexts. (R6)*

## **7. sustained hard work**

Respondents explicitly mentioned their **hard work** while trying to achieve short- or long-term goals. We identified the mobility that took place at this at this level of their reflection: they started with timid steps and went on until the level of reaching the stage of valuing hard work and the learning strategies that they used along the process of language learning. At the same time, they mentioned, by narrating, the actions they took while “struggling” with language learning, their step by step that lead to growth through hard work and the fact that hard work was rewarded – all these, being accompanied by various feelings and emotions. Thus, we identified:

➤ **emphasis on effort and resilience**

The respondents' sustained efforts were a real proof of the fact that they were embracing discomfort as part of their personal development.

*The rest of my initial contact stood under the sign of hard work, as I liked doing my homework and writing the new words in a special notebook.*

(R6)

- **increased confidence** (that encouraged upward movement)

*Being more confident in my abilities to learn and speak a foreign language, I applied for a bilingual specialization in high-school, English and French, obviously. (R3)*

- **passion** (even grit as a motivational trait, decisive for upward movement route, while trying to accomplish long-term goals)

*My passion for the language impressed my teacher I guess, and she would bring me newspapers and magazines to read genuine English. (R5)*

- **self as central to personal growth, while taking small but decisive steps in development** (progress to a more enlightened or capable version of oneself)

*She made me love them both and I, unawaringly, developed into an avid explorer of languages. (...) When I graduated from high-school, I had read all the French books in my mum's library, tomes from the school and town libraries and I was hungry for more. (R4)*

*The genuine leap in my use and love for English took place during my university studies when I discovered reading novels in English. (R6)*

- **hard work is put to trial**

*The contests organised [by school] gave us the chance to demonstrate our knowledge of foreign languages and the prizes encouraged us to be competitive. (R2)*

### **instances of growth**

#### **1. Cognitive growth**

##### **a) mindset growing**

The process of learning was accompanied and supported by another process – that of **mindset growing** – identified by the respondents' expressions of **self-efficacy** (a task-specific psychological concept) and expressing learners' belief in the ability to succeed in accomplishing tasks or in handling certain situations. Self-efficacy was noticed at the level of

- **goal-setting** (high self-efficacy consisting in setting goals and being aware of challenges; persisting through challenges; persisting through setbacks)

*I made mistakes...I distinctly remember these examples to this day, meaning that on the hand I was rather ashamed with them, and, on the other hand I was determined to learn to speak correct English (R6)*

- **choice of activities** (high self-efficacy consisting in opting for difficult, sometimes unfamiliar tasks)

*I had initiated my own dictionary in a notebook where I wrote the new words I came into contact with together with their definitions. (R6)*

- **emotional regulation** (high self-efficacy consisting in handling emotions and feelings)

- **responsible, conscious engagement** (high self-efficacy seen at the level of their willing to invest in effort)

*During my high-school years I worked hard to improve my French, while also learning more and more English. (R1)*

- **response to feedback** (high self-efficacy is illustrated by learners' interpreting feedback as a proof of their success/high level of knowledge and skills); this increased their **self-esteem**, that is, their **overall sense of self-growth and personal value**

*Things got better that summer, as I spent it in an English camp ... In the beginning I was still shy and reluctant to speak in English, but Toby's patience and perseverance partially melted my fear. Every new sentence that I uttered, every new question that I asked were small victories for me. I started to feel proud of myself. Wow! I could really speak another language! (R3)*

In this case, success brought an explosion of sincere emotions of joy, as well as the feeling of pride, when that hard word was rewarded and efforts were appreciated. In fact, self-efficacy influenced self-esteem; in its turn, self-esteem shaped, afterwards, the approach to tasks.

#### **b) developing critical thinking**

Mindset growing was also noticed at the level of moments of **critical thinking** – “*the art of analysing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it*” (Paul & Elder, 2007: 2) – especially at the level of its third component, called *improvement of thinking*. This component includes the intellectual traits, which were identified in the analysed language autobiographies, such as:

- **intellectual autonomy and intellectual courage**

Once on a trip abroad, one respondent refused to share the host house with a Romanian fellow, as she wanted to put on a trial her knowledge of English:

*I vehemently opposed this idea because I wanted to be on my own, to prove to myself – after the failure from the French camp – that I was capable of interacting with foreigners not just a few hours a day (like in the case of the English camp) but a whole week. (R3)*

- **intellectual perseverance**

Though aware of her own limitations in terms of knowledge and language skill but, at the same time aware of her hard work strength and her determination and patience, one respondent showed her perseverance in attending the goal – that of attending a faculty of foreign languages and plainly confessed that:

*I was still undeterred in attending a faculty of foreign languages. (R6)*

- **intellectual reason** (a mental faculty that rests on logic)

*Every stage of my life was marked by a more or less memorable contact with foreign languages, making me understand the importance of language acquisition in communicating with the others. Each time, this made me want to learn more and more... (R5)*

- **intellectual humility**

One respondent, very sincere in disclosing not only her personality traits, but also the weak points in learning, gave us a good example of intellectual humility:

*I cannot say I remember having always liked foreign languages or having had any talents in this regard ... (R6)*

## **2. identity growth**

Language learning and language use proved to have influence upon individuals' identity formation:

*Absorbed in studying English, I gradually felt more and more stimulated, optimistic and even empowered. Yes, I felt empowered due to the good results obtained, but it was also satisfactory because I had finally found one language that could make me feel safe and secure in my relations with the other students. R2*

## **3. social and professional growth**

*The fact that I have finally specialized in English language and I am currently dealing with its registers and styles is, in many ways, as fascinating and rewarding as learning several languages. (R4)*

*Being more confident in my abilities to learn and speak a foreign language, I applied for a bilingual specialization in high-school, English and French, obviously. [...] Not one moment did I hesitate at the beginning of the XII grade, when I had to decide the faculty I wished to attend, as I had already made up my mind: I wanted to continue studying foreign languages in a university. (R3)*

## **4.growing emotionally and psychologically**

According to Pavlenko (2007), different languages serve as varied spaces for emotional expression and growth. The same happens at the level of different stages in language learning and using

Competence (mastery and progress) proved that efforts lead to improvement and that hard work was acknowledged and rewarded. Reactions to success marked the **emotional and psychological changes** of respondents, as well as **emotional depth and inner transformation**.

*I managed to have the best grades in my class and I was very happy... When I was in the Xth grade I had the satisfaction of reading and understanding my first book in French. The feelings of joy and pride that I experienced when I finished reading it are still fresh in my mind. Wow! I could read in another language! (R3)*

*Personally, I was very excited and enthusiastic because we received prizes but also because we could interact with native speakers. I remember the feeling of pride when native teachers of English praised our knowledge of English. That special feeling was a thousand times more rewarding than gifts or prizes. (R2)*

Psychological mobility was connected with the respondents' ability to adapt to new life moments while moving between different ways of being (the case of "movement" from the status of a student to that of a professional).

## 5. relational and cultural development

The process was noticed at different, in different contexts and included:

- **growing access to target language communities** (to native people and their cultures)

Opportunities to interact meaningfully with native speakers or communities triggered opportunity for increased investment.

*I particularly cherish the memory of a Peace Corps volunteer from the USA, whose enthusiasm and liveliness when teaching seemed a valuable treasure for us, especially to her multicultural experience. (R2)*

Anyway, challenges were also present:

*The greatest and most fruitful challenge of this camp was the fact that, for the first time in my life, I was faced with the situation of doing everyday talk on the spot, with no English dictionary at hand and no previous preparation (like I did with letter writing). It was then that I learnt that knowing English is one good way to make one's culture known. (R1)*

- **developing relatedness** (with people of different cultures)

Creating/trying to create networks triggered both positive and negative feelings

a) positive feelings

*It was also a multicultural show, since some of the girls were immigrant and had other backgrounds than Italian, speaking in English as a common communication language and then translating into Italian. Thus, we were learning foreign languages by means of other languages and having fun at the same time. (R5)*

*During my high-school period, I spent all the summers in the English camp, interacting with English people, learning from them, socializing with them and getting more and more confidence from them. (R3)*

b) negative feelings at contact

*When I travelled to foreign countries like France or Italy, people treated me nicely as long as I spoke their language. In the airport, when I tried to communicate in English the smile quickly turned into a frown and sometimes people even refused to lend a helping hand. Obviously, it was frustrating because I could not obtain the information I needed and this made my journey more difficult. (R2)*

*First of all, I did not understand them very well, as the French I had been taught was not exactly the same with its spoken variant. Second, I was really ashamed of my accent in French, as I considered it awkward and clumsy. (R3)*

- **achievement of goals**

I understood them, they understood me, I did not make too many mistakes in English (so I thought ...), I felt at ease talking to them (and their American friend who was visiting them at the time), so my goal was achieved. (R3)

- **changing worldview** (accompanied by positive feelings)

*It was when I went abroad to Poland, with an Erasmus scholarship, that I first discovered the fact that everybody (or almost everybody) around the globe speaks English. I felt so fortunate, because I could talk to Polish teaching staff*

*and teach to Polish students in English, although we had nothing else in common. (R1)*

*To conclude, I would like to say that one of my dreams is to learn and know as many languages as possible, at least on the comprehension, if not also on the production level. I believe language is the key to the full understanding of a culture. (R1)*

### **Conclusions**

Personal development, as a journey towards one's 'growth and one's better version, is based on action – as its crucial element – and has got reflection as both an important and a necessary component. This assertion can be explained, as a conclusion of our study.

Personal development presupposes involving into action – that is, taking steps (little by little, but constantly); this dynamic process is based on a) a desire to grow, a strong determination and hard work, even though contexts, challenges, adversities might be at play in various moments of the individual's life; b) a change in mentality, attitude, behaviour, and style of work; c) a permanent personal mindful mobility through various paths of life.

In the context of personal development, mobility includes physical movement along with mental flexibility. This triggers the individuals' opportunity to develop their emotional intelligence – that is, the ability to adapt oneself while taking the "journey" through different languages, phases of life, environments and experiences. Moving from one stage of life and experience to another, from ignorance to knowledge, triggers a personal transformation at the level of mindset and behaviour.

Mindful reflection is also part of personal growth and a necessary step on the way to moving forward, towards development; it allows individuals to analyse their past actions (with ups and downs – with progress and failure), to understand their mistake, the causes of various setbacks, the moments of cultural misunderstandings (their causes and strategies of solving them) and to learn from their experiences so that they could continue the journey through languages confidently. Reflection also helps them reach understanding of their becoming in life through learning and using languages.

We chose language autobiographies as instrument for our study, as we considered them relevant examples of reflection. Their analysis offered us a variety of language learning and use aspects, brought into light by respondents; they enhanced, through real examples, the idea that personal development does not mean a progression characterized by linearity; on the contrary, it represents a wide range of linguistic experiences that have the role of shaping the way in which individuals learn, relate and act in the world.

Thus, their analysis helped us draw, at least, two conclusions:

a) mobility emerges as a profound internal practice of becoming, as the respondents' movement across languages, spaces and contexts goes beyond the acquisition of their linguistic competence; it broadens their cognitive traits, shapes and reshapes their affective horizons and, at the same time, it helps a

reconstruction of their sense of self and a better self-expression, while reshaping their identity;

b) linguistic mobility gets full understanding only when considered as deeply interconnected with social, cultural and emotional dimensions of one's personal growth; it helps individuals develop intercultural knowledge, intercultural empathy and adaptability.

In conclusion, mobility is an external condition for personal development, a catalyst of transformation, an internal practice of becoming and a true expression of personal development – in other words, a journey toward greater self-awareness and agency.

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