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Supporting Multilingual English Language Learners Through Spoken Word Poetry and Multimodal Identity Text Activities

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Abstract

This paper introduces two research-based activities designed to support multilingual English learners presented at Conversations that Include, an interactive workshop-series which revolved around the theme of inclusivity. Drawing on my experience as a language educator and researcher, the spoken word poetry and identity text activities aim to provide teachers with multilingual and multimodal strategies for developing language in learners. Grounded in translanguaging pedagogy and supporting the linguistic and cultural diversity in mainstream as well as language learning classrooms, these activities valorize multilingual learners' distinct identities, languages and experiences, and challenge monolingual language ideologies and print-based literacy practices in schools. While I offer examples for educators on how to implement these activities to foster language-inclusive classrooms, I also encourage teachers to take creative risks to use, adapt, and extend the activities to suit the learning goals and needs of their students within their education contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Linguistic and cultural diversity is the norm worldwide, yet educational practices and pedagogies in the Global North continue to promote English monolingualism and reinforce linguistic and racial hierarchies within classrooms (Bale et al., forthcoming; Haque & Patrick, 2015; Kim et al., 2020). These hierarchies are propagated through traditional ubiquitous language pedagogies and policies which tend to reinforce so-called standard English ideologies. However, standards of language are largely promoted by White middle-class educators and discriminate against multilingual learners who do not look or sound like the norm (Rosa, 2019). Therefore, when viewed through the lens of English monolingualism or standard language ideologies, multilingual learners are typically framed as deficient and non-proficient English language users, rather than valued for the rich and multiple linguistic resources, identities, and experiences they bring to the classroom. To counter these deficit and discriminatory ideologies pedagogies that center the diverse linguistic and semiotic resources of students are needed, particularly since research has reported that multilingual learners and their learning needs are often seen as an afterthought or add-on in mainstream classrooms (see Rajendram et al., 2022).

The purpose of this paper is to present educators with research-based pedagogical activities that center multilingual learners and contribute to more equitable learning spaces and foster language-inclusive classrooms. By engaging diverse modalities, these activities also challenge traditional print-based literacies common in schools. The first activity is a spoken word poetry listening and speaking task intended for advanced learners. Spoken word poetry is a form of creative self-expression combining embodied engagement and evoking affective responses in its listeners. The second activity, which is designed for beginner learners, is the *What Do You See When You Look At Me?* Poem (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INyMAmoAXjc>), a multimodal identity text combining writing, speaking, and digital modalities. Identity texts act as a mirror to positively reflect the language, cultures, and identities of students back to them (Cummins & Early, 2011). Before describing the activities, I first speak to my positionality as a researcher and educator, and then briefly review key theoretical and pedagogical literature supporting these activities.

POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

My positionality statement is intended to explicate my personal, pedagogical, and ideological goals and assumptions. This paper is intended for language educators working with multilingual learners in either mainstream global K-12 classrooms, or teachers specifically in the field of English as a Second Language (ESL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and/or English as an Additional Language (EAL). Having experienced the privilege associated with being a White English-speaking Canadian woman teaching EFL in South Korea for 5 years (see Burton, 2019) as well as witnessing the marginalization and devaluing of multilingual learners language practices and identities as an ESL instructor in higher education in Canada for 8 years, I am motivated by a desire to design and implement multimodal and multilingual pedagogies to foster critical, creative and language-inclusive teaching and learning experiences. The activities described in this paper were originally developed in collaboration with colleagues Dr. Shakina Rajendram and Wales Wong, and adapted and presented by myself (Jennifer Burton) in the *Conversations that Include* Workshop series, and also to teacher-candidates (pre-service teachers) in my work as a teaching assistant in a Master's of education program in Ontario, Canada.

Presently I am a 6th year PhD candidate in the Language and Literacies Program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, and my dissertation explores English language learners' experiences with spoken word poetry in an academic language program, providing evidence for its linguistic, affective, and social affordances. Writing and performing spoken word poetry myself, I believe in inviting learners to be curious and critical about themselves and their position in the world, and encourage them to make agentic choices to participate in diverse modalities of self-expression.

TRANSLANGUAGING, IDENTITY TEXTS AND SPOKEN WORD POETRY

A pedagogical approach to support language-inclusive teaching in which multilingual learners' languages and semiotic practices are used to affirm their identity is known as translanguaging. Translanguaging pedagogies encourage and support learners to select features from their repertoire that

help them fulfill their communicative needs and maintain their cultural and linguistic identities (García et al., 2017). Translanguaging recognizes the fluidity of languages and meaning-making practices which also include embodied repertoires like movement and gestures (Hua et al., 2019). Teachers can support multilingual learners by planning activities to make students more aware of the resources, linguistic and non-linguistic, in their entire repertoire and to use them for different tasks and purposes (see dela Cruz, 2023, this issue, for plurilingual task design). Research reports on the importance of translanguaging for fostering metalinguistic awareness (Jiménez et al., 2015), facilitating access to background knowledge (Sayer, 2013), and promoting vocabulary development (Galante, 2020). In addition to cognitive and language-related benefits, translanguaging provides social and affective affordances, such as promoting home-school connections (Tian, 2021), building rapport and resolving conflict among students (Rajendram, 2021), and preserving emotional safety and comfort (Dovchin, 2021). Several translanguaging strategies are available from CUNY-NYSIEB; educators need not have knowledge of their students' languages to support translanguaging pedagogies (<https://www.cuny-nysieb.org/project/translanguaging-guides-resources/>).

Identity texts which can be written, oral, signed, musical, visual, dramatic, or multimodal were introduced as a pedagogical activity in classrooms to support multilingual learners in marginalized groups challenge views and power relations that devalue their identity by acknowledging their languages as cultural and intellectual resources for literacy development (Cummins & Early, 2011). Recent research indicates that identity texts foster spaces within the classroom that recognize and value diversity (Sales et al., 2021), and that teachers play a critical role in reconfiguring the linguistic demands and expectations of the classroom when engaging multilingual learners in multilingual identity texts by providing them with opportunities to experience how linguistic and cultural identity broaden ways of being and knowing (Prasad, 2018). Dávila and Susberry (2021) report on the benefits of multimodal and multilingual identity texts in a high school social studies ESL classroom in facilitating a collaborative, learner-centered classroom and increasing students' knowledge of English while also promoting their home languages around topics of immigration, politics, and national identity. Results of an ethnographic study examining translanguaging in poetry reading and writing in a secondary-school English class found that multilingual students were able to develop

powerful and complex personal representations in their poems (Dutton & Rushton, 2021). Burton et al. (2020) and Rajendram et al. (2022) provide examples of multilingual identity poetry activities for educators working to valorize multilingual learners linguistic and cultural resources in the classroom.

Spoken word poetry differs from traditional poetry in that it is written but performed for an audience, and it is specifically in the connection between the listener and speaker during a spoken word performance when the poem truly comes to life. Playing with movement and gesture, and poetic devices such as rhythm and rhyme and humour, spoken word poetry invites users to engage not only with their linguistic resources, but also their embodied and affective resources for creative self-expression. In educational contexts, spoken word has been reported to foster critical literacies (Desai, 2017; Fiore, 2015), connect with dynamic youth literacy practices (Seltzer, 2020), engage imaginative thinking (Hirsch & Macleroy, 2020), and provide space for learners to speak about sociopolitical issues relevant to their lives (Burton & Van Viegen, 2021). For a pedagogical example of how educators engaged multilingual learner youth from refugee backgrounds in spoken word poetry activities see Burton and Van Veigen (2021).

The two multimodal and multilingual activities that I present next are grounded in translanguaging pedagogy, putting the diverse resources of multilingual learners at the center of the curriculum to promote language-inclusive teaching and challenge traditional print-based and monolingual language and literacy practices in schools.

Activity One: Spoken Word Poetry

The first activity introduces students to the genre of spoken word poetry by showing an example of an online spoken word performance. There are several online performances available on a range of topics, so I typically select one that I feel might resonate with the students. When speaking to teachers or teacher educators about spoken word poetry for multilingual English language learners, I like to show *3 Ways to Speak English* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9fmJ5xQ_mc) by community-engaged scholar and nationally renowned speaker, *Dr. Jamilia Lyscott*, who is also the co-founder and co-director of the Center of Racial Justice and Youth Engaged Research, and an Assistant Professor of Social Justice

Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Dr. J's performance is powerful and speaks directly to the topic of how educational spaces regulate racial and linguistic ideologies and privileges within the classroom (Flores & Rosa, 2015). In her performance she uses humour to position herself as a trilingual orator who speaks 3 Englishes: one type of English at home, one at school, and one with friends. Her performance often generates rich discussions and critical dialogue about how institutions reinforce standard language ideologies and practices associated with White upper-middle class English speakers and how African-American Vernacular English is positioned as inferior or deficient in schools.

Before playing a performance in the classroom, I set the context for listening by asking three questions: *What do you hear? What do you see? How do you feel?* I also ask students to use emojis whenever they connect with particular parts of the poem (online) or snap their fingers and stomp their feet (in person) during the performance, which resembles the type of audience interaction in a live spoken word event. After listening, I elicit thoughts and feelings from the class as a whole, then I put students into groups assigning them a specific listening focus and play the poem again (see Figure 1).

LISTENING FOCUS - JIGSAW			
Message (Group 1)		Performance (Group 2)	
1. Identify the social issues (topic) the performer(s) discuss(es) in the video. 2. How does she address the issue? 3. What is the message/ solution? 4. How does she achieve this message?		1. What did you observe about the performance of the video? 2. Comment on the performers' non-verbal communication (body gestures and movement), and the sound, tone, speed, and volume of their voices.	
Language (Group 3)		Connection (Group 4)	
1. What did you observe about the language use, rhyme, rhythm, humour, etc.? 2. What did you observe about how she spoke English? 3. What vocabulary/ phrases do you remember? 4. What languages did she speak? Why? 5. How did she express herself?		1. How do you feel watching this performance? Why do you feel that way? 2. What emotion is the performer expressing? 3. Do you agree with the message? 4. In what ways could you identify with what was being expressed?	

Figure 1. Spoken word poetry jigsaw listening task.

After this task, we collectively define and describe the genre of spoken word, and discuss its purposes and potential for language and literacy teaching. Spoken word allows students to be creative, playing with language without adherence to standard grammar (Dooley, 2014), and

situates their lived experiences at the center of curriculum, positioning them as experts in their own stories. Moving beyond language, spoken word underscores the importance of embodied literacies such as movement, gesture, and gaze.

Activity Two: What Do You See When You Look at Me? Poem

In the second activity, designed for an online context, teachers prompt students to take or find a picture of a place or object that is meaningful to them and save it on their computer to upload later. To scaffold the task for the students, the teacher can show an example of their picture of a meaningful place or object by asking a question and providing an answer (see Figure 2).

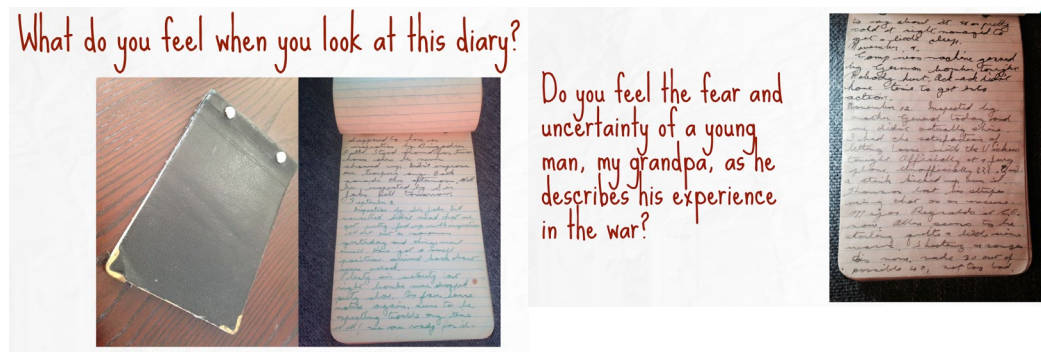


Figure 2. What Do You See When You Look at Me? Poem by Author.

Next, students individually complete their own question and answer using the prompt *What do you see/ hear/ think/ feel?* (Figure 3). Teachers can invite students to draw upon the diverse languages in their repertoire to position students' practices as assets and resources. After they have worked independently to brainstorm their question(s) and answer(s), the learners work in groups of 2-4 in a Zoom breakout room uploading their picture and prompt to a Google Jamboard (<https://jamboard.google.com/>), an online multimodal platform that allows users to draw and add text in multiple colours and upload images. Then, students can share their questions and answers within their small group before the teacher encourages volunteers to share with the whole class. Rather than relying only on the target language or written word, this activity broadens learners' language and literacy practices.

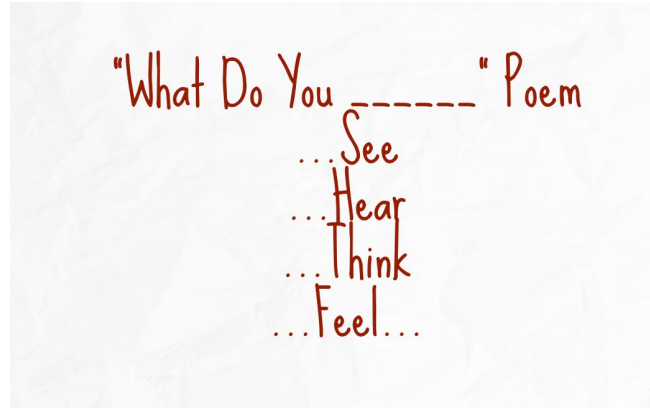


Figure 3. What Do You See When You Look at Me? Poem Prompt.

Example From Workshop Participant Laura. Laura, a multilingual workshop participant, shared a photograph of herself in her hometown Cartagena, Colombia with two of her favourite people, her husband and her father, and asked what we felt by looking at her picture (see Figure 4). For her it represented warmth, love, happiness, and safety.

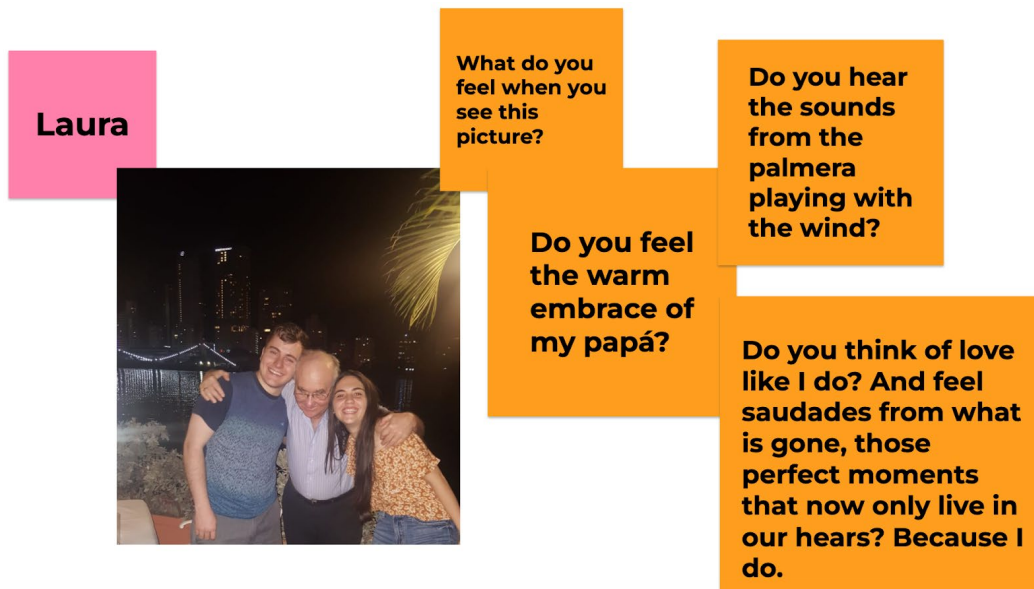


Figure 4. What Do You See When You Look at Me? Poem Created by Laura on Google Jamboard.

Laura's poem is mostly written in English because this is the language she identifies with in her postsecondary education, but she noted the limitations of expressing her feelings only in this language. Specifically, she

explained it felt more natural for her to share her personal self in Spanish, the language she grew up speaking and the language she still speaks at home with her husband. When she talked about the languages in her poem, she stated, “I incorporated different languages because they are part of who I am, I have a meaningful connection with these languages. Spanish shows my carefree side and that is how I feel in my hometown”. Laura also incorporated Portuguese in her poem because, not only does she love this language, but she also loves many people that speak this language, in particular, her Brazilian husband. She has many Brazilian friends and family members to whom she communicates in this language exclusively. During the workshop, Laura described the meaning of the Portuguese word *saudades*, which is not directly translatable to English, as the word loses some of its meaning in translation. She explained that *saudades* describes the deep feeling of missing and longing for someone or something that is gone. For instance, a unique moment you will never get back, like that moment captured in her picture. The breeze, the people, and the city will never be the same as on that day.

Laura described the process of participating in the identity poem activity as “relaxing”. She stated, “it kinda gave me a deep moment of connection with myself” and believed it could “promote deep connections between students and between teachers and students”. Fostering students’ literacy engagement and language awareness through the creation of collaborative multilingual identity texts, this activity has the potential to build meaningful relationships in the classroom.

Examples From Other Workshops. When working with teacher candidates in another workshop, one participant shared a photo connected to a deeply personal story about her struggles with mental illness. Her vulnerability provided an opening for other students and me to share more intimately about our own struggles. Another student showed a picture of a piece of Palestinian تطريز (Arabic for embroidery), created by 12 elders who had taken turns creating it in spite of the unceasing 73-year long settler-colonial effort to erase Palestine and Palestinian culture. He expressed that this was the first time he felt secure in exposing this aspect of his identity with his classmates. After hearing a first-hand account of the impact of the eradication of Palestine on his family, his classmates made connections to the displacement of Indigenous communities in Canada and discussed the importance of centering Indigenous stories and knowledges in the

curriculum (for an example of land-sensitive curriculum see Chung, 2023, this issue).

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Pedagogies that support a translanguaging orientation respect and value multilingual learners' diverse language practices, which are often ignored in mainstream (kindergarten to Grade 12) and language classrooms. The purpose of this article was to present two classroom activities that leverage and develop multilingual learners' diverse linguistic and semiotic resources in language and literacy instruction through translanguaging pedagogies. Translanguaging as a transformative pedagogy promotes equity in classrooms by affirming diverse identities and explicitly challenging monolingual ideologies dominating schools. Spoken word poetry activities and multilingual identity poems have the potential to foster critical discussions of identity, multilingualism, and oppression, while simultaneously humanizing the classroom. Laura, for example, experienced what she referred to as "the power" of "incorporating people's lived experiences into their writing and into the classroom" by participating in the activities during the workshop. Both activities move beyond traditional print-based literacies and monolingual language practices typically privileged in classrooms. In this sense, teachers can act as agents of change within their classrooms to challenge dominant practices and foster space for the representation of marginalized languages, identities, and experiences. Failing to make spaces for the diverse identities represented within the classroom can lead to feelings of exclusion for multilingual learners and devaluation of linguistic difference. Also, incorporating all learners' languages into the classroom helps teachers build strong bridges between learners' home and school language practices, thus making learning more authentic and meaningful for them (Burton et al., 2020).

Teachers may wish to adapt or extend these activities to suit the learning and curriculum goals and needs of their students based on the language and subject area, grade level and age of their students, and the specific linguistic, cultural and political landscape of each setting. In fact, the successful implementation of these activities depends on this. For example, to provide scaffolded support for students to eventually write and perform their own spoken word poems, they could respond to a list of prompts such

as, “What are some assumptions others make about you? How do (you think) others see you? How do you want others to see you? What do you want others to know about you?” Teachers may wish to connect the identity poem to a particular unit or theme, which can be done by creating language and context objectives and adapting the activities to make the language and content skills taught in the unit. Of critical importance in the implementation of these activities is planning for diverse modes of student participation by giving learners agency and choice to share in ways that feel comfortable to them to mitigate the chances of students becoming representative of their respective religion, culture, or country. With this in mind, I encourage teachers to take creative risks in their classrooms and participate in multilingual and multimodal activities alongside their students.

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