

Breaking More than the Ice: Affording and Affirming Plurilingualism through Identity-Based Icebreaker Activities

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Plurilingualism has populated the intersection of theory and pedagogy with practices that support the inclusion of diverse linguistic and cultural identities in language education. In some educational contexts, such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP), plurilingual practices can be met with resistance due to systemic target-language-only beliefs and approaches. This article aims to resist monolingualism in EAP by detailing the benefits of incorporating identity-based icebreaker activities within a plurilingual framework. Using an action research methodology, this article draws on class recordings, lesson plans, and observation notes to analyze the implementation of a series of identity-based icebreakers in an online EAP course at a Canadian university. Findings show that the systematic use of identity-based icebreakers afforded affirmations of plurilingual identities in class, while coinciding with the emergence of vulnerability, community, and criticality. This article contributes to contextualized understandings of the use of plurilingual pedagogical strategies in a traditionally monolingual teaching context, suggesting that even micro activities can have an impact on linguistic and cultural inclusion in language education.

Le plurilinguisme se situe à l'intersection de la théorie et de la pédagogie avec des pratiques qui soutiennent l'inclusion de diverses identités linguistiques et culturelles dans l'enseignement des langues. Dans certains contextes éducatifs, tels que l'anglais sur objectifs académiques (AOA), les pratiques plurilingues peuvent se heurter à une certaine résistance en raison de croyances et d'approches systémiques axées sur l'utilisation exclusive de la langue cible. Cet article vise à résister au monolinguisme dans le contexte de l'AOA en détaillant les avantages de l'intégration d'activités brise-glace basées sur l'identité dans un cadre plurilingue. En utilisant une méthodologie de recherche-action, cet article s'appuie sur des enregistrements de classe, des plans de cours et des notes d'observation pour analyser la mise en œuvre d'une série d'activités brise-glace basées sur l'identité dans un cours d'AOA en ligne dans une université canadienne. Les résultats montrent que l'utilisation systématique de brise-glace basés sur l'identité a permis d'affirmer les identités plurilingues en classe, tout en coïncidant avec l'émergence de la vulnérabilité, de l'esprit de communauté et de l'esprit critique. Cet article contribue à la

compréhension contextualisée de l'utilisation de stratégies pédagogiques plurilingues dans un contexte d'enseignement traditionnellement monolingue et suggère que même de courtes activités peuvent avoir un impact sur l'inclusion linguistique et culturelle dans l'enseignement des langues.

Keywords: diversity, icebreakers, identity, inclusion, plurilingualism

Plurilingual pedagogies have emerged as a critical response to monolingual and multilingual ideologies and practices (e.g., Lau & Van Viegen, 2020). Monolingual beliefs uphold one-nation-one-language ideals, devaluing and restricting individual and societal diversity (Gogolin, 1997); multilingual perspectives maintain an artificial separation of linguistic and cultural codes, often approaching language development from a view of “double monolingualism” (Jørgensen et al., 2015). Plurilingualism, instead, recognizes and normalizes the interconnection of diverse and dynamic linguistic and cultural repertoires, validating partial knowledge and emphasizing the complexity involved in language use (Chen et al., 2022; Piccardo, 2018). With a view of language users as social agents who can choose to activate or resist societal language beliefs and behaviour (Wernicke, 2018), theories of plurilingualism are especially relevant in educational contexts where monolingual ideologies must be resisted, such as the context of English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

As in several other language education contexts, the EAP context remains laden with formal or informal English-only policies that unnaturally restrict the use of other languages during the learning process (Galante et al., 2020; Williamson, 2022). In the EAP context, these policies are compounded by a strong focus on English-medium instruction and an institutional function as a gatekeeping mechanism to higher education opportunities. While many students naturally resist these monolingual approaches, actively drawing on knowledge of other languages to support their learning of academic content in English, target-language-only policies nevertheless convey the message that languages other than English are not welcomed or valued in the EAP class (Chen, 2020). Given the intimate connection between language and identity, English-only approaches mean that learners are not invited to bring their full selves to their learning. This represents a significant challenge to be addressed in contexts like EAP.

Although it can be difficult to overcome restrictive target-language-only policies in contexts of English-medium instruction—and plurilingual approaches may themselves be met with resistance by students and staff alike—EAP instructors have the agency to implement practices that afford and affirm the exploration and development of plurilingualism. In light of the particularities of the EAP context, one productive avenue for incorporating plurilingualism is through identity-based icebreakers. That is, when opportunities for plurilingual instruction may be restricted by mandated lesson plans, lack of flexibility in high-stakes assessments, and pressure from multiple stakeholders, icebreakers can be a viable way to introduce and implement plurilingual teaching (micro)strategies. This article explores how icebreakers that focus on linguistic and cultural identity can contribute to affordances for plurilingual class interactions and affirmations of diverse ways of knowing and being. After a description and analysis of a series of four identity-based icebreakers below, I argue that the use of these icebreakers can also set the stage for the development of vulnerability, community, and criticality.

Positionality

Before detailing its methodology and findings, it is important to position myself in relation to this study. I was born in Canada to parents of German and Ukrainian origin. I grew up speaking English at home and studying French at school. It was not until high school that I started learning other languages. Now, I speak German, Spanish, and Italian on a regular basis. I am also learning Ukrainian and know some Portuguese. I have previously taken beginner language courses in Russian, Korean, Hebrew, and Mandarin. As an EAP instructor, my own plurilingual identity is the foundation of my linguistically and culturally inclusive teaching practice.

Methodology

To arrive at its claims, this article details the methods, findings, and implications of an action research process (Burns, 2009) in which I implemented and evaluated a series of identity-based icebreakers in an EAP course at a Canadian university. This course consisted of 15 students from China and one student from Iraq in a conditional-acceptance academic English program that took place online over 12 weeks. In critically reflecting on the identity-based icebreaker activities used in this course, I accessed 12 digital lesson plans, observation notes, and 12 class recordings of four hours each. First, I reviewed the lesson plans to extract descriptions of the icebreaker activities used in each class. Based on these descriptions, I then selected four icebreakers that had an explicit focus on language, culture, and identity. Rather than an exhaustive list of the icebreakers used each week, this selection allowed me to focus on thick descriptions of the icebreaker activities. In assessing the impact of these activities, I drew on the observation notes to identify instances where plurilingual classroom interactions emerged following the use of the icebreakers in class. Following this, I viewed the class recordings for the corresponding weeks, located the interactions, and transcribed the spoken dialogue and chat messages to reconstruct these interactions for analysis. I then selected four reconstructed interactions which contained explicit connections to each of the identity iceberg activities and used these as the basis for a critical thematic analysis.

Identity-Based Icebreakers

Usually used at the beginning of class, icebreakers can serve as brief warm-up activities that contribute to a sense of class community. They have also been found to incite positive psychological and emotional responses such as increased investment in learning (Artati, 2021) and favourable attitudes toward other class members (Fekete, 2022). When combined with an identity-based model in language education (Abendroth-Timmer & Hennig, 2014; Forbes et al., 2021; Norton & McKinney, 2011), they can also lead to important teaching and learning moments in relation to linguistic and cultural identity. Drawing on an understanding of identity as multiple (Rattansi & Phoenix, 1997), fluid (Dunn, 1997), situational (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995), and negotiated (Wenger, 1998), I chose to implement identity-based icebreaker activities that emphasize the diversity and complexity of linguistic and cultural identification. I describe four of these icebreakers in detail below, outlining the procedures and observed benefits of their implementation. For each, I provide a personal example revealing and theorizing aspects of my own plurilingual identity.

Icebreaker #1: Identity Iceberg

This icebreaker draws on the cultural iceberg model (Hall, 1989), which suggests that deep culture lies mostly beneath the surface. The same can be said of plurilingual identity, which inherently includes culture. Some linguistic and cultural identity markers, such as accent or race, are often (though not always) generally apparent when first interacting with others. Others, such as cultural or religious beliefs or customs, may remain hidden below the surface. Plurilingual individuals may choose to reveal or conceal these parts of their identity in a given context, such as a classroom. In my classroom, I have adapted the cultural iceberg model into an “identity iceberg” icebreaker activity intended to foster a holistic exploration of plurilingual identity markers.

On the first day of class, I prepared two slides—one showing the cultural iceberg model and another showing my own identity iceberg (Figure 1). I used these slides, first, to explain my belief that cultural identity is deeply connected to language learning, and then to introduce and position myself in relation to my own (perceivable and less perceivable) identity markers. For example, I explained that, though my use of English is immediately perceivable in class, I also use Spanish and Italian with my husband at home. I also shared how, beyond race, I identify with my German and Ukrainian ethnicity. I took the opportunity to further identify myself as a heritage language learner and to inform the class how my examples and suggestions for language learning are rooted in these personal experiences. Likewise, I cautioned how my teaching would be shaped by some of the experiences and perspectives that my identity markers have caused me to have, such as the social and professional privileges associated with growing up as a White person in Canada. With this, I stressed how our academic discussions as a class would, naturally, be influenced by everyone’s identities and lived experiences. Then, I asked my students to complete their own identity iceberg using a template (Figure 2) and share with me and their classmates whichever identity markers they felt comfortable revealing.

Engaging in this icebreaker activity sets the tone for a continual surfacing of the unique perspectives, experiences, and expertise that students bring to class. In an asset-based approach (Lin, 2020) to identity, it also validates the diversity of who they are by prompting them to consider their whole selves, not just their role as students, in class. Under a plurilingual view, this exploration of diverse identities can lead to more contextualized and holistic (Germain-Rutherford & Karamifar, 2022) understandings of individuals, cultures, and languages.

Icebreaker #2: What’s in a Name

More complex understandings of plurilingual identities can also be cultivated through an exploration of names and naming practices, a part of language that often holds profound cultural significance. Names also have deep personal meaning: they may carry associations to family members, periods in time, symbols, or personal experiences. On the other hand, names can be the source of Othering and name-based microaggressions in certain sociocultural contexts (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012; Sohal, 2022; Srinivasan, 2019). In the context of English language classrooms, the icebreaker “What’s in a name” subverts the Shakespearean line insinuating that the naming of things is irrelevant. Turning a question into a statement, this icebreaker explores the complex identity markers that are found in a name. In doing so, it encourages critical reflection on the linguistic and cultural functions of names in contexts of plurilingualism.

This icebreaker requires no materials or preparation. At the beginning of class, I asked students to introduce their preferred names, sharing the pronunciation along with any meaning or personal feelings they have about their name. When introducing my last name, I shared with students how the “sch” consonant combination comes from German and makes a [ʃ] sound in English. I also shared how I felt embarrassed growing up when teachers would (sometimes intentionally) mispronounce my name on the

Figure 1

Identity Iceberg Icebreaker Example

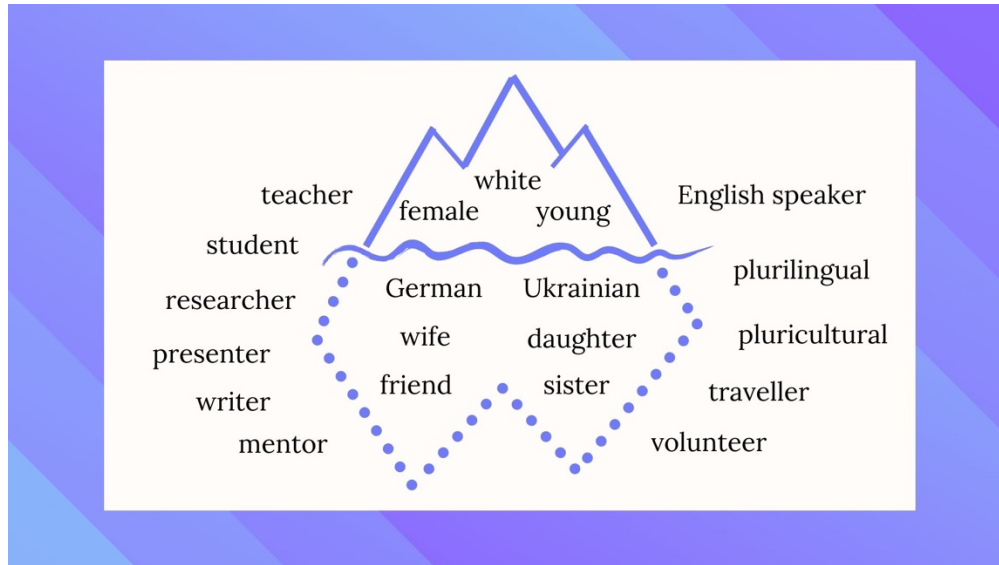


Figure 2

Identity Iceberg Icebreaker Template

Name:

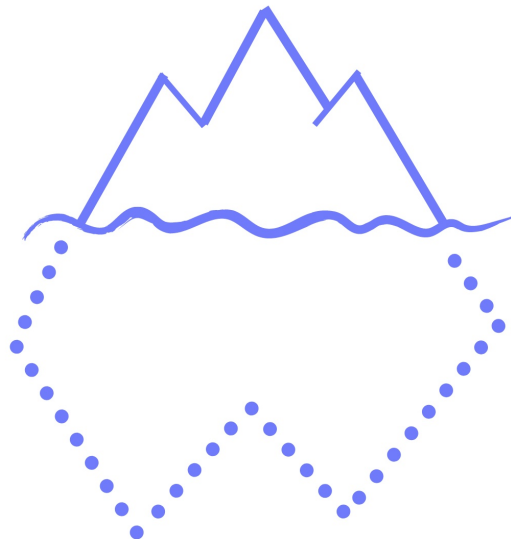


Figure 3

Plurilingual Portraits Icebreaker Example



attendance list, and how many people still ask me if “Schmor” is like the campfire snack s’mores. I explained why I do not like this question, usually asked with a mocking tone, and how my last name has a 400-year history dating back to the Prussian empire (long before s’mores were invented).

Completing this icebreaker as a class can raise awareness around the importance of respecting names, as well as individuals’ complex relationships with them. It can also serve a practical purpose of listening to and learning the pronunciation of everyone’s names, which is crucial to fostering a linguistically and culturally inclusive educational approach (Zhang & Noels, 2021). Other pedagogical benefits include the possibility to compare naming practices across cultures, with a view toward valuing these diverse practices (Peterson et al., 2015). All of these possible outcomes support a plurilingual approach to language education, recognizing and respecting the diversity of cultures and individuals.

Icebreaker #3: Plurilingual Portraits

Another way to value individual diversity and plurilingualism is through multimodal identity texts (Cummins & Early, 2010), which have been used in an increasing number and type of research and educational contexts, from elementary schools (Melo-Pfeifer, 2017; Prasad, 2015) to teacher education (Valencia et al., 2020) and EAP (Galante, 2020). One type of multimodal identity text is a “plurilingual portrait,” which, in an icebreaker activity, can enable creative expressions and representations of linguistic and cultural identity.

This icebreaker activity can be completed on a blank piece of paper or using a graphic design tool, as I have done for my own plurilingual portrait (Figure 3). In my class, I shared my portrait as an example before asking students to draw or design their own plurilingual portraits. I instructed them to include any and all languages that have been a part of their lives, even in a small way. In my example portrait, I

explained some of the symbolism that I included, such as my use of a faded Québécois flag on a book with a bookmark to symbolize how I feel that my French was learned mostly in a past academic context but that my story with French continues, or how the footsteps walking toward the Italian flag represent my belief that Italian will be an important part of my future career and family life.

By emphasizing the multifaceted and complex nature of linguistic and cultural affiliations, the “plurilingual portrait” icebreaker can help validate dynamic individual repertoires and partial competences (Coste et al., 2009; Piccardo, 2019), fostering important connections between plurilingual identity and language learning. While the use of flags in my own plurilingual portrait may (over)emphasize the role of national identity, they can also be used to symbolically highlight the influence of geographical locations on plurilingual identity, which is the subject of the next icebreaker.

Icebreaker #4: Pluricultural Places

The connection between language, culture, and identity can also be enhanced through a focus on place. Indigenous land-based pedagogies emphasize the importance of physical place and human relationships with land. They also recognize that cultural identity is intimately interwoven with land (Wildcat et al., 2014). Regardless of whether plurilingual students identify with a culture that actively promotes land-based education, Indigenous insights can inform valuable reflections and conversations about place and positionality in relation to identity (e.g., Arellano et al., 2019; Mashford-Pringle & Stewart, 2019; Weenie, 2020; Zinga & Styres, 2011). Within a plurilingual approach, this can also prompt an exploration of the complex relationship between place(s) and imagined linguistic and cultural communities (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). This premise informs the “pluricultural places” icebreaker.

In this icebreaker, which requires access to a computer or mobile device, I asked my students to share a place that is special to them and to explain why. Since this was in an online classroom, students shared their screens and showed their chosen place on an interactive map application. In a physical classroom, students could share the place on their phones or take turns using a class computer. In my class, I first shared a place with my students to model the activity. Given that the majority of the students in this class came from China and I wanted to take the chance to further position myself in relation to that country, the place I chose to share was Suzhou, China. I explained that Suzhou was special to me because it was the place where I taught abroad for the first time and learned many lessons that influenced me as a teacher and a person. I took the opportunity to share with my students that I have since travelled to other regions in China, to express my view that students from one country represent a rich diversity of regional history, cultural customs, and linguistic varieties. I was also able to share a few words that I had learned in Suzhouese.

This icebreaker allows class members to reveal parts of their plurilingual repertoires by sharing their lived experiences as well as expertise of another geographical location or linguistic code found on their map. These plurilingual experiences and expertise can be validated and prioritized in class through culturally responsive practices (Gay, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2021). This activity also enables the inclusion of other/Othered geopolitical and sociocultural contexts beyond the mandated target language or culture, affording references to diverse cultural norms in instruction.

While these icebreakers have a rather explicit focus on language, culture, and identity, other icebreaker activities can be modified to have a stronger focus on plurilingual identity. For instance, the activity “find someone who” can be created with prompts that require students to learn about each other’s linguistic and cultural backgrounds, such as “find someone who speaks four languages” or “find someone who has lived in three countries.” The activity “two truths and a lie” could include true statements that share information about language and heritage, such as “I have studied Korean” or “I have a great

grandmother from Georgia.” No matter the activity, an explicit identity-based approach to icebreakers can benefit students by increasing affordances to affirm plurilingual identities in class.

Findings: Plurilingual Identity Affordances and Affirmations

In incorporating the above series of identity-based icebreakers in my 12-week online EAP course, I found that the use of these icebreaker activities afforded instances of plurilingual interactions during the remainder of the class in which they were used, as well as opportunities to validate the diverse linguistic and cultural identities of class members throughout the course. That is, based on the identity markers revealed by both me and the students during the icebreakers, we were able to engage in interactions that included languages other than English and conversations that validated our complex cultural identities and language-learning trajectories. These findings and reflections are exemplified through four specific class interactions, reconstructed below.

Near the end of the first class (week 1), in which I used the “identity iceberg” activity, I noticed that students were typing in the chat in English and Mandarin. As one of the students applied a Zoom filter and replaced his face with a cat avatar, another student wrote in the chat “Wow! Walter [pseudonym] is a cat!” To this, another student replied “哈哈”. I recognized these characters and confirmed with my Mandarin-speaking students that this meant “haha.” I then shared that, in Spanish, “haha” is written “jaja,” with the j’s pronounced like h’s. Because I had shared my own identity iceberg with students at the beginning of this class, they knew that Spanish was one of the languages in my repertoire and had some context for me sharing this example. I then asked if anyone knew how to “laugh” in any other languages. One student shared that her Brazilian classmate told her they use “kkkkk” in Portuguese. I explicitly validated her sharing of this example by saying “Right, right, I’ve heard that too. Great, so you know a little Portuguese now too.”

My students also validated my knowledge of other languages in class. Following the class in which I used the “What’s in a name” icebreaker activity (week 2), revealing the German origin of my last name, one of my students greeted me with “Guten Morgen, teacher!” I responded with, “Guten Morgen, wie geht’s? [Good morning, how are you?]” This short interaction was repeated in four subsequent classes, initiated three times by the same student and once by another student. Each time, I positively affirmed their use of German with me by responding with a short phrase in German, adding a couple new expressions during each of these interactions (e.g., “Bist du müde? [Are you tired?]”).

Plurilingual interactions continued in the class where we completed the activity “plurilingual portraits” (week 4). During this activity, one student from China revealed that he spoke the Wenzhou dialect. Later in this class, when one of the students sneezed, I said “Gesundheit,” the German word for “bless you.” I then asked how to say this in Mandarin, and one of my Mandarin-speaking students told me that they say “ni hao ma?,” which translates in English to “are you good?” This student then asked her Iraqi classmate how to say this in Arabic, and she told us that they say “alhamdulillah” when they sneeze. Then the student from China who had shared his knowledge of the Wenzhou dialect during the icebreaker activity chimed in and told the class that they say “peise.” The other Chinese students smiled, and a couple of them spontaneously repeated the phrase out loud. The Wenzhou dialect speaker repeated the phrase a couple times for them, teaching his classmates the pronunciation. One other student then shared that she also knew this dialect, though she could not speak it. I took the opportunity to express my (plurilingual) belief that receptive knowledge of a language counts as knowledge of a language, and that she could have included that dialect in her plurilingual portrait. I also said to her, “maybe you’ll learn to speak it more too,” encouraging expansion of her partial knowledge.

A desire to expand linguistic and cultural knowledge (re)surfaced in class in week 7, when we used the icebreaker activity “pluricultural places.” During this activity, I showed my students the city where I

had worked abroad in China. After class that day, one student began chatting with me about her goal to work abroad after university for a multinational non-governmental organization. She asked me more about my experience working abroad, and I gave her some ideas and advice, including to take an elective course in French, one of the working languages of the organization she was interested in. When she expressed to me her feeling that her “English still isn’t good enough” and that she wasn’t sure if she could learn French, I affirmed her advanced knowledge of English and her capacity to develop working proficiency in another language. In this way, icebreaker activities enabled further conversations and interactions that supported inclusive, plurilingual views of language identity and language learning.

By Way of a Conclusion: Vulnerability, Community, and Criticality

The incorporation of a series of brief, identity-based icebreaker activities in class afforded meaningful opportunities to express and validate plurilingual identities, as evidenced in a variety of recorded classroom interactions. These icebreakers also enabled opportunities for vulnerability, community, and criticality to emerge. From the first day and first icebreaker, we all engaged in vulnerability by revealing aspects of our otherwise concealed identity markers, setting the tone for the cultivation of trust and relationship building. By continuing to share parts of our personal identities through the exploration of previous lived experiences in subsequent icebreaker activities, we began to cultivate a sense of group identity and belonging, and we formed the basis for the emergence of a class community centred on critical respect for diversity. By including and expanding on our diverse linguistic, cultural, and personal knowledge in the class interactions that followed the icebreaker activities, we were able to engage in contextualized conversations around academic texts, in which we critically co-constructed meaning and understanding, not around a single cultural or linguistic norm but in relation to a diversity of plurilingual identities. Now, instead of just “breaking the ice,” we can “das Eis brechen,” “romper el hielo,” “briser la glace,” and much more. By breaking the ice in a way that explicitly includes diverse linguistic and cultural identities, we can indeed break more than the ice: we can work toward breaking the boundaries of monolingual language instruction.

The Author

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