

Preparing Teachers for the Plurilingual Class: Autobiographies as Decolonizing Texts in Second Language Teacher Education

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This article discusses a pedagogical activity—an autobiographical creation—adopted in a second language teacher education context to support teachers working with plurilingual learners. Using decoloniality to reposition praxis, the article presents a creativity-infused autobiography creation project to help teachers access their cognitive, social, emotional, ideological, and historical lives. Recognizing the power of teachers' life stories in decolonizing English language teaching the autobiographical creation was designed to help teachers move beyond the theoretical toward deeper, more nuanced conceptualizations of their identities and consider how their identities shape their pedagogical practices. This autobiographical creation sought to provide teachers with a space for "critical self-reflexivity" to develop a critical awareness of their language-learning experiences and professional practices. Drawing upon the autobiographies of three plurilingual teachers, the article discusses how autobiographical reflection helped them live language teacher education and create "yet unthought" ways. The article concludes with a brief discussion of the potential of creativity-infused identity projects in helping teacher education confront coloniality by providing a space for teachers to generate knowledge and broaden their conceptions of their teaching selves, praxis, and learners.

Le présent article présente une activité pédagogique, à savoir une création autobiographique, adoptée dans un contexte de formation d'enseignants de langues secondes afin de soutenir les enseignants œuvrant auprès des apprenants plurilingues. En se basant sur le courant décolonial pour repositionner la praxis, cet article présente un projet de création d'autobiographies imprégnées de créativité qui vise à aider les enseignants à accéder à leurs vies cognitive, sociale, émotionnelle, idéologique et historique. Reconnaisant le pouvoir des récits de vie des enseignants dans la décolonisation de l'enseignement de l'anglais, la création autobiographique a été conçue pour aider les enseignants à aller au-delà de la théorie vers des conceptualisations plus profondes et plus nuancées de leurs identités, et à examiner la manière dont leurs identités façonnent leurs pratiques pédagogiques. Cette création autobiographique visait à fournir aux enseignants un espace d'« autoréflexivité critique » afin de développer une conscience critique de leurs expériences d'apprentissage des langues et de leurs pratiques professionnelles. En s'appuyant sur les autobiographies de trois enseignants plurilingues, l'article examine la manière dont la réflexion autobiographique les a aidés à vivre la formation des enseignants de langues et à créer des moyens « encore impensés ». L'article conclut avec une brève discussion sur le potentiel offert par les projets identitaires créatifs pour aider la formation des enseignants à faire face à la colonialité. En

effet, ces projets fournissent un espace aux enseignants pour générer des connaissances et élargir leurs conceptions de leur enseignement, leurs praxis et leurs apprenants.

Keywords: autobiographical creations, decolonizing language teaching, identity-focused praxis, second language teacher education, teacher autobiographies

Preparing Teachers for the Multilingual Class

Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Canadian government has continued to support immigration and cross-border mobility of newcomers and refugees, thus enriching Canada's cultural and linguistic diversity. Census data also indicated that four in ten people could converse in more than one language, and one in eleven could speak three or more languages (Statistics Canada, 2021), pointing to high linguistic diversity in Canada. This data is critical in understanding how the linguistic landscape of Canadian schools continues to evolve rapidly. It is also an urgent reminder for second language teacher preparation programs to develop asset-based, inclusive, and decolonizing pedagogies responsive to the linguistic repertoires that students bring to school.

This article reports on an autobiographical creation activity adopted in a graduate second language teacher education program to help teachers reflect on their identities and how their identities and experiences shape their work with plurilingual learners. Grounded in critical self-reflexivity (Diversi & Finley, 2010) and the decolonizing potential of autobiography (Asher, 2009), this activity offers teachers a safe and meaningful opportunity to interrogate their identities and praxis. Decolonizing in language teacher education aims to disengage from traditional practices, beliefs, and knowledges and encourage emancipation (Solano-Alpizar, 2015). As a first step, decolonization in language teacher education recognizes and questions how power operates through discursive practices, teaching methodologies, course material, and assessments. At the core of any act of decolonization is the transformation of hegemonic powers into actions for social justice and the recognition that teachers, to varying degrees, are complicit in colonial systems inflicting oppression by enacting government policies and assessments (Espinosa, 2021).

This article provides an overview of the autobiographical creation activity and discusses (1) how graduate student teachers embraced autobiographical creations to articulate their identities and (2) how autobiographical creations helped teachers rethink language teaching and the support they provide plurilingual learners.

Decoloniality to Reposition Praxis

Although teacher education presents fruitful ground for planting the seeds of transformation that can lead to decolonization, English language teacher education as a discipline poses a unique challenge to decolonizing. Historically, English language teaching has functioned as an essential and powerful vehicle of White supremacy, which holds White people to be superior to people of other racial backgrounds and has historically justified and perpetuated various forms of racial discrimination, segregation, and inequality, often through institutional and systemic means (Motha, 2020). English language teaching continues to be firmly embedded in racial inequalities and hierarchies (Kubota, 2016). English language teachers become complicit with White settler colonialism (Coulthard, 2014) "when we language specialists agree to work uncritically with limited systems of language-based affiliation and belonging that conceal

histories of White settler appropriation for profit and that lead us towards racial exclusion and erasure” (Motha, 2020, p. 131). Criticality and transformative action, then, are central to any decolonizing pedagogy.

The inherent coloniality and raciolinguistic ideologies that use language to construct, maintain, and challenge the racial identities and hierarchies embedded in English language teaching are often concealed in modernity and grand narratives of the power of the English language as a modern and desirable language (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Mignolo, 2000). This view upholds the English language, Eurocentric knowledges, and language teaching materials and methodologies as superior and with the potential to improve the lives of minoritized communities (López-Gopar & Sughrua, 2023).

I adopt Walsh’s (2018) notion of decoloniality as a *project to take on* to assist teachers in challenging the status quo in language teacher education. The autobiographical creation discussed in this article aims to make possible a different way of being, thinking, knowing, feeling, existing, and living with by exploring teachers’ identities through a creative means. The generation of the autobiographical creation helps teachers “become producers, not just consumers, of pedagogic knowledge and pedagogic materials” (Kumaravadivelu, 2016, p. 81). The goal of this decolonial praxis is to bridge the gap between theory and practice, emphasizing the importance of reflective and informed action to bring about meaningful and effective change. It aims “to question, displace, and subvert ... concepts and practices left by colonial inheritance with the purpose of intervening, constructing, creating, and liberating meaning of a decolonizing practice” (Granados-Beltrán, 2016, p. 181).

“Decoloniality as a Project”: Autobiographical Creations

A teacher autobiography is a lens through which to explore and facilitate a teacher’s understanding of teaching practices and to delve into the what, the how, and the why of pedagogical actions (Narváez et al., 2013). In language teacher education, autobiographies have been utilized to explore how teachers’ identities are constructed as they strengthen their self-knowledge (Gagné et al., 2017). Teachers’ life stories and critical self-reflexivity are essential components in decolonizing praxis (López-Gopar et al., 2022). Asher (2009) recognizes the “(re)generative, transformative potential of critical, self-reflective autobiographical work” (p. 5) with the potential for social and educational transformation. The deep introspection and consciousness-raising embedded in the autobiography’s generation helps teachers reflect on their positionalities and praxis.

I was first introduced to autobiographical creations as a doctoral student (see Gagné et al., 2017). Generating my professional autobiography provided me a unique opportunity to explore my identities, praxis, and experiences and understand how my personal life and the sociopolitical struggles around me shaped my outlook on teaching and the pedagogical practices I adopted. The deep “autobiographical reflexivity” (Coffey, 2015, p. 501) involved in the creation of my autobiography provided me with new insights into my beliefs, emotional landscapes, and lived experiences of my multilingual self (Kalaja & Melo-Pfeifer, 2019). Since then, creativity-infused identity work has been at the centre of my teaching and research (see Herath, 2023a, 2023b; Herath et al., 2023; Valencia et al., 2020). Creativity has helped me to critically examine and transform my conceptualizations of language teaching and learning, pedagogical practices, and evaluation strategies. Creative means of interrogating one’s identity help amplify minoritized identities, cultures, experiences, and languages that have otherwise been historically overlooked in mainstream teacher education.

My understanding of the transformative value of creativity-infused identity work led me to incorporate autobiographical creation in my praxis. The autobiographical creation is an activity that seeks to transgress dominant assumptions about assessing graduate work and challenge Eurocentric assessment tools that are based on Western cultural norms, values, and knowledge systems that disadvantage plurilingual students who do not share these cultural frameworks (Schissel, 2019). Informed by the visual

(Kalaja & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2018) and multimodal (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009) turns in applied linguistics, the autobiographical creation decentres writing and encourages teachers to express themselves through other modes of expression, such as art, music, craft, and technology-mediated communication. These first-person accounts allow students to embrace teaching “through who they are” (Gay, 2016, p. viii).

Context and Participants

The autobiographical creation activity I share in this article was conducted in a graduate second language teacher education program in the winter of 2023. It was the final project in a course entitled “Seminar in teaching English as a second/additional language: Theory and practice,” a three-credit core course offered in the Master of Education in Curriculum, Teaching and Learning specializing in Second Language Education. This course aims to foster an appreciation of fundamental concepts, theories, and worldviews informing the teaching of English as a second language.

The autobiographical creation asked students to create their autobiography as a language educator, using a genre and a medium of their choice. Building on Gagné and her colleagues (2017), they were provided ten building blocks to work with: (1) a prologue; (2) their metaphor of language teaching; (3) philosophies that shape their teaching; (4) a reflection on what it means to be a successful language teacher; (5) maxims that reflect their beliefs about language teaching; (6) milestones linked to their work as a language teacher; (7) critical incidents that reflect turning points in their teaching; (8) various strategies adopted to improve their teaching; (9) an educational biography including experiences learning additional languages; and (10) a reflection on the process of preparing their autobiography. They were asked to think about their autobiography being approximately 20 pages or equivalent.

The generation of the autobiography was carefully scaffolded over the 12-week semester, with readings on teacher autobiographies, sharing my experiences and work on creating my autobiography, sharing samples of creative autobiographies, a guest talk by a colleague from another university who works on creative autobiographies, and devoting class time to discuss each building block of the assignment. Each week the students either came with ideas or completed pieces of their autobiographies. The sharing of ideas and the discussion of what was possible helped the students to stretch themselves. The sense of community that was created through the sharing was critical in the generation of autobiographies. The last day of the classes included a celebration and a gallery walk, where all the students shared their work and received feedback.

The participants were 11 plurilingual graduate students with varying experience working with English language learners in Canada and internationally. The students included one White Canadian-born student and one student from Vietnam with permanent residency status in Canada. The remaining students were from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Ghana, Colombia, and Iran. All students had experience learning additional languages. Sharing ideas and discussing how they planned to create their autobiography helped them learn from one another and become comfortable with the project. Consent to use the autobiographies was sought after the course was over and the students had received their grades. All 11 students consented to sharing their work for research purposes. Due to the scope of this paper, I draw from just three autobiographical creations to examine the potential of creative autobiographies to help teachers to critically examine and challenge ways in which English language teaching and learning are shaped by colonial legacies, structures, and ideologies.

How Did the Students Embrace Autobiographical Creations?

This project’s focus on creativity sought to decentre Eurocentric and colonial academic genres prevalent in graduate school. The autobiographical creation aimed to challenge colonial academic conventions,

representations, and narratives perpetuated through graduate assignments and assessment structures. The emphasis on the teaching self (Kumaravadivelu, 2012) helped to foster agency and empowerment among the students by valuing and supporting their knowledge systems and languages (Lopez-Gopar et al., 2022). By encouraging students to use a creative medium of choice to look inward and reflect on their identities and practices, I hoped they would emulate these practices in their teaching and provide spaces for their plurilingual students to build their linguistic and cultural repertoires.

Though some students were initially hesitant and found it difficult to conceive of a graduate project that did not involve a conventional term paper, the scaffolding provided throughout the semester helped them to become enthusiastic and curious about the project. Significant class energy was directed toward generating the autobiographies, an activity embedded in community building and sharing within the class. Gradually, students began to discuss their passions and how they wanted to leverage them in the project as a way to develop or build their teaching skills. Figure 1 captures images of some of these creations.

Figure 1

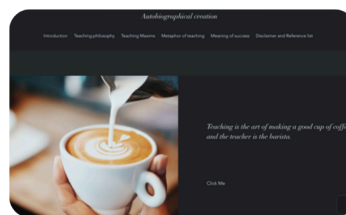
Examples of Autobiographical Creations



Movie



Sketchbook



Website



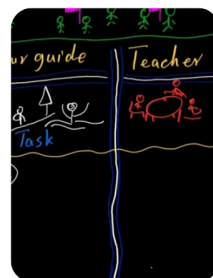
Handmade octagon box



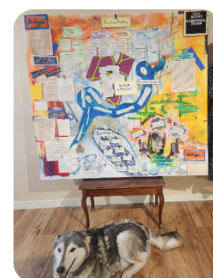
Embroidered scrapbook



A teacher's jacket



Digital story using doodle



Mural

How Did Autobiographical Creations Help Teachers Rethink Language Teaching and the Support They Provide Plurilingual Learners?

In the following subsections, I draw insights from three autobiographical creations to highlight how the autobiographical creation helped plurilingual teachers to reconceptualize their identities and practices.

Embracing the Plurilingual Teaching Self: Tran's Handmade Octagon Box

Embracing her passion for craft, Tran created a handmade octagon box that opened on all sides. Each side of the octagon opened into zigzag books, signifying further growth and expansion. In her introduction, she valued the opportunity for critical reflexivity that this creation afforded her. Her octagon highlighted her pride in herself. The ten building blocks provided to generate the autobiography were represented in the eight sides of the octagon, its lid, and the box.

As she reflected on critical incidents that shaped her identity as an English language learner, Tran acknowledged the racial dimensions of language and power that she experienced in Vietnam. She recalled being labelled “not a very good student” in classrooms that adopted Eurocentric language-teaching methodologies. She felt “humiliation and embarrassment” and was ridiculed by her teacher. One punishment for incorrect spelling had her rewrite the correct spellings 50 times, which communicated a strong message about the importance of English and being a speaker of English. Growing up in a culture where teachers are respected and their practices are never questioned, Tran did not have a voice. She expressed the futility of her position: “My foster mother advised me that I should learn harder to prove I was capable, and my teacher might change her mind. But life is not that easy, it did not matter how hard I tried, nothing changed.” Located within larger naïve educational discourses that claim neutrality, meritocracy, colourblindness, and equal opportunity (Ladson-Billings, 2000) and that ignored the epistemologies of nonnative speakers of English, Tran was positioned as a deficit learner. Her experiences as an EFL learner were shaped by the discriminatory, socially inequitable, and hegemonic powers that operate in colonial/outer-circle settings (Kumaravadivelu, 2016). Her language learning was very colonial in orientation, with language perfection being the target. Through the reflection, she challenged her own colonial orientation that language had to be perfect.

The reflection on the critical incidents that shaped her praxis allowed her to expose the racially charged nature of learning English. Even in her recollections of her time as an English as a foreign language teacher in Vietnam, she used words such as “unsuccessful” and “failure,” and she constantly referenced being inadequate, with a need to improve. The autobiography helped her reposition herself: “The autobiography has provided me an opportunity to take a step back to look through myself and make connections between the past, the present, and the future. It has helped me to embrace my true self and what I bring to the class.”

Reconceptualizing Pedagogical Practices through an Asset-Oriented Lens: Mojgan's Jacket

Referencing her training in Iran as an apparel and textile designer, Mojgan created a denim jacket to map her autobiography. To highlight how teachers' identities shape their practices, she designed a jacket and an accompanying bag to represent the experiences, ideas, and expertise that teachers bring to their classes.

Embedded in the autobiographical creation is a teaching metaphor. When being used in teacher education, metaphor “involves employing a familiar object or event as a conceptual tool to elucidate features of a more complex subject or situation” (Oxford et al., 1998, p. 4). Drawing on Kumaravadivelu's (1994) call for teachers to create their methodologies, materials, and curricula according to the circumstances and requirements of their classrooms and pupils, Mojgan compared the language educator to a designer. For her, a good designer takes a human-centred approach. They use their creativity to build on the resources and needs of their clients. As she stated, a teacher is a designer because they should “think about creative ways and strategies to use the resources students bring to the class. I make sure I give what my students need. To me, the classroom is like a design project.” She clarified her choice and articulated that a true designer uses creativity to build on their clients' needs.

Aligning her role as a designer who works with the assets the students bring, Mojgan highlighted, through the notion of a successful educator of plurilingual students, how she values and supports the multiple languages and cultures her students bring to the class and how she builds on the richness and the complexity of their linguistic and cultural repertoires:

I create a sense of community and respect within the classroom. This can involve all of us getting to know each student on a personal level, recognizing and valuing their unique cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and creating opportunities for students to collaborate and learn from one another.

Drawing on Matsuda's (2017) work, Mojgan's asset-oriented pedagogical practices challenged colonial notions of ownership of the English language. Furthermore, her practices are informed by the notion that "the English language no longer belongs to English-speaking countries" but is an international language appropriated locally. The process of creating the autobiography, the class readings, and the class discussions helped Mojgan to make these powerful connections between theory and practice.

Promoting Diversity and Plurilingualism: Andres's Autobiographical Movie

Building on his passion for music and nostalgia for a musical career he could not pursue, for his autobiography Andres created a movie that incorporated his music. In his autobiography, he critiqued the dominant raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa, 2015) that value standardized language practices, which set unattainable standards for plurilingual Colombian teachers and learners:

I used to believe that the teacher is the master of knowledge: Teachers must know everything, and I wanted my students to become masters of English grammar knowledge. I carried the world on my back, and I became frustrated because my students could not produce perfect sentences or pronounce with a *perfect accent*.

The dominant discourses that shaped Andres's practice upheld standard varieties of English, perpetuating colonial hierarchies and power dynamics that positioned him and his students as linguistically deviant (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Such discourses force teachers and students to strive to achieve unrealistic goals. However, in his autobiographical narrative, Andres questioned the dominant ideologies and arbitrary notions that privilege native speakers and standard varieties of English: "Today I ask myself, what is a perfect accent? What is a perfect sentence?" Unravelling himself from ideologies he had been steeped in throughout his life, first as a language learner and then as a teacher, involved deep and honest self-reflexivity. He adopts a decolonial mindset that embraces inclusivity and diversity that overlooks the notion of an ideal language learner.

Andres's metaphor of a language teacher embraced the diversity and plurilingualism prevalent in multilingual classrooms:

Metaphorically speaking, a teacher is an orchestra conductor. An orchestra conductor's mission is to lead a group of musicians—my students. An orchestra consists of musicians playing different instruments. Not everybody in the orchestra does the same thing. The orchestra conductor must motivate the musicians so that they give the best. To do this, teachers must get to know their students and help them find the best way to understand the musical scores. To become a conductor, it takes preparation, perseverance, and a process of constant self-reflection to understand our strengths and weaknesses.

He saw his class as an orchestra, each student playing different instruments and music pieces. He viewed his students from an asset-oriented lens by recognizing them as creative individuals (López-Gopar et al., 2022). The beauty of an orchestra is its diversity, and the richness of the musical production lies in a conductor who nurtures diverse musicians.

Concluding Thoughts: Reconceptualizing Language Teacher Education from a Decolonizing Lens

I want to conclude by returning to Walsh's (2018) notion of decoloniality as a *project to take on* to assist teachers in challenging the status quo in language teacher education. Decoloniality as a project refers to the active pursuit of decolonial practices and ideologies in teaching. It involves taking action to challenge and dismantle the remnants of colonialism that continue to perpetuate inequality, oppression, and the dominance of Western perspectives in our classes. Steeped in critical self-reflexivity, the autobiographical creation encouraged plurilingual language teachers to reflect on their identities and praxis. The project moved beyond awareness and is built on potential areas for action. By moving away from a Eurocentric academic paper that would be typed and uploaded to the university's learning management system, the project sought to rethink the assessment of plurilingual learners by having them demonstrate the knowledges and skills they possessed but were not fully acknowledged. Moreover, the collaborative aspect of this project was decolonial, since students engaged in very powerful discussion about their project ideas over the course of the semester.

The creative means—craft, music, design—gave them varied and authentic ways to critically reflect on their identities, biases, and positions of privilege and marginality. The autobiographies revealed how coloniality transmuted English language teaching through teaching methodologies and materials, pedagogical practices, and expectations for language teachers and learners. All three students whose work was discussed here spoke of the challenges and discrimination they experienced as English language learners. However, there is commitment in their practice to critique and reframe stereotypes and biases and to engage in pedagogical practices built on social justice. From a teacher education point of view, a call is necessary for second language teacher education to provide students with meaningful opportunities to recognize their complicity in the reproduction of linguistic and racial inequities (Baker-Bell, 2017) and with the sensibilities and skills to transform deficit-based pedagogies to asset-based (Moll et al., 1992) pedagogies built on translanguaging and translingual practice (Bale et al., 2023; Canagarajah, 2018). Decolonizing our praxis is an ongoing process. Creativity-infused projects, such as the autobiographical creation, can potentially support teachers' ongoing journeys of reflexivity and transformative action.

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