

Language learning through multimodality and identity texts: A pilot project supporting English language learners

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In the spring of 2017, the *Modern Learning: ELLs in Arts* team and educators from Maple High School and Stouffville District High School engaged in a professional collaborative inquiry around how multimodality, identity texts, and Steps to English Proficiency (STEP) can support language learning for English Language Learners.

The [*Identities through Art*](#) project connected the ESL classes from Maple High School and Stouffville District High School in authoring and creating identity texts through visuals, drawings, photography, words, poetry, and stories. The 32 students were all from a secondary English as a Second Language Level 2 (ESLBO) or English as a Secondary Language Level 3 (ESLCO) class, and were at the beginning stages of learning English as an additional language (STEPS 1 to 3). They spoke a variety of home languages including Mandarin, Cantonese, Arabic, Urdu, Russian, Vietnamese, and Spanish, and had very diverse migration experiences.

The learning was based on constructions of social identities, in which students reflected on how they are perceived by others and society, their lived experiences, stories and how they construct their own identity. They engaged with the elements of design, photography, and art processes to explore how they might express their feelings and stories of who they are. They also read and wrote their own multilingual poems and stories to extend the expression of their identities through the written code. The layering of symbols, colours, words, images, and recordings were culminated together in a gallery and e-book, in which their oral stories were recorded and published on YouTube. This intermixing, known as multimodality, was supported through digital mediation and mobile technologies.

Multimodality

Playing with multimodality with the students on digital media expanded our literacy practices, allowing us to interact with texts in new ways, such as collaborative authorship and remixing, anytime and anywhere (Lotherington & Jenson, 2011). In this sense, our students combined traditional texts with visuals, audio, video, and spatial modes to construct meaning in dynamic and social ways, on a variety of analog and digital canvasses. English language learners are particularly suited for multimodal learning, as they already construct meaning through multimodal and multilingual ways, and are skilled in leveraging mobile devices for day-to-day tasks and maintaining global communication with their families and friends. As learners continue to learn English and other languages in their new community, they also translanguage – using freely a variety of language practices in their own language repertoire (Garcia & Kleyn, 2016).

During the project, students and teachers were translanguageing in community talk circles, sharing ideas and experiences using all the languages available to us. We leveraged the

stories to create collaborative and individual artwork and photography to layer onto one another, while learning about how the elements of design and symbols help communicate meaning. Students also wrote stories and poems that would be read to one another, then layered on audio recordings in different languages in connection to the artwork they made. As you can see, students combined multilingual oral and written text with strategic use of visuals, colours, and symbols via their notebooks, markers, charcoal and paint on paper, and iPads - multimodality and translanguaging at the centre of the language learning.

The *Modern Learning: ELLs in Arts* team learned that leveraging student strengths in multimodality, digital media and translanguaging has provided the possibility for students to bring their full selves into the learning, broaden their communicative repertoire, and make their learning visible. For teachers, it made the teaching more accessible to students and reinforced language skills in multiple modes and media. Thus, we learned that embedding multimodal and multilingual digital tools into teachers' pedagogy is not merely an optional 'nice to do'. Rather, if teachers discount students' existing communicative practice in the classroom, they impair the students' ability to learn (Street, Pahl, & Rowsell, 2009).

Identity Texts

The multimodal narratives (the students art, self portraits, poems, and stories) are an example of what Cummins and Early (2011) termed an identity text. As students "invest identities in the creation of texts...[it] then holds up a mirror up to students in which their identities are reflected back in a positive light" (Cummins & Early, 2015). The construction of identity texts follows two principles asserted by Cummins et al. (2006) to promote academic engagement among English language learners:

- ELL students' cultural knowledge and language abilities are important resources in enabling academic engagement;
- ELL students will engage academically to the extent that instruction affirms their identities and enables them to invest their identities in learning.

Throughout the project, we observed an increased level of personal investment and literacy engagement as students began creating and sharing their stories. As the stories unfolded, teachers and students began to know one another more deeply, building a stronger sense of community and belonging. As one teacher noted: "*I have come to understand that students can really find themselves at ease when they are able to affirm themselves through their stories. They have a great sense of pride.*"

The student's multimodal narratives were shared to the community at a gallery at the Vaughan Civic Centre Library, and now online through our virtual reality gallery and e-book. As the narratives are shared with peers, community members, teachers, and families, they continue to receive positive affirmations of self.

The construction of the students' identity texts were supported through instructional scaffolds, to enable all students to access the learning. The Steps to English Proficiency (STEP) resource was a key component in the teacher learning.

STEPS to English Proficiency

[STEP](#) is a framework for assessing and monitoring the language acquisition and literacy development of English language learners across the Ontario Curriculum. The resource was developed to guide instruction and classroom-based assessment. Educators can use the STEP continually to assess and record evidence of students' language proficiency progress gathered through day-to-day classroom learning experiences. Information from STEP, gathered over time and in various learning contexts, will be useful for school leaders, teachers, students, and parents in supporting the learning and teaching of ELL in the following ways:

- support planning and programming decisions
- implement responsive differentiated instruction and assessment
- track language proficiency and literacy development
- select appropriate resources
- make decisions regarding participation in and support for large-scale assessment
- engage students in self-assessment and goal setting
- provide students and parents with accurate indication of the child's level of English language acquisition and literacy development
- determine discontinuation of ESL/ELD support
- engage in reflective teacher practice and professional dialogue

During the project, the STEP resource was explored to determine intentional and personalized programming for English language learners, particular for students at the beginning Steps of learning English. Through co-planning and co-teaching, educators designed differentiated scaffolds for students to enter into the learning. For example, students were provided sentence starters and sentence frames that corresponded to their STEP when speaking to their peers around the meaning of colour. Students labelled their charcoal drawings to music using emotion words in different languages. Students were provided differentiated templates to begin writing their own poems. Students always had the opportunity to think about their responses (wait time), write it down and talk to a peer, before sharing their thinking to a wider audience.

Teachers also used the STEP resource to support our pedagogical documentation practice. Teachers used a [graphic organizer](#) listing the pre-determined success criteria. We transcribed our observations and conversations with students according to the criteria. We reflected on our observation notes to gain insight on the learning, as well as to determine the STEP the student is on. We then responded by providing accommodations corresponding to the STEP, and determining language learning goals by looking ahead to the next STEP.

Teachers noted that documenting observations and conversations *"tells us which area our students need additional assistance, and how to fill in those gaps in order for them to progress..."*. The documentation using criteria helped them focus in on specific look for's *"[I now know to] provide more wait time to allow students to think about a response..[and] provide time to allow them to speak in English and not always be worried about translation."*

Using STEP in our teacher reflection enabled us to design and provide targeted scaffolds, which resulted in students' increased ability to demonstrate greater language output through their oral and written responses.

Reflecting on the Learning

The project was an opportunity for the *Modern Learning: ELLs in Arts* team to learn alongside school-based educators and their students. It was a rare opportunity to have been able to work so closely with teachers and students for an extended period of time. It was not without challenges: often the school structures (i.e. scheduling periods) was a logistical puzzle, especially to coordinate between two schools that are 40 kilometres apart. Administrators and educators were very flexible in accommodating around school structures to make it work. Our own schedules allowed us to see the class once a week for about 7 weeks, which is a short duration of time to build relationships and a sense of community, as well as to develop shared understandings of pedagogical goals among teachers. However, the learning that resulted was incredibly rewarding, and was only made possible by the shared ownership and commitment to the project of all the team members: Jon Lewis, Chunha Park, Justina So, under the leadership of Debbie Donsky and Nada Aoudeh, as well as the school teams: Matthew McClennon and Shawn Perry (Maple H.S.) and Terry Lee, Heera Firasat, and Karen Parris (Stouffville D.H.S.).

The documenting of our learning journey and virtual reality gallery enhanced our reflection and learning. The virtual reality gallery also enables parents, family members, and friends of our students who were unable to attend or live overseas to engage with the learning. Thus we are so thankful to the creative and innovative Learning Design and Development team who tirelessly filmed, combed through footage, and 'played' with new technologies with us - Leah MacDonald, Hamal Finn Roye, Matthew McPhee, Nicole DaCosta, and Chris Jasper.

Finally, we are grateful for the tremendous commitment and thoughtfulness of our students in creating and sharing their heartfelt stories of self. Click on the link below to view the students ebook, a video introducing the project, and to navigate our virtual reality art gallery. We also hope to see you at Quest on Friday November 17 Session E10 to explore the student's work and engage in the creative process as well!

bit.ly/IdentityThroughArt

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