

**Multi-Lingual and Multi-Identity: Writing in School as a 7th Grade Intermediate  
English Learner**

by

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**Abstract**

This article discusses a qualitative study centering the writing practices of seventh grade multilingual students in a small, urban city in Massachusetts. Analysis of participants' narrative and nonfiction writing reveal that emergent multilingual students inherently express multiple, sometimes contradictory identities due to their development as language learners and adolescents. Students achieved this by weaving through various languages (including different Englishes) and drawing on their lived experiences and observations. In doing so, multilingual young people disrupt unequal voices and language hierarchies by transgressing standard ideologies in academic writing. To affirm and promote the validity of translingual, heteroglossic writing, educators should consider multilingual texts as legitimate exemplars and develop heteroglossic literacy practices that support students to refine their pre-existing language use in service of their authorial intentions.

*Keywords:* multilingual learners, emergent multilingual learners, translanguaging, heteroglossia, identity, writing, post-structuralism

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### **The Beginning Narrative**

Before the sound of the schoolwide bell reverberates throughout the building, there is always a brief noise that signals the end of class to students. Once they sense the speakers turn on, the sound of rustling papers, screeching chairs, bumping desks, and pre-teen voices begin to permeate all classrooms and hallways. Some teachers stop the class in their anxious path with a firmly raised voice and something along the lines of, “Remember—the teacher dismisses you, not the bell.” Others follow the bell with their usual dismissal phrases like, “Get outta here!” or “Ok, see you tomorrow. Have a good day!” as the students run off excitedly to meet their friends in the halls for what feels like seconds of unmonitored socialization. Ms. Sullivan is the latter.

Today, I am one of the last to leave Ms. Sullivan’s room as the supporting Multilingual Educator in a 7th grade English Language Arts (ELA)/Writing class. I wait for most of the middle school mob to leave the room before I grab all my things in my arms and head to the next class—the perks of a traveling teacher.

*Macbook—check*

*Overflowing green pencil case—check*

*Black folder with miscellaneous learning supports—check*

*Clipboard with random worksheets from students who asked if I’d hold onto their work and said they’d “bring their binder” the following day—check*

*Oh and my cell-phone with a couple unread messages from our Grade 7 teacher group chat—check*

The hallway traffic is a claustrophobic’s worst nightmare. Security and teachers stand in their respective positions greeting students and monitoring the “unmonitored socialization.”

A few newcomer students carrying their large 2-inch black binders shout, “Hola, Ms!” as they see me squeezing past them.

“Boys, keep your hands to yourself,” I announce with a stern face.

“Keep it pushin’, y’all. I don’t want you to be late. It’s purple class.”

At the first sight of Ms. Morgan, I say “Hello!” with a big smile and sigh of relief. I’ve made it through the crowd of pre-teens without a scratch.

Today’s lesson is about spicy leads in writing.

“We want to hook the reader, or catch their attention, in the beginning of our stories so that they continue reading and get some hints about what your story will be about,” I explain confidently from my standing desk at the back of the room during the mini lesson.

Jordan sits at the very front of the room facing Ms. Morgan. During most of the lesson, he is rapping Bronx drill music lyrics to himself so passionately that he whisper swears at the Chromebook screen, as though the computer is his audience.

“Remember—calm body, Jordan,” redirects Ms. Morgan (more than once). The energetic 7th grader looks back to me and I motion with my hands for him to do the same—calm down his body.

Jordan self-identifies as a “happy kid” whenever met with a lesson or survey about social-emotional learning and the influx of depressive or anxious symptoms in teenagers. However, this persona quickly turns into one of furrowed eyebrows and crude outbursts when he is angry about losing a soccer game during recess or a negative message home to mom about his behavior. He refuses the usual in-class coping mechanisms, like coloring, journaling, and breathing routines, and instead isolates himself and puts his head down on the desk. During this period, in particular, Jordan is the happy kid who likes drill music. He didn’t lose a soccer game earlier today and he has yet to frustrate a teacher with his hyperactive tendencies.

“Jordan, we’re not using our Chromebooks right now.” At this moment, he senses Ms. Morgan’s serious tone and growing frustration.

“Pay attention, Jordan. Stop rapping,” I remind him quietly while pointing to the board.

“But Ms!!!” groans Jordan in a louder whisper while Ms. Morgan continues teaching.

Once students have been introduced to our spicy leads menu, they are sent off to work independently on crafting a lead in their drafts. Ms. Morgan and I grab our conferencing

clipboards and review the names of the students we are checking in with today. As I'm walking over to Allison, Jordan stops me and signals with his hand for help.

"Ms, can you check this? I don't know if it's good," he admits mid-rap-lyric.

"You're not on my conference list today, Jordan," I explained disappointedly.

Jordan's furrowed eyebrows begin to appear, "Why? You can just read it really quick. I just wanna know if it's good."

\*\*\*

*One time there was a kid named Glizzy and he was in a hospital trying to fit in. He was trying to fit in by doing all the things the cool kids did. But it was too hard for him. They started laughing at him and he got sad. A couple of hours later he was practicing all of the tiktok dances until he finally learned it.*

\*\*\*

He notices the light chuckle and smile as I finish skimming the draft.

Then, Jordan proceeds to criticize the content of his own story, as if it wasn't drawn from a personal experience, a thematic understanding of young adult literature at large, or a deep collection of social-emotional knowledge that few people had pointed out within him, "Isn't it so cringey, Ms? Why do people want to do TikTok dances anyway?"

\*\*\*

The story above narrates a recent moment in my teaching that in many ways, generated the initial ideas of this research project. As a fourth-year multilingual educator of color, I have always been interested in the ways in which schools shape the identities and worldviews of the individuals that inhabit them, particularly young people. I started off my teaching career in the height of the COVID-19 pandemic as one of the first adults that young teenage newcomers interacted with and who they grew to trust in this unfamiliar place called Massachusetts. Most of them had only lived in the U.S. for a year or less, while a few trickled in later in the academic year. Through many Google Translate entries, awkward pauses, turned-off Zoom cameras, and

moments of miscommunication, I grew to be conversationally fluent in a language that schooling had only taught me to be academically literate in—Spanish. This newfound linguistic identity of mine opened up more paths of connection with my newcomer students, who were also navigating an immense identity crisis, in which they were forced to question all that they knew and relearn ways of being and communicating in this world.

This year, my teacher identity has shifted once again. As an English educator for intermediate-level students (instead of beginners), I have been re-learning a curriculum, forming more robust co-teaching relationships, and expanding my relationships with students beyond the newcomer cohort. I have always thought about student-teacher relationships in a holistic manner. Young people are complex beings with identities outside of the classroom that are worth observing, learning, and reinforcing. A student's behavior in the classroom is almost always extremely different from their identity with their friends, at home, in public spaces, or even with specific individuals. One of the ways in which I've been able to connect with my students is through their writing. Jordan, for instance, presents socially as the 'macho' leader of his soccer-fanatic boy group, dressed in all black and devoted to the masculine culture of drill music. However, his realistic fiction writing shows a more discreet side, one that is sentimental, creative, and thoughtful, one that holds and recognizes insecurities just like any other 7th grader. This project seeks to shed light on the hard work that multilingual learners do to assert various parts of their identities while navigating a new writing context with unfamiliar language varieties.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Multilingualism as Translanguaging**

Multilingual learners (MLLs) have unique perspectives to share due to their multiple experiences and sources of knowledge. The majority of adolescent MLLs have either spent most of their childhood in a different country of origin or in an immigrant family, in which they are

the first or one of the first to acquire English as a new language. As such, they are constantly shifting identities and languages for various goals. In my teaching context, I have noticed three different languages that students use fluidly in their day-to-day interactions. Intermediate-level MLLs (or as we call them at my current school district, Transitional MLLs) frequently adopt social English (or Black English) with their peers. Martinez (2017) cites many instances of this “language sharing” amongst Black and Latinx youth. In one of his own studies, he notes that a Black male youth “argued that his Latinx peers spoke Black language because it was the language of the larger community, or what he called the ‘biosphere’ we live in,” which includes hip hop culture, a major source of influence in youth pop culture (p. 185). In my students’ daily communication, they appear to be like any other non-MLL teen who touts elements of popular youth culture and carries an iPhone with never-ending buzzes of social media notifications. “I just *wanna* know if it’s good” and “Isn’t it so *cringey*, Ms?” exemplify Jordan’s knowledge of social English through the contraction of “want to” and the adjectival slang term “cringey”. It is in the classroom, however, that Jordan’s learning differences as a multilingual learner become more obvious around his non-MLL peers. A heavy emphasis on academic English and Tier 3 content-based vocabulary (Beck & McKeown, 1985) means that MLLs’ funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) fall onto the backburner when they enter the formal classroom. These two registers counter the use of Spanish with friends and family as it is the most prominent home language of our school district. It is important to note that these languages do not exist in vacuums. In this specific context, students are unafraid to employ Spanish in the hallways and with peers due to the cultural and linguistic homogeneity of the community within and surrounding the school. Students often weave in and out of these three languages in a variety of spaces. Social English is more prevalent in peer interactions both inside and outside of the classroom. However, students recognize that they may need to shift their language sometimes when speaking with adults or engaging in academic tasks. On the other

hand, the use of Spanish slang and Spanish language generally functions as a method to connect with peers who have been confirmed multilingual as well.

This fluid movement of language was first termed as “translanguaging” in the nineties during discussions about bilingual Welsh education (Kalan, 2022). Ofelia García and her colleagues soon adopted it to mobilize and empower Spanish speakers in English-Spanish dual-language programs, with the larger goal of promoting multilingualism in U.S. academic contexts (2022). From the beginning of García’s work, it was made clear that translanguaging is distinct from code-switching because it characterizes multilingual individuals as having a singular, integrated linguistic repertoire that is heteroglossic and constantly changing (García & Lin, 2017). On the other hand, code-switching assumes that multilingual speakers have some kind of linguistic mastery in multiple named languages, and as the term suggests, they switch back and forth between those languages repeatedly. Thus, their linguistic repertoire has clear boundaries between multiple languages. Translanguaging informs my study because it describes a phenomenon that I have already noticed in my experience as a language educator, and it aligns with theories of identity that emphasize dynamism and fluidity, which are explained in the following section.

### **Language AND Identity**

A key part of maintaining the status of white, anglophone culture in the United States is to categorize multilingual learners as less than or deficient due to their linguistic differences (Flores, 2020). However, by shifting our perspective to one that values the multiple sources of knowledge that learners bring to the table, we might discover greater complexity and expertise than previously assumed. In a study of adolescent newcomers who were developing their English literacy through historical thinking and the use of primary sources, Fránquiz and Salinas (2011) show an asset-based approach when describing the ways in which students’ bilingual strengths were leveraged throughout lessons. Students’ final identity texts were not limited to a single, uniform variety of written language, thus allowing the newcomers to express

their growing historical thinking and content knowledge in multiple literacies. Instead of viewing young people as passive receptacles of knowledge, critical scholars of language teaching depict multilingual learners as active agents who “construct the terms and conditions of their own learning” (Liu & Tannacito, 2013, p. 359). Much like Fránquiz and Salinas (2011), my study seeks to shed light on the work that multilingual learners do to navigate multiple languages, contexts, and identities.

The field of multilingual learning overwhelmingly emphasizes second language acquisition (SLA) and English literacy development in K-12 and adult learning contexts. Household names like Cummins and Krashen are frequently cited in the education of emerging language teachers. Their research focuses typically include individual-level factors of language learning, such as motivation and personality, and methods to promote greater comfort and adjustment to the new language, like the input hypothesis and natural order hypothesis (Krashen, 1982). The former hypothesis argues that comprehensible input is necessary for language acquisition. Krashen (1982) uses the formula of  $i+1$  to show that the input must exceed the current state of language competence by one level in order to be comprehensible. The natural order hypothesis argues that individuals tend to acquire the grammatical structures of a new language in a predictable order. Cummins (1999) developed the dichotomy of Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) to show the length of time that MLLs require to fully attain the languages of conversation and school. Though this framework may help educators plan for time-constrained instruction, it does not illustrate the nuance in how MLLs and frankly, all users of English, deploy language. Other researchers and theories of translanguaging challenge us to push against this dichotomous thinking about multilingual learning. All these aforementioned hypotheses ultimately recommend strategies for educators to advance language acquisition. However, there appears to be less literature that intentionally explores the experiences of young multilingual learners as they adjust to a new world across borders and build even newer worlds within.

Researchers like Canagarajah (2019) and Norton (2001) differ somewhat from the canon of SLA theory because they adopt a both/and approach when considering the individual-level and societal-level factors that impact multilingual learners. Macro-level considerations like transnationalism and power are more likely to be ignored in the canon as language-learning is typically discussed as a complex, individualized experience impacted by factors unique to the learner. In an interview with Canagarajah, we are reminded of the importance of acknowledging the larger social context in which our young MLLs live because it affects their behavior, decision-making, literacy development, and identity development in school. The interviewer explains how:

His early studies adopted critical ethnography to address the strategies of resistance and appropriation by Sri Lankan students and teachers in the face of western teaching materials and methods, and the global power of English. (Porto, 2021, pp. 82)

This approach follows the tradition of critical pedagogues like Freire (1970), who believed that language teaching is not a neutral practice, but a highly political one. In the context of my study in particular, the students that I teach grapple with the hegemonic English-speaking culture of the U.S. on a daily basis. Thus, their relationships with language and identity are framed by a larger impetus to adopt Standard Written English as a form of social and material capital. In the world of language learning, this is often referred to as English language ideology or native speaker ideology (Liu & Tannacito, 2013). Both ideologies acknowledge the larger power dynamics that exist in our country regarding language. Liu and Tannacito (2013) speak of these phenomena in their study of Taiwanese students' investment in their second language writing. They find that their investment is heavily fueled by a desire to belong to an imagined community of White prestige.

Though many researchers have been able to make general claims about language and identity using critical theory, others have tried to achieve this while simultaneously analyzing individual differences. Canagarajah recently narrowed his focus to the teaching of English

writing for multilingual students, and how critical pedagogies may be used to promote and develop a decolonial orientation to literacy (Porto, 2021). In a similar vein, Norton (2000) theorizes language and identity from a sociocultural, poststructuralist perspective. Her work directly questions “the artificial distinctions drawn between the individual and the social, which lead to arbitrary mapping of particular factors on either the individual or the social, with little rigorous justification” (p. 4). This has led her to reconceptualize identity as something more complicated than an issue exclusive to the language learner’s internal world or the learner’s context (external world). This stands in contrast with aforementioned literature in which language and identity are studied *solely* from a micro-level or macro-level lens. Norton defines identity as:

...how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how that person understands possibilities for the future...SLA theory needs to develop a conception of identity that is understood with reference to larger, and frequently inequitable, social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction. In taking this position, I foreground the role of language as constitutive of and constituted by a language learner’s identity. As Heller (1987) demonstrates, it is through language that a person negotiates a sense of self within and across different sites at different points in time, and it is through language that a person gains access to – or is denied access to – powerful social networks that give learners the opportunity to speak. (Norton, 2000, pp. 5)

In this study, language and identity are closely tied because it is through the medium of writing in which I am extrapolating the expression of my participants’ identities. Without this concrete linguistic data, the study would be entirely theoretical at best and overly presumptuous at worst. In other words, I would be essentializing and assigning identities to students. Following Norton’s explanation above, I view identity as dynamic by nature, which means that I will be contextualizing my findings with self-reported demographic information and reflections about

language. Language is thus the vehicle through which students express various identities, and this expression is often bound by their access to the language and the related communities.

Norton (2013) expands on this definition of identity using a critical lens of power. Often times, language functions not only as a form of symbolic power (i.e., in the situation that an immigrant in the U.S. must learn the dominant language of English to survive) but also material power (i.e., a benefit of knowing English in the U.S. is that you have more expansive job opportunities, and a larger network, which can result in higher wages). Weedon (1997) draws from post-structural feminism to inform her description of the relationship between identity and power. The development or expression of identity involves some degree of human agency as well as socially-constructed language. She states that “Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed” (p. 21). All of this is embedded in macro institutions of power, such as the legal and education systems, which further reproduce inequality in micro-level interactions. Thus, when I speak about language and identity in my study, power relations will also be considered in tandem.

### **Studying Identity Through Writing**

Translanguaging and identity expression are arguably most evident in students’ speech, as they flow through their linguistic repertoire depending on the context and who they are communicating with. García and Lin’s (2017) study of student speech revealed participants’ bilingual capabilities as well as their bilingual identities. Writing, however, can also be a useful tool for assessing multilingual learners’ use of language. It is a productive language domain that arguably has lower stakes compared to speaking. Many multilingual learners avoid speaking due to their affective filters and a stigmatized English as a Second Language (ESL) identity (Yi, 2013). But writing can be a private form of communication and one that does not always require an audience like speaking. Thus, it can be a valuable data source when looking at how identities

converge or diverge. Kibler (2017) notes that, “As writers’ L2 expertise advances, they also tend to develop increasingly sophisticated approaches to drawing upon their bi/multilingualism to support their writing in the L2 and across languages” (p. 27). Written language may be more revelatory as a data source because the participants in my study have reached what some have called the “intermediate language plateau”, in which learners find it incredibly difficult to reach an advanced level in multiple language domains despite dedicated time and effort (Richards, 2008). Their speaking skills may not be representative of their holistic linguistic capabilities, but their writing may (1) provide a fuller picture of their true knowledge of the language and (2) uncover moments of unexpected translanguaging and bi/multilingualism.

Some studies of language learner identity have used writing as a mode of analysis. Linares (2021) for instance, discovered that a ninth-grade newcomer’s dialogue journals became his low-tech, low-stakes entrance into classroom and school-based writing. It was through this mode of communication and expression that Marlón reclaimed a sense of agency through his decisions to translanguage and share personal experiences. As a result, his social studies teacher, Ms. Rosewall was not only able to promote Marlón’s literacy development as a Student with Limited and Interrupted Education (SLIFE) student, but also see his identities more holistically. Similarly, Liu and Tannacito (2013) observed moments of resistance in their participants’ writing. But more prominently, they saw how the authority of English writing practices dangerously cemented a sense of inferiority in the emergent multilingual university students.

These findings could have been distilled through other methods like ethnographic observation and interviews. However, both studies implicitly mention the benefits of writing as a data source because it allows both parties (the writer and the reader) to review the communication multiple times, whereas speech and conversation are fleeting by nature. There is greater room for multilingualism as the audience for writing is usually quite diverse, compared to that of speaking. Interviews, focus groups, and oral conversation may result in

miscommunication and misinterpretation. They can also pressure multilingual speakers to ‘say things correctly’ or divulge personal information in a face-to-face situation. Thus, by using writing as an in-road to study identity, we may be able to discern layers of identity that are less apparent in oral speech.

### **Literature Review**

#### **The Current Language Learning Landscape of the U.S.**

Due to the dominant linguistic and academic identity prioritized in schools' hegemony, young multilingual learners are sometimes viewed as limited in their ability to express multiple identities. Language has historically existed as a function of power. Nieto (2021) notes that, “The justification for official English policies has been built around a monolingual ideology that associates linguistic minorities as foreign to the US and, therefore, must assimilate into ‘America’ and abandon any traces of their countries of origin, especially their native languages” (p. 4). The predominance of monolingualism is deeply embedded in American history, as enslaved African folk were segregated into heterogeneous language groups to sever cultural bonds (Chang-Bacon, 2021), and indigenous youth were coerced into “Westernization” at boarding schools (Endo & Reece-Miller, 2010). It was only six years ago that Massachusetts state officials signed a bill to overturn a 15-year ballot measure that effectively eliminated bilingual education from most public schools (Vaznis, 2017).

While the English language has often been used to control populations designated as ‘other,’ it is also paradoxically recognized as a symbol of status, something to be revered and desired by marginalized groups. Freire (1970) argues that “...the oppressed, at a certain moment of their existential experience, adopt an attitude of ‘adhesion’ to the oppressor” (p. 45). In Bonny Norton’s (2013) study of immigrant women in Quebec, Saliha says “we come here to speak like them,” (p. 49) because they know that the target language holds both symbolic and material power. The power dynamics of language-learning are also evident in the construct of “imagined

communities”, which is described as an individual and social process in which members develop a sense of belonging and practice the language and identified characteristics of the group (Norton & Pavlenko, 2019). Norton and Pavlenko (2019) note that multilingual “...learners have different investments in different members of the target language community, and that the people in whom the learners have the greatest investment may be the very people who provide (or limit) access to the imagined community of a given learner” (p. 705). Therefore, schooling and the adults in our schools have great responsibility in shaping the linguistic identities and motivations of students, and this responsibility is often undermined. In fact, one study of four schools in Japan found that the least privileged bilingual students were socialized into the most restricted imagined communities even though they would benefit most from an education that presents a wider set of options and opportunities for the future (Norton & Pavlenko, 2019).

Though our education system has made strides in promoting bilingual programming and adopting culturally relevant pedagogies, emergent multilingual students continue to experience discrimination from microaggressions in daily interactions to larger inequities, like underfunded school districts. Furthermore, asset-based multilingual teaching continues to be the exception, not the rule in our country. Flores and Rosa’s (2015) framework of *raciolinguistics* argues that much of language teaching is dominated by appropriateness-based approaches in which “standardized linguistic practices [are viewed] as an objective set of linguistic forms that are appropriate for an academic setting” (p. 149). Thus, multilingual learners are expected “to model their linguistic practices after the white speaking subject despite the fact that the white listening subject continues to perceive their language use in racialized ways” (Flores & Rosa, 2015, p. 149). This stance is manifested in various ways as a form of systematic stigmatization. In U.S. educational contexts, for example, white English-dominant students may be praised more than students of color for attaining bilingualism (Chang-Bacon, 2021, p. 26). In addition, Black youth may be taught that the linguistic practices of Black English are “incorrect” or “inappropriate” in academic and professional settings, therefore excluding them from these spaces both implicitly

and explicitly (Chang-Bacon, 2021, p. 26). Given this national context, we must acknowledge the variety and diversity of our classrooms, as well as educators who create safe pockets of hope for multilingual and multicultural learners. In spite of a dominant educational culture that holds English and whiteness in the highest regard, young people find various ways to resist and express other identities in an attempt to reclaim their agency. This is the phenomenon that my study seeks to explore and expand upon.

### **Critical Language Teaching**

Based on the existing literature, there seems to be a wide continuum of approaches to teaching language in multilingual settings. The aforementioned Cummins and Krashen camp takes more of a conservative position and believe that multilingual learners must acquire the language of schooling in order to be recognized as functioning adults in our society. Some (Liu & Tannacito, 2013) have critiqued the absence of race discourse within the SLA field: "...reluctance to engage with discourses of colonialism and notions of difference has prevented the field from confronting racialization in language teaching and learning, resulting in 'epistemological racism' and a hegemony of whiteness and Western imperialism in the field" (Stille, 2016, p. 485).

Scholars like Crump (2014), however, address this absence and propose that we take a stance of criticality in our teaching of language, acknowledging the intersections of the subject-as-seen and subject-as-heard. In other words, this theory recognizes that fixed categories of race, language, and identity are not only socially constructed but also actively shape the possibilities of becoming. One way to combine culturally responsive teaching with language studies is to interrogate the following question: "...how might language policies (national policies, language-in-education policies, or family language policies) reinforce, produce, or resist racial hierarchies?" (Crump, 2014, p. 220) Perhaps this question encourages us as language educators to prioritize the cultivation of our students' critical language awareness and to facilitate their thinking about the histories and power dynamics embedded in their linguistic identities.

Closer to the other end of the spectrum lies Flores' conceptualization of language architecture. This is similar to Crump's (2014) LangCrit theory in that it emphasizes the importance of increasing the critical consciousness of students and their teachers. However, Flores (2020) more firmly states that when we challenge linguistic hierarchies and more specifically reject the academic language at the top, it must occur in conjunction with the breakdown of structural barriers that marginalize these communities and constructed these hierarchies in the first place. Therefore, the responsibility of creating a more identity-affirming education should not solely belong to those who have been oppressed, but also those with immense power in the broad political and economic structures of our world—the oppressors (2020).

While our ultimate goal as English language educators is to teach students to pass an exam, meet grade-level standards, or be functioning adults in the United States, it is also imperative that we create safe learning environments in which they feel comfortable in the development of their identities and knowledge. To be reflexive educators, we must consciously look at our units of instruction and lesson plans with a critical eye and see language as a functional and expressive part of students' identities. A common phrase used in educational discourse is that we want students to "be themselves" in the classroom. Before we can problem-solve to create a more identity-supportive curriculum or pedagogy, we must first study and unpack the negotiating work that students are already doing given an imperfect set of lessons that may prioritize grade-level standards and academic English over their own needs and identities. Flores (2020) proposes 'language architecture' as an alternative to raciolinguistic ideologies that unfairly dichotomize academic and non-academic language, reify deficit perspectives of students of color, and limit students' language development and exploration. Using the framework of language architecture, Flores (2020) argues that we should recognize students' home language practices as already aligned with the linguistic knowledge embedded in state standards. Teachers would then bring students' attention to how authors construct

multilingual texts and negotiate multiple identities in their writing. This pedagogical approach becomes a model for students to explore their own linguistic development and counters the notion that the English language should be taught simply as a list of empirical rules and practices.

### **Similar Studies**

Though the literature has expanded in its theorization of language and identity, the field has yet to apply these theories widely across adolescent contexts. Some researchers of language learning have leveraged post-secondary contexts, perhaps due to their logistical accessibility. Others have gained access to elementary classroom settings in which L2 learners are present (Blackledge et al., 2008; Maguire & Graves, 2001). Stille (2016) conducted a study of primary school MLLs in a large Canadian city, “where 97% of the students spoke a language other than English at home, and 30% of the students were newcomers to Canada” (p. 487). In one case of the students’ language experience stories, Stille noticed that students tried to introduce discourse around the politics of war and imperialism with their limited English language skills. Teachers were unsure of how to respond to their large questions and decided to immediately validate the students’ concerns. During a reflection about the activity, however, it became evident that the educators’ uncertainty about returning to these questions and more specifically, their dismissal of religious violence, ended up reifying the stereotype of Western liberalism and non-Western barbarism.

In another case, teachers are quick to point out differences between the native English speakers and the non-native English speakers and categorize their political views as such. Stille (2016) concludes that “rather than erase difference between native and nonnative speakers, among nonnative speakers, and within nonnative speakers, the notion of subjectivity can be used to think a *different* difference about language and the social subject” (p. 493). In other words, the implementation of identity-affirming curriculum does not guarantee a stance of culturally responsive and relevant pedagogies, especially when identity is viewed as something

static and divisive, rather than complex and dynamic. In this study, I aim to dive deeper into the ways in which students already express the latter definition of identity so that we as educators can more intentionally shape our interpretive stances and curricula to affirm and promote this kind of identity expression.

Case studies seem to be a preferred methodology in similar studies of language and identity as researchers can zoom closely into multiple forms of data from one language learner (Johnson & Kendrick, 2017; Kibler, 2017; Litten, 2022; Lvovich, 2003; Yi, 2013). This aligns with the notion that language learning should be viewed holistically both through the eyes of the learner themselves and the larger societal forces that may impact their identities. In a longitudinal study of a Spanish-English bilingual woman and the development of her disciplinary identities through writing, Kibler (2017) argues that “School-based writing is often seen as a gatekeeper for many students, determining (and often preventing) their access to advanced secondary...coursework. Less well known, however, are the ways in which writing opportunities can also help youth from these backgrounds develop academic identities over time” (p. 26). Writing can serve as a private form of creative expression and identify development in school. Students may push the boundaries of academic English to bolster an argument or tell a story clearly. In turn, young people inevitably reveal their individual identities and leverage their funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005) to create unique pieces of multilingual writing.

### **Gaps in the Existing Literature**

Gaps in the literature include studies performed with adolescent multilingual learners, especially those of middle-school age, studies performed in public school settings, as well as studies of more than one student. Kang (2022) and Honeyford (2013) are unique examples in the field because they both recently conducted research about the multimodal communicative competence of adolescent MLLs both in the U.S. and abroad. During a secondary after school program in Korea, high school English learners showed a sense of agency in their narrative and argumentative multimodal texts because they intentionally selected and used “semiotic

modes...through personalization, modification, avoidance, and orchestration, considering audience awareness, genre knowledge and identities” (Kang, 2022, p. 366). For example, one participant named Ma-Ri decided to blur some photos of herself and enlarge others in order to meet her personal communicative needs and interests even if they countered what readers may have considered more effective in a narrative. Jae thoughtfully selected a piece of music that included an out-of-tune section to express emotions from excitement to disappointment.

In another study of a 7th grade Hispanic/Latinx/e/a/o MLL, Honeyford (2013) noticed that when creating digital narrative poems, the student “[played] with elements of magical realism to explore the simultaneity of his experience as an immigrant youth” (p. 17). He accomplished this by weaving parts of real and fantastical worlds with various ways of knowing from his family and culture (Honeyford, 2013). The fields of multilingualism and translanguaging are inherently global by nature. Thus, it is becoming abundantly clear that there are many contexts in the U.S. and beyond where identity and writing can and should be studied further.

This study attempts to fill in aforementioned gaps in the literature that have yet to explore the multilingual writing practices of middle-school-aged adolescents in the U.S. public schooling system. The choice to focus on student writing leans into Crump’s (2014) LangCrit framework as well as Norton’s (2013) theory of identity as negotiated and fluid. Writing is a private form of communication in which identities may converge or diverge, be presented or understated. Therefore, this study aims to answer the following research question: How do 7th grade multilingual learners express their multiple identities in their school-based, academic writing process?

## **Methods**

I am approaching this project’s methodology from the framework of practitioner inquiry. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999), leaders in the movement of practitioner inquiry, argue that

simplistic phrases of “‘knowing more’ and ‘teaching better’” are ultimately defined by “radically different conceptions of teacher learning, including varying images of knowledge...” (p. 249). They posit that the conception of *knowledge-of-practice* breaks the presumed division of practical and formal knowledge (1999). It assumes that the knowledge teachers need to teach well is generated through the intentional investigation of their classrooms, which is also informed by their interrogation of the knowledge and theory produced by others (1999). In this project, I work to assume an inquiry stance, interrogating my teaching as a complex practice with social, historical, cultural, and political significance, and making sense of my theories of practice in the given context of my classroom.

This ethnographic research question emerged from a recent moment of curiosity and inspiration in which one of my students presented an identity that I had not previously seen or heard from him before, one that seemed to contrast the narrative that he had formed with his peers and in other public spaces at school. As an aspiring teacher-researcher, it is important to me that my research is always deeply embedded in the everyday, seemingly mundane anecdotes from my practice.

### **Participants**

The setting of this study is the Washington Avenue Middle School (pseudonym) in a small urban area of Massachusetts. This city, with a small area of two miles, houses three middle schools and one high school (DESE School and District Profiles, n.d.). The strong sense of community is ever-present in public, as passersby and neighbors crowd the corner delis, and in private, when students mention multiple-year-long friendships and watch their family members grow alongside them in the same school system. Washington Avenue Middle School is a Title 1 school with some of the lowest standardized test scores in the state. The student body identifies as 90% Hispanic/Latinx/e/a/o, which greatly impacts our MLL programming in the school and across the district (DESE School and District Profiles, n.d.). In addition to an emerging dual

language program that has extended into the middle school level at one of the three middle schools, the district has recognized a high need for MLL teachers across all grade levels.

Students like Jordan are identified as Transitional MLLs who land in Levels 3-6 according to their WIDA ACCESS<sup>1</sup> 2.0 exam scores from the previous academic year and teacher recommendations informed by assessments and observations. My caseload of 7th graders for the 2022-2023 academic year consisted of 32 students. We met our legally-bound instructional time requirement of 45 minutes per day during students' ELA/Writing block. Some of the Transitional students received an extra thirty minutes of instruction with a licensed ESL teacher (myself) through our short intervention period. There is an even mix of U.S.-born students who were identified as MLLs when they entered the district and students who were born in Latin America (mainly Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala) and had some schooling in their home country before they arrived to the U.S. The former group has spent nearly their entire lives in the U.S. while the latter group has typically been in the country for 2+ years.

Of the 32 students in my Transitional MLL cohort, I received consent and assent from 21 students. This set of participants stretches across five different classes, two of which I taught with one English content co-teacher, Ms. Sullivan, and three of which I taught with Ms. Morgan. In the sample, Honduras and El Salvador were tied for the top two countries of birth, followed by the U.S. as a close third. Spanish is the majority self-reported first language of the group (about 76.2%), while a handful of students stated languages like French, Haitian-Creole, Portuguese, and English. See Table 1 below for a summary of demographic information collected from the 4 participants whose data is further parsed in the Findings & Discussion section.

**Table 1***Demographic Information for 4 Select Participants*

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<sup>1</sup> ACCESS is an online, adaptive test used to monitor and report MLLs' progress towards English language proficiency. It tests students' language in the 4 domains of listening, reading, writing, and speaking. ACCESS is primarily an accountability measure for U.S. states in the WIDA consortium. However, it also serves as a useful form of language assessment for MLL educators, students, and their families.

First Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Country of Birth	Age that they moved to the U.S.	First Language	Number of languages that they are fluent in	Languages that they are fluent in	Language they feel most confident in	Language domain in English that they feel most confident in	Language domain in English that they feel least confident in	Places that have helped them most to learn English	Types of writing they enjoy in English
<b>Dayana</b>	13	U.S.	N/A	English / Spanish	2	English	Spanish	Speaking	n/a	Listening to music in English	Writing in my diary or journaling about my life, Writing poetry, Writing argument essays, Writing text messages
<b>Marisol</b>	12	U.S.	N/A	Spanish	2	Spanish & English	Spanish	Speaking	Writing	At home with family and relatives, TV shows, movies, Youtube videos, Listening to music in English, With friends outside of school	Writing music, Writing realistic fiction stories, Writing argument essays, Writing text messages
<b>Mario</b>	12	El Salvador	9	Spanish	2	Spanish & English	Spanish	Listening	Writing	With friends outside of school	Writing music
<b>Jordan</b>	13	Honduras	8	Spanish	2	Spanish & English	Both / Spanish	Speaking	Reading	TV shows, movies, Youtube videos	Writing music

Generally, the Transitional MLLs blend in seamlessly with the rest of the “mainstream” crowd at the school due to their communicative competence and the ethnic/linguistic homogeneity of the district. They can speak and advocate for themselves in “mainstream” social and instructional settings, but they tend to lean on the quieter side in the classroom and are unlikely to volunteer to participate verbally. As a result, Transitional MLLs may blend into the background, thus leaving their reading and writing skills unaddressed because they have devised other survival skills in the academic and social settings of school. These generalizations are evident in the cohort’s most recent ACCESS 2.0 exam scores as Listening was the highest-scoring language domain, followed by Writing, Speaking, and lastly, Reading. The general goal of the MLL program across our district is to increase Transitional MLLs’ literacy skills and academic language usage so that they eventually transition out to learn more independently like their “mainstream” peers. Though my project does not intend to highlight the academic literacy development of my student participants, the program’s goals and intentions serve as context for the learning and identity expression that happens in the ELA/Writing classroom.

**Materials & Procedures**

This study involved human subjects, so I obtained approval from the Internal Review Board (IRB) at Salem State University before initiating any data collection. After I verbally introduced this project to students, those who volunteered to participate in the study with

guardian consent (and minor assent) were assigned pseudonyms for identity protection. The primary form of data were students' writing samples from throughout the six units of the 2022-2023 academic school year. This included digital Google Classroom assignments, such as writing drafts, and paper assignments, such as graphic organizers and brainstorming in writer's notebooks. The digital data were copied and saved into a password-protected Google Drive, accessible only by myself and my thesis advisor. Paper materials were scanned to be saved digitally onto the same drive. Because data collection is part of our regular practice as classroom teachers, there was minimal risk for students who consented to participate in the study.

To contextualize the student work, I also collected curricular materials, such as lesson plans, slideshow presentations, conferring notes, and other materials created to support the learning of the Transitional MLLs in my classes. Because my study is not necessarily centered on pedagogy, I will not be describing in depth the details of our lesson plans leading up to the final writing pieces that were used in my data collection and analysis. However, to provide some context, it is relevant to note that our ELA/Writing block is separated from the Literacy/Reading block at Washington Avenue Middle School. Thus, the writing curriculum itself is free-standing, mostly teacher-created, genre-based, and often unrelated to what students may be reading in their Literacy block. I selected two out of six units that address the genres of narrative and informational/argumentative writing. From those two units (titled "Almost a True Story 🐦 - Writing Realistic Fiction" and "FACTS! 📖 - Nonfiction Research-Based Writing", respectively), I chose to analyze only the summative writing projects because they provided sufficient insight about students' cumulative learnings in two writing genres (one fiction and one nonfiction). Despite being the final products of the unit, I discovered through my pilot coding that the writing *process* was still very much evident both in the imperfections of the pieces as well as the visible scaffolding that we provided to MLLs in their final draft assignments. I excluded other writing samples like graphic organizers and notebook brainstorming because I did not want to make uninformed interpretations using students' incomplete thoughts and writing.

Furthermore, I believed that the final projects themselves were already representative of the incomplete, cyclical nature of writing.

To provide demographic information about the participants, I conducted a survey at the end of the school year. Entitled “Language Learning Survey”, I introduced this questionnaire to participants as a part of my research project. It was formatted as a mix of multiple-choice and open response questions. The survey not only provides background information about the participants, but also additional context regarding their perceptions of their language learning experiences. For instance, one of the survey questions was: “What is your first memory of learning your first language? Who taught it to you? What was it like? Describe the situation in detail in at least 2 sentences.” Other questions prompted students to share their feelings about learning English: “In what situations do you feel the most comfortable using English? Explain in at least 2 sentences.” Please see Appendix A for the full list of survey questions in their respective formats.

To begin my data analysis, I inductively coded the participants’ narrative summative projects and research-based writing summative projects two times. The first round was meant to identify any examples of identity expression or development, which frequently created codes that were quoted directly from the students’ writing. Following Norton’s (2000) definition of identity as negotiated, dynamic, and expressed through language, I am inclined to see identity expression anywhere and everywhere in participants’ writing. For instance, Bianca’s realistic fiction story reveals the academic struggles of a character named Kai (See Figure 1 below). Though we may never know how much of this narrative is inspired by Bianca herself or someone in her life, I viewed her characterization of Kai as an expression of identity at large. In the second round, I consolidated and re-labeled some of these codes using the discourse of sociolinguistics that I gained in my education and professional development as an MLL teacher. Below is an example of this 2-round coding for one student’s narrative realistic fiction story. The column on the right summarizes some of the codes from Round 1 using terminology like

“academic language”. Thus, Round 2 involved greater interpretation and grouping. Throughout Bianca’s narrative, she explains how Kai is repeatedly discouraged by the poor grades he earns in his classes. This affects the character’s social presentation and sense of self. The language and information that Bianca uses to shape this story leads me to understand Kai’s academic and social-emotional knowledge and identities more deeply.

**Figure 1**

*Example of Rounds 1-2 of Coding: Bianca’s Narrative Writing*

**Bianca A. (Ms. Morgan’s class)**

Round 1 - Specific examples of identity development	Round 2 - Labeling examples in your discourse
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “Not very good in studies” - translation</li> <li>● “Didn’t give a fly”</li> <li>● “He was mad”</li> <li>● Making impulsive decisions due to anger</li> <li>● Dialogue tag llll</li> <li>● Wanting to be alone when angry</li> <li>● Trying to ignore peers</li> <li>● Not doing well in school despite studying</li> <li>● “So dam bad”</li> <li>● Not wanting to disappoint parents / show them your grades</li> <li>● Valuing doing well in school</li> <li>● Not meeting parents’ high expectations</li> <li>● Giving up and using Google with little effort</li> <li>● Parents rewarding kids with gifts (i.e. a new iPhone)</li> <li>● Not giving up</li> <li>● Dialogue conventions llll</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Translating from Spanish</li> <li>● Avoiding foul language in school-based writing</li> <li>● Social-emotional content - anger, wanting to be alone</li> <li>● Academic language - dialogue tags and conventions</li> <li>● Reasons to gain academic success - to appease parents</li> <li>● Doing well in school</li> <li>● Not putting effort into school (despite capabilities)</li> <li>● Parents rewarding kids for academic success</li> <li>● Lessons learned - not giving up</li> </ul>

After these two rounds of preliminary coding, I conducted a “code check” to create larger categories. Figure 2 below is an example of one category (“using academic language”) that was generated from several codes in participants’ research argument essays. The tick marks represent the number of times that this code reappeared in the data.

**Figure 2**

*Recurring Codes Organized Into a Category*

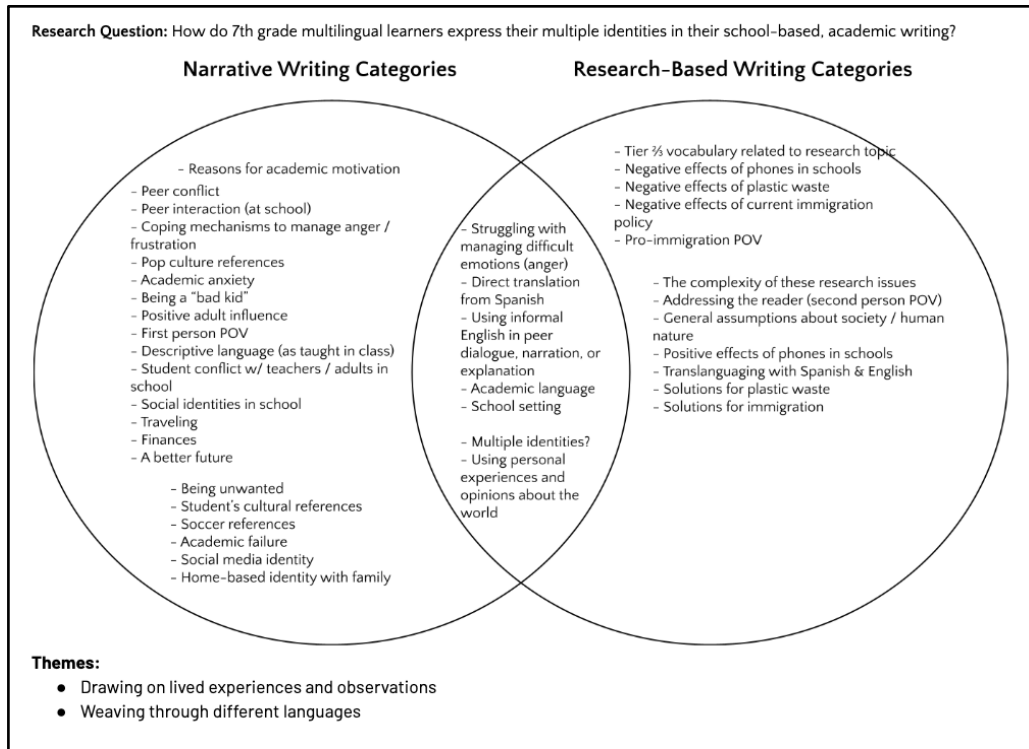
- **Using academic language**
  - Citing secondary sources |||
  - Conventions for citations |||
  - Transition words |||
  - Translation or copying from other sources? - academic language
  - Academic organization - the process of writing
  - Thesis statement using frame |||
  - "The problem of the thesis statement"
  - "Live happily ever after"
  - Paragraph organization using labels |||
  - "I know this because"
  - Paragraph indentation |||
  - Complete sentences with periods |||
  - Writing structure - following CCER, HASH, TRES I
  - Citing external sources "according to", "\_\_\_ wrote how"

Finally, to formulate themes, I reorganized the categories into a Venn diagram to see which ones were unique to the two writing genres (narrative and argumentative/informational), and which were common to both genres. During this part of the data analysis, I realized that my codes and categories marked (1) the language used in students' writing, (2) the topics that they wrote about, and/or (3) details about school and academic life. Therefore, I reorganized the categories into a table of these three markers so that I could see in a different format, which categories belonged to multiple markers or only one. From this categorization process, I developed the final themes of my data analysis. See Figure 3 and Table 2 below for visual representations of this final phase of data analysis.

Although I had coded summative writing pieces from all 21 participants, I narrowed the focus of my Findings & Discussion section to 4 students. I selected these participants based on the significant number of codes that were generated from their writing and the wide variety of identities that they expressed in their writing. To counter the perception of a homogenous participant group, I wanted to represent data from diverse genders and countries of birth/origin. I chose a narrative writing piece and a nonfiction writing piece for each theme to show how these participant strategies were enacted in different writing genres.

### **Figure 3**

*Categories Organized into Themes Using a Venn Diagram*



**Table 2**

*Categories Organized into Types of Markers*

Language markers	Topical markers	School-based / academic markers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 1 Descriptive language (as taught in class)</li> <li>● 2 Tier 2/3 vocabulary related to research topic</li> <li>● 2 Translanguaging with Spanish &amp; English</li> <li>● 1 Pop culture references</li> <li>● 1 First person POV</li> <li>● 1 Social media identity</li> <li>● 1 Home-based identity with family</li> <li>● 2 Pro-immigration POV</li> <li>● 2 Addressing the reader (second person POV)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 1 Peer conflict</li> <li>● 1 Peer interaction (at school)</li> <li>● 1 Coping mechanisms to manage anger / frustration</li> <li>● 1 Student conflict w/ teachers / adults in school</li> <li>● 1 Traveling</li> <li>● 1 Finances</li> <li>● 1 A better future</li> <li>● 1 Being unwanted</li> <li>● 1 Student's cultural references</li> <li>● 1 Soccer references</li> <li>● 2 Negative effects of phones in schools</li> <li>● 2 Negative effects of plastic waste</li> <li>● 2 Negative effects of current immigration policy</li> <li>● 2 The complexity of these research issues</li> <li>● 2 General assumptions about society / human nature</li> <li>● 2 Positive effects of phones in schools</li> <li>● 2 Solutions for plastic waste</li> <li>● 2 Solutions for immigration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 1 Reasons for academic motivation</li> <li>● 1 Academic anxiety</li> <li>● 1 Being a "bad kid"</li> <li>● 1 Positive adult influence</li> <li>● 1 Social identities in school</li> <li>● 1 Academic failure</li> </ul>

**Findings & Discussion**

In the first Code Check that I conducted to form categories, the following codes reappeared most frequently across several summative projects from the Narrative Writing Unit entitled “Almost a True Story 🌈 - Writing Realistic Fiction”:

**Table 3**

*Codes of Highest Frequency in the “Almost a True Story 🌈 - Writing Realistic Fiction” Unit*

Code	Frequency	Representative Example
Dialogue conventions	46	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The secretary responds, ‘I do not know anything about the situation so I am going to transfer you to Ms.wan’” (Dayana).</li> <li>• The doctor looked at the blanco de whatsapp and asked him, ‘do you want the good news or the bad news?’ “ (Elias)</li> </ul>
External dialogue	43	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “‘Did you hear about what they said in recess’ I whispered to my Friend” (Dayana).</li> <li>• “his friend then scream at him ‘ what was goin to happen if i wasn’t there , were you goin to keep saying bad stuff about gay people this friend ship is over!’” (Mario)</li> </ul>
Descriptive language (as taught in class)	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “‘Help!’ blanco de whatsapp screamed as he held his twisted ankle. Jason and the other player started running over to blanco de whatsapp and created a circle so he could have space” (Elias).</li> <li>• “Blizzy was walking down the hallway on his way to lunch with some drinks and food. Then he tripped accidentally with the food and drinks and spilled it everywhere. All the students in the lunchroom pulled out their phones and started recording Blizzy on the floor with the food all over his body” (Jordan, “Blizzy and the bully’s”).</li> </ul>
Text shorthand	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “<i>Maddie is trying to pick up blossom</i> but Maddie said: ‘ugh blossom you’re so heavy’ <i>then blossom decides to walk to maddie and lay down in her legs</i> Maddie said: ‘oh nvm you got it blossom lol’” (Anna, “Maddie adopts a new pet”)</li> </ul>
Emoji / Emoticon	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “blossom is a dog she is nice shy and scared when blossom sees a person she acts scared and maddie feels bad for blossom :(“ (Anna, “Maddie adopts a new pet”)</li> <li>• “Maddie says to blossom ‘Aw blossom you are so cute I wish someone would adopt you but no one does wants to’ ‘sigh’:“(“ (Anna, “Maddie adopts a new pet”)</li> </ul>

The first three codes are clear examples of components of academic language that we targeted during several mini lessons in this unit. My co-teachers and I very intentionally selected specific

language demands that were both characteristic of the writing genre and required explicit instruction and practice based on our knowledge of students and pre-assessment results. One of these language points was the format of external and internal dialogue in fiction writing (right column of Figure 4), which includes punctuation and indentation. We also taught students how to express deeper characterization in their dialogue using specific dialogue tags (left column of Figure 4) that expanded upon their characters' actions, tone, and facial expressions. To encourage students to use other dialogue tags besides "said", we created an anchor chart with a variety of possible tags based on the emotions or tones of the character speaking (Figure 5). This lesson about dialogue formatting tied into previous lessons that addressed adjectives and adverbs, and how they could be used to develop greater description and imagery in students' writing. It is apparent that students applied these language demands in their final projects because they appeared several times throughout my coding process. In contrast, the last two most common codes are representative of students bringing in their "other languages" into the classroom and translanguaging within their writing. Their use of text shorthand and emojis show their multilingual thinking very visibly. These elements of "other languages" exemplify the participants' identities as growing adolescents in a technology-centric world.

**Figure 4**

*Student-Facing Slides: Dialogue Format and Dialogue Tags in Narrative Writing Unit*



In the second Code Check of the Argument / Informational Writing Unit entitled “FACTS! 🌐 - Nonfiction Research-Based Writing”, the following codes reappeared most frequently:

**Table 4**

*Codes of Highest Frequency in the “FACTS! 🌐 - Nonfiction Research-Based Writing” Unit*

Code	Frequency	Representative Example
Complete sentences with periods	32	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “We all know that some people don’t know what they cause when they throw trash into the ocean” (Amelia, “The Causes of the Trash on the Oceans”).</li> <li>• “When students hear the security guards coming they act like they are using the bathroom but they are really not” (Jordan).</li> </ul>
Conventions for citations	16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “‘We’re turning the Atlantic Ocean into a watery landfill.’ said Judith Enck, the president of Beyond Plastics” (Amelia, “The Causes of the TRash on the Oceans”).</li> <li>• “<b>According to the</b> [Learning Network] <b>titled (Teenanegers should monitor their own use of phones)</b> ‘It is our job as teenagers to learn what happens when we stay on our phones too long and we don’t get enough sleep or don’t finish a homework assignment, we won’t understand the consequences if we don’t learn for ourselves.’ ( <i>Josh Reifel, Glenbard West, Glen Ellyn, IL</i> ).” (Jordan).</li> </ul>
Citing secondary sources	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “In 1960s the plastics waste stared then after that it stared to become a problem now according to cnn.com” (Sebastian, “Why is Plastic Pollution Bad”).</li> <li>• “<b>In the</b> [Learning Network] <b>titled (Teenagers should not be on their phone as much), (Anna Diab, Glenbard West HS, Glen Ellyn, IL) says,</b> ‘I think adults should be worried about how much their child is on their phone. If my child was constantly on their phone I would be mad because it is disrespectful when you are with someone and they won’t get off their phone.’”</li> </ul>
Paragraph indentation	12	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 10px;"> <p><i>Finally it could also affect how the sea animals live</i></p> </div> <p style="text-align: right;">(Amelia, “The Causes of the Trash on the Oceans”)</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 10px;"> <p>You want to know how to save the oceans and marine life? Here are some tips you need to follow:</p> </div> <p style="text-align: right;">(Sebastian, “Why is Plastic Pollution Bad”)</p>
Negative effects of pollution on humans	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Did you know that water provides 70% of the air we breathe? You didn’t know that right? Well, do you wanna know how to save the water?” (Amelia, “The Causes of the Trash on the Oceans”)</li> <li>• “This research suggests how the chemicals could affect the rivers where people drink the drink the water it could damage the person drinking it” (Sebastian, “Why is Plastic Pollution Bad”).</li> </ul>

Like Code Check 1, the most frequently occurring codes in the FACTS! 🌐 Unit were examples of formal academic language. The premise of research-based writing is to investigate a wide range of reliable primary and secondary sources to answer a research question or confirm, disprove, or complicate an argument. Thus, it is unsurprising that students followed the conventions that we taught to properly cite their secondary sources. See Figure 6 for a reference of select student-facing slides in which we informed students about the typical conventions for citing secondary sources. Considering we frequently provided sentence frames as models to support students' academic writing and prompted students to check their essays for complete sentences with punctuation, it is unsurprising that they exemplified these skills in their final projects. The final code in the list above is representative of a common topical marker in the final essays of the FACTS! 🌐 Unit. The research question prompts for the project were as follows:

1. What is the best solution for plastic waste?
2. What does a humane immigration policy look like?
3. How should cell-phone use be monitored in schools?

Students who chose to form an argument for Research Question #1 would have needed to discuss the negative effects of pollution before offering a solution for the issue. Thus, it makes sense that this was such a commonly reappearing code in the data analysis.

**Figure 6**

*Student-Facing Slides: Editing Nonfiction Writing for GUMS*

**EDITING (for GUMS)**

- Editing can be checking for the little things like GUMS ✓
  - Grammar - Does the language make sense?
  - Usage - Did they use the correct version of words?
  - Mechanics - Capitalization and punctuation
  - Spelling - Are words spelled correctly?

**YOU'RE**

**Today, let's talk citing**

**CITE YOUR SOURCES**

- Cite - to quote or refer to another source of information
- Great researchers cite their sources to show that their evidence is reliable, respectable, and believable
  - Great researchers also **DO NOT PLAGIARIZE** other people's writing
- Great nonfiction writers correctly cite their sources in a formal, professional way that flows with their writing

**Turn & Talk: What would you EDIT in the format or GUMS of this paragraph?**

**I would remove the... because...** Plastic waste problem

**I would add... because...**

Introduction  
Ready...set...write!

Body Paragraph #1: The problem of plastic pollution is one of the biggest problems humans have faced the problem of the plastic is that animals are getting caught in plastic and dying the plastic also pollutes the earth.

**Student-facing slides from lesson on Editing Drafts for GUMS**  
**Objective:** Writers will be able to edit ✓ the conventions and format of their writing in order to create polished, professional pieces .

**3 ways to cite your nonfiction sources in your writing**

**1** According to the [name of news source] titled *article title in italics*, "direct quote in quotation marks" (author name in parentheses).

- **Example:** According to the Guardian article titled *Why are families being separated at the border?*, "every migrant who crosses the border illegally..." (Holpuch).

- Title of source (in italics)
- Name of news source (the organization or company)
  - New York Times
  - Washington Post
  - National Geographic
- The author's name (if there is one)
- The quote in double quotation marks ("...")

**Student-facing slides from lesson on Citation Format**  
**Objective:** Writers will be able to cite evidence correctly ✓ by practicing with markers and referring to 3 sentence frames .

In the following sections, I will be discussing a deeper interpretation of these codes and categories, and what they reveal about language, identity, and writing for this group of young multilingual participants. In quotes of participants' writing, typos and minor spelling or grammatical errors were maintained in an effort to preserve students' linguistic variation in spite of typical teacher directions to proofread academic writing for "English conventions".

## Weaving Through Different Languages

### *In Narrative Writing*

As was hinted in the previous section, participants were very clearly translanguaging (García & Lin, 2017) in both their narrative and argumentative writing pieces without explicit prompting from their teachers. The fluid, "in-and-out" nature of their writing illustrates a collection of identities that are constantly negotiated and in flux according to the social context. This is characteristic of multilingual learners and adolescents in general. Linares (2021) notes that, "in the discussions about the relationship between adolescent literacy and identity, many researchers have found that adolescents use language (both oral and written) to form and

represent their identities; further, their identities influence their literacy engagement” (p. 209). These identities, according to poststructuralists, are not only socially-constructed and dynamic by nature, but also at times contradictory. This is apparent in Dayana’s (pseudonym) realistic fiction story, which narrates a school-based conflict using a first-person perspective.

Thirteen-year-old Dayana is part of the subgroup of MLLs who were born in the U.S. but identified as children in need of additional English language support due to their non-English or bilingual home life. Dayana specifically stated that she has more than one first language (English and Spanish). In the demographic survey, she explains how her first memory of learning language was writing in kindergarten. However, she also notes that reading is the English language domain in which she has the least confidence because she often “forgot how to read the word or how to read.” Her self-awareness about this struggle is confirmed in her Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which outlines her learning accommodations and goals due to multiple diagnosed learning disabilities.

In Dayana’s survey, it is clear that her bilingualism can create some cognitive dissonance, as English remains the language of school and social life, while Spanish is the language of home (and sometimes social life). For instance, when asked to name the languages that she was fluent in, she responded “i am fluent in Engilsh.”<sup>2</sup> However, in the following question, she writes, “i feel the most confident in spanish because i speak it at home,” perhaps alluding to the low academic confidence she holds at school due to her experience as a differently-abled learner. Though Dayana would categorize herself as fluent in English, she also recognizes that her knowledge of Spanish is expansive as well. This questions the phrasing of my survey questions because I asked students to narrow down a singular language in which they feel most confident, when it may be a difference of context that determines confidence in ability. This multiplicity in

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<sup>2</sup> This typo is an example of my maintaining students’ writing in order to preserve their linguistic variation despite hegemonic “English conventions” in the classroom.

confidence in conjunction with context-dependent insecurity is representative of a translanguaging mind.

Though we will never know whether or not Dayana actually modeled the narrator and protagonist of her fictional story after herself, it is clear in her writing that she has a rather complicated relationship with school, as the second sentence reads, “And I was not paying attention in class.” The events of this story follow a dramatic conflict between the narrator (Olivia) and another friend group. Because this conflict occurs in school, it inevitably interferes with Olivia’s learning, her social life, her relationship with her teacher, and her relationship with her parents. The first time that Dayana appears to be weaving her knowledges of English and Spanish is when she writes the following piece of narration:

I talk to much in her class i whisper talk to my friends then I give her a bad eye roll  
because if she doesn't like me i do not like her either i keep talking to friends because I  
want to and i don't care if she gets mad because it is my mouth and i can talk whenever I  
want to.

Phrases such as “bad eye roll” and “if she gets mad” are representative of Dayana’s knowledge of informal English. The use of “bad” and “mad” are words that have multiple meanings in English and Spanish. For example, the direct translation of “bad” in Spanish is “malo” or “mala”, but the context determines its specific meaning, like “mean” or “awful.” The use of “mad” instead of “angry” is also an intentional choice of language because it is used more informally. This excerpt almost sounds like an internal monologue as though she has used or heard similar language and reasoning before. I have personally heard “it is my mouth and i can talk whenever I want to” in Spanish multiple times when students have been told to stop talking by a peer or teacher and become dysregulated or resistant because of the interaction. With this language, Dayana is expressing her multilingual identity firstly, but also a school-based identity that she may feel personally connected to.

Later in the story, Olivia becomes a proposed target for the school security and the teacher (humorously named Ms. Wan per our idea collaboration during class). Dayana continually uses language related to someone's back to express the frustration that the narrator holds towards these adults for assuming that she was an instigator in the peer conflict. She uses this language in the following descriptions and dialogue: "she told security to get on my back", "I was really mad at the teacher because he (the security guard] was behind me at all times like a bodyguard", and "Why is the security behind my daughter?" The repetition of this language can be interpreted in two ways: (1) Dayana has limited English language to describe this situation in which a child feels targeted by the adults in school due to perceived disrespectful and disruptive behavior in class and (2) Dayana is intentionally leveraging her preexisting knowledge of a metaphor that exists in English and Spanish, specifically when someone has a "target on their back." The former interpretation takes a more deficit view of Dayana as a multilingual writer, while the latter is more asset-based. Although her phrasing may not be the most specific or correct according to formal English, as we typically use the language of "targeting" to discuss this kind of action or relationship, Dayana uses words like "behind" and "back" very consistently in order to communicate a similar meaning.

Dayana demonstrates the variety in her language repertoire as she moves seamlessly through the informal external and internal dialogue of the character's teenage self and the formal language of narrative writing and adults at large. In recognizing that adults and professionals speak differently with each other compared to adolescents, she writes the following dialogue exchange over the phone:

The secretary responds, "I do not know anything about the situation so I am going to transfer you to Ms.wan."

Ms. Wan picks up the phone and shouts, "Your daughter has to have security behind her back because she doesn't want to pay attention and bothers other students. I am so sorry but she has to go through that."

In this excerpt, Dayana shows that she is gaining disciplinary literacy in the academic content area of English Language Arts (Davies et al., 2022). She adopts dialogue tags and appropriate punctuation for narrative dialogue in her writing because these were language demands that we explicitly taught and encouraged in her writing. These narrative elements became a repeated reference throughout the realistic fiction unit. My co-teachers and I even included them in the “Voice & Style” section of our rubric, which mentioned dialogue as a compositional risk. It is clear that Dayana desires academic success and acknowledgement from her teachers because she is evidently working this language into her school-based writing. Thus, despite her learning differences, Dayana proves her understanding of the benefits of an education and the functions of formal academic language. The above excerpt also shows Dayana’s strong understanding of professionalism and adult language. The act of transferring a call or apologizing with a qualifying “but” are pieces of language that she has likely heard and observed from adults in her life and is applying into her writing. This characterization ultimately makes her narrative feel more realistic because there are obvious linguistic differences between the young people and the adults of the story.

In this piece of writing, Dayana reminds educators that “identity is nonunitary and contradictory” (Norton, 2013, p. 162), which deeply impacts the ways in which language learners behave and engage with the target language. In the survey and the day-to-day student experience, Dayana self-constructs and accepts the imposed identity of a dually-identified student, specifically someone who is bilingual yet struggles with reading in at least one language. Though she recognizes that this is part of her academic identity, Dayana does not let it stop her from regaining power in the classroom. From my observations as Dayana’s teacher, it was clear that she was one of a few MLLs who was unafraid to draw upon their multilingual knowledge in the classroom. Dayana spoke Spanish in small bicker sessions with her peers, gossip exchanges with friends, and in response to her bilingual teachers. Her social identity in the classroom was somewhat outspoken, as she grew to respond more openly during direct

instruction in class. When we asked the class for verbal or non-verbal confirmation that they understood instructions or new content, she was one of a few students who proudly provided us with that feedback.

This confidence grew over time as my co-teacher and I started to develop a more positive relationship with her. Dayana had started off the year as a more talkative student, so much so that it became disruptive at times because she would be speaking or arguing with a peer during the mini lesson. This was confirmed by other teachers as well who believed that Dayana was acting this way due to larger disengagement, difficulties with self-regulation, and a great need for additional support with grasping academic content. It is likely that these interactions and other similar observations served as the inspiration for her realistic fiction story. Despite initial identity constructions as the deficient non-proficient English speaker or the stereotypically moody student with an attitude, Dayana developed and expressed new identities over time that not only spotlighted her bilingualism but also her commitment to learning and active engagement in her classes. This is evident in her application of narrative writing's language demands and her increased class participation later in the academic year (Davies et al., 2022).

### ***In Nonfiction Writing***

Identity shifts may be more obvious in fiction writing due to the creativity, freedom, and ambiguous inspiration of the genre. We do not know exactly where these characters come from and how much the author is personally connected to them. The act of weaving through different languages, or translanguaging, in nonfiction writing, however, could also be interpreted as evidence of the writer's identities and their ability to shift between multiple worlds. Marisol is one participant who expressed various parts of herself in the language of her informational argument piece about immigration. Much like Dayana, Marisol is a U.S.-born MLL who recognized her difficult adjustment to the English language at an early age, specifically during kindergarten. As a reminder, the school district in which she resides is predominantly Hispanic/Latinx/e/a/o and Spanish-speaking and has one of the highest percentages of MLLs in

the state of Massachusetts. A countless number of students have successfully been reclassified as Former English Language Learners (FELLs). Marisol (and Dayana), however, have not exited the program in the anticipated six years and could eventually become Long Term English Learners (LTELs). Much of this lag in English language development could be attributed to the learning impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Carrie Parker, an education researcher, expands on this phenomenon in a recent article:

Many of the specific strategies that teachers use with English learners don't translate easily into an online environment. For example, kids need to be speaking English, and teachers need to provide scaffolds to support them during academic discussions...Kids who have not experienced success, or for whom school is difficult, will have a much harder time doing that. So those existing inequities will get much worse when we return to school. (Education Development Center, 2020)

MLLs like Dayana and Marisol may very well fit into this category of students who have not always experienced academic success and require a structured environment like in-person classes in order to build upon their English knowledge with a low affective filter.

What distinguishes Marisol from Dayana, however, is that she was never identified as a student with a learning disability. She even notes that her linguistic challenges are a thing of the past: "I started english when i was like 4 or 5 years old i remember i had some problems with it but i got through it and know it well." Marisol alludes to a specific type of comfort in speaking both languages (as opposed to reading or writing them) because you can "talk in it out with someone you feel good talking with." Furthermore, when comparing her confidence in both languages, she says, "I feel most confident in speaking spanish because i am fluent and it is not that difficult for me." This idea affirms the notion that identity is multiple and contradictory in nature. Guided by social constructionism, Yi (2013) explains how, "Individuals continuously engage in presenting, re-presenting, and performing who they are in relation to others and in revising their sense of self while interacting and observing how others position themselves (p.

211).” In this case, Marisol hints at the fact that she may be shy and more reserved in formal English-centric settings compared to informal multilingual settings due to her linguistic background.

Though Marisol now feels confident in speaking both English and Spanish (compared to when she was just starting formal schooling), she admits that reading and writing in English are particularly difficult because of the vocabulary used in school. This manifests in both interpretive and productive language domains because in the words of Marisol, “sometimes you do not know what words mean” and other times “you do not know how to spell out words.”

As a middle school English language teacher, typos, incoherent ideas, and run-on sentences are evidence of what students may need additional instruction in, what we could have taught better, or what we can teach better in following years. Smaller mechanical errors like spelling often become a low priority because we are not always trained to teach “proper” spelling and phonemic awareness in secondary grade levels. In addition, spelling errors usually do not interfere excessively with meaning and content-based grade-level standards. Marisol reminds us, however, that vocabulary and spelling impact her language learning experience more than we realize. It negatively impacts her self-confidence as a writer, her comprehension as an English learner, and the discourse of her communication overall. When I switch my MLL teacher hat to my teacher-researcher hat, these mistakes also become signs of language variation.

Marisol’s informational essay sought to answer the following research question: What does a humane immigration policy look like? Given a pre-selected text set for three research topics, this cohort of seventh graders were tasked to collect information about their chosen topic and develop an argument to answer their respective research questions. During this ELA/Writing unit, we introduced the typical structures that informational writing may follow: problem and solution, cause and effect, sequence, and description. Marisol aptly chose the problem and solution structure for her essay and proposed multiple solutions for the issue of

U.S. immigration. In her very first body paragraph, it is clear that Marisol is mixing more informal English discourse with the academic language demands that she has acquired in class. She writes:

A possible solution for children to stay with there familys would be sending them to were there coming to and sending them to there families and were they want to be sent to their families and sent to one specific person thats gonna take care of them or they can be let in the process so when they pass border they can be sent to their families when their ready according to the text it says "Children can be put in place protections for migrant children who arrive at the border." that can be a solution it depends the situation.

Marisol's first proposed solution very clearly represents her pro-immigrant identity and mentality. As a child of immigrants herself, she prioritizes the reunification of families and keeping them together at all other political costs. From a linguistic perspective, the lack of punctuation in this paragraph may be evidence of what some researchers have termed "working-class storytelling" (Michaels, 2005; Miller et al., 2005). In Michaels' 1981 study of "sharing time" at the elementary level, she noticed that the Black children, specifically the Black girls often engaged in topic-associating talk. This kind of discourse was characterized by "a series of implicitly associated personal anecdotes" and "an absence of lexicalized connectives other than 'and' relating the anecdotes" (Michaels, 2005, p. 429). Furthermore, "these sharing turns gave the impression of having no beginning, middle, or end" (Michaels, 2005, p. 429). Contrary to the beliefs of middle-class individuals, these anecdotes shared a common theme, but it had to be inferred through association. In other words, the theme was not described in a linear fashion. In Marisol's writing, it is clear that she is discussing the theme of keeping migrant families together. Her thoughts do not show a clear beginning, middle, or end in the form of punctuation or separated sentences. In fact, the writing reads somewhat like a verbalized narrative of her inner thoughts combined with textual evidence. Although this is not necessarily the discourse

and conventions we would expect in formal academic writing, this kind of (oral) personal storytelling is a highly valued practice in working-class communities (Miller et al., 2005). Marisol exemplifies this socioeconomic identity of hers (perhaps unconsciously) as she writes on about the importance of migrant children being reunited with their families. The prepositional phrase “were there coming to” (instead of “where they’re coming from”) could be misinterpreted as meaning deportation to one’s home country. Given her research evidence, however, she seems to be referring to the process of identifying caregivers to reunite migrant children with family in their new country. Marisol acknowledges that the details of placement for migrant children can be very difficult decisions and processes in general. Therefore, deportation may be an unfortunate, necessary reality because of the unclear systems that exist to address this issue. Regardless, creating this system would be a humane policy proposal for immigration.

Marisol is not necessarily a high-achieving student based on her grades and assessment scores, but she cares deeply about her learning, which is evident in the academic language that she sprinkles throughout her essay. The practice of citing words and findings from reputable sources is significant in the discipline of nonfiction writing. By providing an introductory phrase to the quote and including quotation marks, Marisol is explicitly applying the knowledge that she gained in the classroom into her own writing.

Throughout the rest of the essay, Marisol draws upon her multilingual knowledge to express her ideas, even if she does not “know how to spell out [the] words.” This is evident in her second body paragraph as she defines migration. Instead of using the phrase “crossing the border”, she says, “pass border” multiple times. Similar to Dayana’s use of “behind” to refer to a target on someone’s back, Marisol uses her pre-existing knowledge of the word “pass” in English and Spanish to communicate a similar meaning of border crossing. This phenomenon of translanguaging shows up again in the third body paragraph when Marisol discusses push factors that lead people to migrate legally or illegally to a new country. She writes: “...its not a really good place to stay in people try to pass the border because they think there gonna have a

better life here because in there countries its hard for them because their is poorness.” The use of “poorness” instead of “poverty” is representative of Marisol’s fluid linguistic repertoire, which doesn’t necessarily indicate full fluency in multiple languages but rather an emerging bilingual identity and set of knowledge. By applying her pre-existing knowledge of suffixes and other words with the morpheme “-ness”, Marisol accepts the fact that her essay may not have perfect spelling or academic language and communicates her ideas in the ways that she knows best. To reiterate, others may view this language from a deficit view in that Marisol must be taught to expand her academic vocabulary further and understand the difference in meaning and usage for words like “poorness” and “poverty”. For the purpose of this study in particular, it is worthy to note that Marisol is demonstrating a heteroglossic approach in her writing as she continues to build upon her knowledge of the English language.

Another language variety that Marisol utilizes in her writing is informal shorthand English that is often used in texting (or Short Message Service [SMS]). SMS English abbreviations like “gonna”, “u”, and “ur” are frequently despised and discouraged by English teachers because they are believed to negatively affect students’ academic literacy skills. Studies that have explored the relationship generally prove that the use of textisms can actually positively affect youths’ subsequent reading and phonological awareness (Vosloo, 2009). However, most of these studies do not consider other factors like socioeconomic status, parent education status, and cultural values (Vosloo, 2009). Regardless of how this applies to Marisol’s situation, her use of textism can be interpreted in the following ways: (1) that she was rushed in her typing and tried her best to express her ideas in a time-efficient manner; and (2) that she was leveraging her entire language repertoire to inform the reader about the current landscape of immigration and how we should do our best to prioritize the well-being of children and families. This specific language play points us to Marisol’s identity as a youth who has grown up immersed in the online worlds of the Internet and cellphones. Though Marisol is not clearly showing her knowledge of spelling and formal English in these instances, she is bringing

multiple parts of herself into her writing, one of which is her teenage technologically-savvy self. Her use of textism also emphasizes the value of friendships and technology in her life as she is so frequently communicating with her peers using this language that it has now bled into her school-based writing too. The significance of Marisol's identity as a friend or young teen is also evident in her presentation in class. Marisol is one of many quiet, respectful students who tend to fall through the cracks because they generally follow directions and cooperate with others, but do not always advocate for themselves when they need support. Her academic needs become more apparent after the lesson when we review her written work, and more audible during one-on-one check-ins about the content at hand. When Marisol is with her few close friends, however, she has lots to say and shows confidence in her multilingualism. In this context, when the English language is lower priority, her identity as a Spanglish speaker becomes more prominent.

Although Marisol doesn't explicitly state the political complexity of immigration, she hints throughout her essay that there are several stakeholders involved in the issue, which makes it difficult to land on clear, consistent systems and decisions. This diplomatic approach to her argument reveals her deeper worldviews as well as her emerging identity as a second-generation immigrant or first-generation American. Marisol's first body paragraph describes multiple possible solutions for child migrants to stay with their families. Thus, a major stakeholder in the issue of immigration is migrants' family. Their presumed priority is usually the safety and happiness of their family members. Body paragraphs 3 and 4 describe the push factors that lead migrants to embark on their journeys and the trauma that ensues if they enter the country illegally. The stakeholders here are the migrants themselves, their loved ones in their home countries, and the residents of the country in which they arrive.

Throughout her piece, Marisol seems to be providing solutions that promote legal immigration pathways for all. This is confirmed at the very end, when she argues that undocumented migrants should take the time to obtain papers before they fully make the

transition. Students were provided with a comprehensive text set for their chosen research topic. However, we do not know whether Marisol dove into the anti-immigration sentiments that drive some politicians to bar all illegal migrants from entering. She does not mention politicians as stakeholders, which further shows her attention to those directly impacted by immigration policies, not those creating them. Through her heteroglossic language and argument, she suggests that the competing wants and needs of stakeholders in the U.S. and abroad complicate the situation of immigration immensely. She also alludes to the fact that every migrant's story is different, thus there is no one-size-fits-all solution. It is unclear what her position is on the larger question of illegal immigration in particular, perhaps because the question itself is so complex. This ambiguity points to Marisol's identity as a second-generation immigrant or first-generation American with U.S. citizenship, as she recognizes the struggles of people like her parents who successfully migrated here and maybe earned residency or citizenship too.

### **Drawing on Lived Experiences and Observations**

#### ***In Narrative Writing***

The funds of knowledge framework is a common term used in the discourse of culturally-relevant pedagogies to describe the process of building connections between students' home and school lives (González et al., 2005). By leveraging their pre-existing knowledge, students and families may be more engaged in the school environment. Linares (2021) discusses how the "low-stakes, low tech, dialogic nature of journaling" allowed a newly arrived Guatemalan teen in Kentucky to freely translanguage, invoke familial knowledge, and share personal experiences (p. 673). This not only promoted Marlón's active engagement in classroom-based literacy practices but also supported his reflexivity and social-emotional development as a Transnational Emergent Multilingual (TEM) adolescent adjusting to a new world and language. Through my analysis of the participants' writing, it became apparent that without prompting, MLLs like Marlón will always bring their outside knowledge into academic spaces. It is through this knowledge that we can learn more about students' identities and values. As mentioned

previously in the breakdown of Dayana's writing, realistic fiction storytelling lies at an interesting juncture of personal experience and fabrication. We can only infer how much of the content of the story is derived from lived experience.

Mario is one participant who shows evidence of this crossroads in his narrative writing. According to his memory, Mario arrived to the U.S. from El Salvador when he was nine years old. As a now twelve-year-old who has mastered social English with his peers and even utilizes academic English in the classroom, he still feels more confident in his native language of Spanish because it is what he uses "all the time in school and out of school" (Language Learning Survey). English, on the other hand, is solely used in school. Mario even said that, "The most challenging part of learning English in school is talking to a teacher because if they don't know Spanish is harder for me to talk to them." This is unsurprising as MLLs tend to gain BICS before they do CALPS (Cummins, 1999). Conversations with teachers not only require both BICS and CALPS, but they also have an embedded power dynamic. These factors likely increase Mario's affective filter in this context.

Despite Mario's insecurities about his abilities in English, he is a high-performing student compared to his MLL and mainstream peers in the seventh grade at Washington Avenue School. According to a district-wide reading assessment, he reads at a fifth grade level, which is higher than the majority of students in the cohort. He is also a dedicated musician who enjoys learning to play new instruments and asks teachers if he can stay after school to practice.

From the beginning of Mario's realistic fiction story, it is evident that he is familiar with the conventions of academic English (i.e., capital letters and punctuation) and applies them intentionally in his long-term writing projects. As we continue to read the narrative, however, other identities beyond his academic self begin to emerge. Mario narrates a story about a young boy named Top G who fits the archetype of the "new kid in school." He builds this character through detailed narration of their inner thoughts and the anxiety-inducing plot of running late to school and getting lost in a new space. Soon enough, Top G begins to gain popularity and

climb the social ladder of his school. But his loyalty to his first friend (who helped him find his way on his first day of school) is put to the test when he finds out about their homosexuality/queer identity. In the climax of the narrative, Mario writes:

At lunch he says something bad about gay people and his friend is there behind him ,his friend gets mad and leaves, top g screams to his friend “wait!” but his friend didn't listen to him,after school he tries to text his friend but he wast able to, his friend didn't answer.

This storyline addresses classic themes of friendship, social hierarchies, and identity that frequently show up in adolescent literature. It also shows Mario's pre-existing knowledge of what it is like to be the “new kid at school”, as he was in the same position as Top G a few years ago when he moved from El Salvador to Massachusetts.

The reference to sexual orientation or queer identities in general is a bold literary decision as the general culture of the seventh grade has remained predominantly cisnormative and heteronormative for the past few years that I have taught there. There are definitely students who exist outside of the dominant or majoritized culture. Sometimes it is made known to adults and peers in school, and other times it is not. No matter how much effort we may put in as educators to affirm these changing and emerging identities of students, we unfortunately cannot protect them from cisheteropatriarchy. This ideological hegemony holds cisgender and heterosexual males in higher regard over all other gender identities and sexual orientations. It is ever-present in the language and micro-culture of our Hispanic/Latinx/e/a/o boys (and less so, our Hispanic/Latinx/e/a/o girls) who make subtle microaggressive jokes about homosexuality and refer to a Christian or Catholic god when justifying the gender binary. Though we do not have evidence of Mario's religious leanings or that of his family, it can be argued that he is knowledgeable about both sides of this issue – one in which homosexuality is rejected and regarded as a joke, and another in which the humanity and identity of queer people are valued. The name Top G is also a pop culture reference to Andrew Tate, an American-British media personality who gained global fame and billions of views on TikTok for his misogynistic videos

and hypermasculine playboy persona (Das, 2022). Top G is an abbreviation for Top Gangster, or “someone who is capable in all realms” (Khatwani, 2022). In other words, Top G represents a model of toxic masculinity, which treats women as objects of the male gaze and reveres men for their power gained through money and displays of dominance. Using these allusions and strategic storytelling, Mario presents to us his identity as an emerging teenager who is embedded in contradictory cultures surrounding gender and sexual identity. These contradictions appear in multiple loci in his life, such as church, school, social media, and home.

Mario’s impressive ability to parse multiple perspectives in this issue is further exemplified when Top G’s friend confronts him about his judgments of queer people, which are likely fueled by his recent confidence and rise in the school’s social hierarchy. Again, Mario mixes this social knowledge and identity with academic conventions that he has absorbed in class, specifically the use of double quotation marks and dialogue tags. The theme of revenge and retaliation in youth culture likely comes from Mario’s observations of his peers at school, who tend to believe in the “eye for an eye” mentality, as their social-emotional development is also in flux at this age. Even though Mario references gay jokes and gay microaggressions throughout his narrative, he never explicitly writes a specific example of it in his dialogue. In addition, his attention to detail regarding the feelings and internal conflicts of the characters demonstrates his empathy and emotional intelligence. Developmentally at this age, it can often be difficult to set aside one’s own insecurities and emotions to empathize and attend to others’ needs, especially when they counter your personal beliefs. Thus, Mario’s attention to the intricacies of these multiple identities proves his own knowledge about these real-life issues, as well as his social-emotional competency.

Ironically, Top G starts as a bully, but eventually turns into the bullied. This change in image is exacerbated by the gossip that travels amongst his peers after his friend decides to avenge the humiliation and homophobic judgment he experienced. In this case, the bullied becomes the bully. The solution that ultimately repairs the friendship in the end is a genuine

face-to-face apology:

The next day he went to school and as always he got bully, after school he goes to his friend and said in a quiet voice “i’m sorry, i know my mistake, i know what i said and i’m not proud of it i’m sorry ,bye” he friend them said “ its fine, sorry about all the bully i did to you” top g invited his friend to his home and laugh about all the things they did.

The language of “I know what I said and I’m not proud of it” illustrates Top G’s vulnerability as a developing character. Through this resolution, he acknowledges that his insecurities about masculinity and being the “new kid” are arguably what led him to betray and ridicule his friend in an attempt to gain power. This ending is another example of Mario’s multiple, sometimes contradictory identities as an emerging multilingual teenage boy. Firstly, he shows us that academic conventions do not exist in a vacuum, and that they often coincide with other language varieties, especially in a genre of writing that is meant to mimic reality. By drawing on his lived experience as a student in formal schooling and a friend to his English-proficient peers, Mario expresses both his academic and social identity in school. Secondly, Mario seems to draw upon his observations of masculinity and teenage-hood to juxtapose the “Top Gangster” personality with the vulnerable, emotional characteristics that are present in both teenage boys. It is through this juxtaposition that the characters read more realistic and complex.

With a closer eye and thoughtful considerations of Mario’s background, we can see how MLLs leverage their lived experiences and observations in their writing without explicit prompting from teachers. In fact, the details of Top G’s internal struggle as a new student and then his grappling with his friend’s sexual orientation are what makes Mario’s story that much more powerful as a piece of literature. These bits of information also make us wonder how we can further Mario’s development as a writer and language learner by encouraging him to apply his pre-existing funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005) in other contexts and build upon them.

***In Nonfiction Writing***

Narrative genres of writing may be more conducive to the use of personal experiences and observations as they often reflect or mirror real life. However, Jordan reveals to us that research-based argument writing is as much personal as it is real. In the introductory anecdote of my study, Jordan presents a very distinct side of himself in writing compared to his visible, public identity in school. The former is a perceptive, creative youth with a deep understanding of adolescent insecurities and the latter is a macho, soccer-and-video game-obsessed boy whose mind is constantly wrapped up in Bronx drill music lyrics. Jordan frequently asks me existential questions about whether I would do something against my morals for an exorbitant amount of money. Each time that he proposes a similar scenario, he hopes that I change my anti-capitalist answers. Jordan is deeply invested in hip-hop culture. This knowledge informs his sense of humor and general demeanor in class. He often gets stuck in his anger and agitation as he has self-proclaimed “anger issues.” When emotionally regulated, however, Jordan enjoys cracking jokes, making noises with his body to satisfy his auditory stimulation needs, and fidgeting with ball-like toys.

Jordan is part of the subgroup of emergent bilingual participants who was born in a country other than the U.S. Having moved here from Honduras when he was eight years old, Jordan doesn't remember much about the beginnings of his language education here and abroad. Nevertheless, Spanish remains his locus of comfort because he believes that he holds a more expansive lexicon; in other words, he thinks that he “knows more words” in Spanish (Language Learning Survey). On the other hand, his somewhat positive relationship with English has primarily been formed through his friendships and the media that he consumes (i.e., TV shows, movies, and Youtube videos), much like many other participants. Because these are his main sources of English knowledge and practice, Jordan feels most confident speaking English with his friends and less so when reading it in the context of school. When asked what kind of writing in English he enjoys, Jordan mentions his affinity for music and how he writes raps at home and with his friends.

From an academic standpoint, Jordan is a student whom many teachers have been concerned about due to his occasionally disruptive stimming behaviors, resistance to wearing glasses, and struggle to self-start difficult tasks. These behaviors seemed to significantly impact his academic growth because he rarely engaged in his classes and scored a few grade levels below on his math and reading diagnostic assessments. Like many other fidgety boys, Jordan was recommended for an ADHD evaluation and monitored for several months by the Instructional Support Team at Washington Avenue School. We tracked individualized interventions, such as a Check-In, Check-Out mentor system in which Jordan could earn points towards a weekly incentive, consistent reminders to wear his glasses (a practice in collaboration with Jordan's mom so that she could reinforce the expectation at home), and daily checklists for class tasks. With all this support, Jordan was able to: (1) accurately show his knowledge on informal and formal assessments because he was motivated to focus and try his best; and (2) increase his grades because he attempted more of his work independently, advocated for himself, and was held accountable to high expectations by his teachers. It was during this period of growth that Jordan wrote a research-based essay to answer the question: *How should cell-phone use be monitored in schools?*

The introduction of Jordan's essay immediately hints at his observations of cellphone use amongst adolescents of his generation:

Imagine that you are in a classroom and trying to listen to the lesson but then someone pulls their phone out and forgot to put it on mute and goes into social media and a video pops up and the volume of the phone all the way up and it distracts the whole classroom. Schools should not let their students use their cell-phones because they can get distracted, skip class, and cheat.

The policy at Washington Avenue Middle School is to keep cellphones turned off and stored in lockers throughout the day. Despite this, most students tend to not-so-secretly hold their cellphones in their pockets or in the waistband of their pants because they do not trust the

supposed privacy of lockers and feel safer with their phones on their person. This paragraph is a perfect mix of Jordan's informal knowledge of patterns of behavior in school and his learnings of academic English and writing structures from class. He starts off very clearly with a descriptive hook that draws the reader into visualization of the scene and then states his thesis statement clearly and concisely. I will admit that some of the paragraph was written with my prompting and support. During our writing conference, however, Jordan confidently expressed a possible situation in which phones can be disruptive to the classroom (for the hook) as well as multiple reasons that they should be monitored more in schools (for the thesis).

The first body paragraph of Jordan's essay continues this pattern of heteroglossia, which represents his developing academic identity. He introduces his first reason for stricter monitoring of phones. But instead of providing related text evidence and further explanation (as would be expected in our proposed structure for academic argument writing), he proceeds to state another reason that he had not mentioned in the thesis statement and a reason for the opposing side. He writes:

Cell-phones should not be allowed at school because if there is a big test and it depends if you stay back or go to another grade and the teacher is not paying attention to you and if you have your phone in your pocket you could just cheat. Another reason is If there is a big fight and the student has their phone on them they could record the fight and post it on social media without the other person's consent. If you are going on a field trip i think you should bring your phone because you're out of school and a lot of things could happen like an emergency and you could make a phone call. But that's the only way you should have your phone. **In the** [Learning Network] **titled** (*Teenagers should not be on their phone as much*), (*Anna Diab, Glenbard West HS, Glen Ellyn, IL*) **says**, "I think adults should be worried about how much their child is on their phone. If my child was constantly on their phone I would be mad because it is disrespectful when you are with someone and they won't get off their phone."

In this excerpt, Jordan continues to expand upon his argument using hypothetical or observed anecdotes of when cellphones can be used appropriately and inappropriately. From a linguistic perspective, we might call Jordan's sentences run-ons because there are multiple events and ideas that could be chunked apart instead of combined using the repeating conjunction of "and." Furthermore, the fact that Jordan includes a counter-reason and later a piece of research evidence that does not exactly match the supporting reason of cheating shows that he has not yet mastered a linear, cohesive structure for his argument writing.

If we look at this from an asset-based perspective that values other language varieties besides standard academic English, we would see that Jordan is consistently telling stories that are drawn from his personal experiences and observations of cellphone use in school and other environments. Similar to Marisol's minimal use of punctuation, Jordan's writing has elements of "working-class storytelling" (Michaels, 2005; Miller et al., 2005). In his essay, he uses implicitly-associated anecdotes to discuss the topic of cellphone use in school. Though the evidence and reasoning are not connected in a linear manner, in the way that we taught, Jordan demonstrates his knowledge in other ways, specifically through his references to lived experiences. His qualifying anecdote about the value of phones during field trips illustrates Jordan's complicated thinking about this issue. Although he is writing an argument for increased monitoring of phone use in schools, he recognizes that there is no singular, clear-cut answer, that everything is determined by context. We as teachers prioritized the language demands and structures of nonfiction writing. But Jordan took the content of his writing one step further to illustrate the gray areas of research and argument. Skills like qualifying an argument and introducing a counterargument are often taught in higher grades. But Jordan is already attempting it in the seventh grade and using his lived experiences and knowledge to do so. To some readers, Jordan's essay may feel like a misaligned maze in which we are dragged into several different scenes and secondary sources. With a closer look, however, it becomes

apparent that the maze is still centralized in one consistent space and that Jordan is actually inviting us into his complex worlds and viewpoints as a young middle-schooler.

The third body paragraph of his essay is arguably the most cohesive in that it implicitly explains how cellphone use in school distracts young people from their learning, both in the classroom and in social environments:

Students should not use cell-phones in school because while they are in class and the teacher isn't looking they could take out their phone and use it by taking it out of their pocket and taking it out just a little bit. Another reason why schools should not let their students use cell-phones in class is because when students have a binder they could hide the cell-phone behind the binder and start to use it while the teacher is not even paying attention because they are helping other students. They could do the same with a chrome book or a book pretending they are doing their work, or reading when they are really not. In lunch some students sit in the back just to use their phones, and play with their friends a game on their cell-phones. This has happened before and they got their phones taken away. **According to the [Learning Network] titled (Teenagers should monitor their own use of phones)** 'It is our job as teenagers to learn what happens when we stay on our phones too long and we don't get enough sleep or don't finish a homework assignment, we won't understand the consequences if we don't learn for ourselves. (Josh Reifel, Glenbard West, Glen Ellyn, IL)

Here, Jordan follows a structure similar to the first body paragraph in that he starts with an anecdote aligned with one of his reasons from the thesis and then proceeds to provide another personal anecdote. This time, however, all three anecdotes are tied to the notion that cellphones distract students from experiences that are useful to them, like learning in class and socializing with their peers. The phrase "this has happened before" further proves that Jordan is leveraging his lived experiences and observations to strengthen his argument. The research evidence that he selected also supports his reasoning and alludes to the importance of teens understanding the

short-term and long-term consequences of their actions (i.e. when they choose to prioritize socializing or cellphone use over their academics). Compared to the first body paragraph, this evidence is more linearly aligned to his argument and thesis statement. Perhaps there was more obvious evidence in the text set that fit the topic of this paragraph or Jordan began understanding his argument more throughout the writing process.

As Jordan's English teacher, it is almost instinctual to identify areas of improvement because I know what skills and content we hoped our students would absorb and apply throughout our lessons. Structure and organization were our primary focuses for nonfiction writing because we noticed in the pre-assessment that this was a growth area in our students' writing. So, we took a high-support approach by creating acronyms for each major section of a nonfiction essay. Jordan could have more explicitly followed the CCER (Claim/Topic Sentence, Context/Summary, Evidence, and Reasoning) structure for body paragraphs that we taught him (See Figure 7 below). During independent writing time or after school help sessions, Jordan occasionally became frustrated by my prompting him to use these structures as he did not understand the purpose. Having to acclimate to new language structures is rightly so frustrating, especially when there are other informal ways to communicate the same idea or meaning. Nevertheless, Jordan's attempt to incorporate elements of the acronyms throughout the essay shows that he is motivated to do well in his classes and grow as an academic writer. The tension that he is experiencing as an emerging writer and an adolescent of informal spaces is evident in the multiple knowledges present in his nonfiction writing.

**Figure 7**

*Student-Facing Slides: Structures for Introduction, Body Paragraph, and Conclusion of Nonfiction Writing*

### Body paragraphs need..

- 4-5 sentences
- 1 Indentation to signal a new paragraph
- 2 Transition phrase into a topic sentence (What is the paragraph going to be about?)
- 3 Summarize your source (What is the main idea of the article or video?)
- 4 Correctly cited evidence (with quotation marks)
- 5 Reasoning:
  - This quote shows...
  - This research suggests...
  - Based on this evidence, it is clear that...

### The BREAKFAST of your essay: Your H.A.S.H. Introduction

- 3-5 sentences
  - H - Hook your reader with a spicy Lead
  - A - Add key details and background information about the topic (including the structure of your essay)
  - S - State your thesis (answer the question)
  - H - Have 2-3 clear reasons to support your thesis

### Example:

Identify the sentence # of each. REACH: Pick ONE to explain how you know.

Topic Sentence	#1
Summary	#2
Evidence	#3-4
Reasoning	#5-6

(CHOOSE ONE) ... I know this because...

(1) First of all, piping plovers have been near extinction for quite some time, especially since the start of hat businesses. (2) According to *Endangered.org*, piping plovers were once thriving creatures until humans started using them for their own gain. (3) The article by *Endangered.org* staff suggests that, "Piping plovers were common along coasts until the late 19th century, when the birds' downy, sand-colored feathers were sought after for the hat-making trade. (4) Because of excessive hunting of plovers and other birds, the United States passed the Migratory Bird Act of 1918." (5) This quote shows that the number of piping plovers decreased across the U.S. due to the expansion of the hat-making industry. (6) The government even ended up creating a law to protect migratory bird populations from continued hunting.

### The DESSERT of your essay: Your T.R.E.S. Conclusion

- 3-5 sentences
  - T - Thesis - we have to restate it in slightly different words!
  - R - Reasons - what were the CLAIMS (topic sentences) you used to support this thesis?
  - E - Exciting Findings - share the awesome info you found in your research
  - S - SO WHAT? Why does this issue matter in the real world? Address your reader!

**Student-facing slides from lesson on Body Paragraphs**  
**Objective:** Writers will be able to organize their body paragraphs with topic sentences, evidence and reasoning by following a checklist.

**Student-facing anchor chart slide deck with acronym-guided structures for their:**

- H.A.S.H. Introduction
- T.R.E.S. Conclusion

There were many instances throughout the year when Jordan would actively stim during whole-class instruction and then immediately ask for one-on-one support during independent practice time. On the one hand, teachers viewed this as attention-seeking behavior in which he was refusing to complete tasks independently even though he was very capable of doing so. On the other hand, it is possible that Jordan recognized that he could not focus during mini-lessons and benefitted the most from intimate learning structures, which is why he advocated for that need. This is not to say that Jordan is incapable of producing writing independently. In fact, most of the anecdotes in this essay were written with little to no support from a teacher. He just sought out additional affirmation from an adult so that he knew the idea was worthy of putting down on paper. Additionally, when we got into the nitty gritty of academic English, Jordan recognized that he benefitted from a knowledgeable thought partner.

In my introductory narrative, it was revealed that Jordan occupied multiple identities in school. While he presented publicly to be somewhat careless in academic endeavors, his writing showed us that he held immense knowledge about the social and emotional worlds of himself and others. Another interpretation is that the story's content was not drawn from personal

experience but rather a synthesis of common social-emotional themes in young adult literature. This also alludes to Jordan's social-emotional identity, as he is applying his knowledge of teen literature and media. Jordan's nonfiction writing shows a contrast in identities as well. He demonstrates a keen awareness of how he and his peers relate to technology, specifically their cellphones. At the same time, he exhibits his motivated academic self through his intentional effort to apply the nonfiction writing structures that we taught him. By analyzing Jordan's writing with a closer eye for language and an asset-based perspective, we can see how his idiosyncrasies as a complex emerging MLL come together to reveal both his lived experiences and his growing disciplinary knowledge.

### **Pedagogical Applications**

Dayana, Marisol, Mario, and Jordan prove that school-based writing is not exclusively impersonal or objective despite the demands of academia or the discipline of English Language Arts. In fact, by weaving through multiple languages and drawing on their lived experiences, they challenge us as educators to rethink the role of student identity in public education. Paulo Freire (1970), renowned educational theorist, states that praxis, the combination of reflection and action, begins with dialogic learning, or the exchange of ideas and experiences amongst learners. He explains:

...since dialogue is the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized, this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one persons 'depositing' ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be "consumed" by the discussants. Nor yet is it a hostile, polemical argument between those who are committed neither to the naming of the world, nor to the search for truth, but rather to the imposition of their own truth...[Dialogue] is an act of creation; it must not serve as a crafty instrument for the domination of one person by another. (pp. 88-89)

The practice of “naming the world” is directly tied to the expression and analysis of our lived experiences and how they are shaped by our identities. If we want students to experience an education in which their multiple identities and knowledges are affirmed, then we must look beyond their academic identity and assimilation into academic English as indicators of learning. The participants’ writing shows us that in their emerging multilingual development, they are grappling with the contradictions of a social identity, an online identity, a home language identity, an aspirational academic identity, a multilingual identity, and so on. This notion of multiple, often contradictory identities aligns with Marcus and Nurius’ (1986) psychological theory of possible selves, “which represent individuals’ ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming, thus linking cognition, behavior, and motivation” (as cited in Norton & Pavlenko, 2019, p. 705). The buzzword of students “being themselves” or “bringing themselves” in the classroom requires that we learn, accept, and encourage all their possible selves.

Dayana, Marisol, Mario, and Jordan were able to show some of their possible selves with their funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005) because our writing prompts allowed for greater flexibility and individual creativity. In our realistic fiction unit, students were given complete freedom to construct a character, setting, problem, and solution as long as the elements fit appropriately into the genre. It is thus understandable that Dayana and Mario created stories in the setting that they knew best: school. During our research-based writing unit, we provided three options for topics that we knew would be relevant to our students’ lives in some capacity (immigration, plastic waste, and cellphone use in schools). Because of this choice in prompts, students openly drew on their lived experiences as the foundational support for their writing. This was also an engaging point of conversation during writing conferences. If a student was behind in their writing, we would remind them of their pre-existing knowledge to help build their momentum and confidence in continuing the essay. In sum, if we want to promote greater dialogue and identity expression in the classroom, then we as educators must

create the space and context for students to do so (i.e., by changing classroom culture, tasks, texts used, etc). This continues to be a pedagogical growth area for us as we operate in a system run by English-centric, White Prestige Ideology (Liu & Tannacito, 2013).

As much as we would like to think that teachers hold the greatest capacity for change in the education system, it is important to remember that classrooms do not exist in vacuums. Norton and Pavlenko (2019) discuss this in relation to language ownership and “how the disempowering discourses of native speaker superiority can shape feelings of inadequacy and professional illegitimacy among non-native speakers of English” (p. 710-711). This exclusion is especially pronounced for racialized newcomers of English, some of whom may be learning English as their second, third, or fourth language. Instead of being lauded for their multilingualism and multicultural knowledge, however, they are positioned within a deficit framework in English-dominant countries. Many scholars have repeatedly rejected this model by pointing out the fact that more than half of the world’s population is bi- or multilingual. Yet the debates that roam in scholarship rarely catch the attention of the general public, and perhaps more importantly, the individuals with power to shift curriculum, pedagogy, and resource distribution on a grand scale. Politicians, media personalities, and writers are examples of individuals who are more likely to change the material reality of classroom learning and influence the public to imagine and reimagine diverse, equally legitimate users of English (Norton & Pavlenko, 2019).

Writers, in particular, have introduced the question of what constitutes legitimate English, and whether it should include all other English varieties, like African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or textism. Authors like Julia Alvarez and Chang Rae Lee have completely changed the landscape of North American literature, and what it means to be an American writer through their cross-cultural, bilingual memoirs, prose, and poetry. Firstly, by composing their work in English, these authors reclaim their right to use and appropriate the language. Secondly, these bi- and multilingual authors often explore “the links between their

multiple languages and selves in ways that were previously non-existent and/or impossible: challenging the essentialist notions of self, deconstructing various ethnic, national, colonial, and gender identities, creating new discourses of hybridity and multiplicity, and imagining new ways of 'being American' – and bilingual in the postmodern world" (Norton & Pavlenko, 2019, p. 712). In doing so, they effectively tear apart traditional definitions of English and American identity.

Though we as educators do not necessarily have the power to advertise these authors' writing so widely that it reaches popular media, we can be more conscious and thoughtful about the texts we choose to read in our classrooms of multilingual and multicultural learners. When students see texts from authors like Lee and Alvarez, they are not only validated in their own identities or encouraged to learn about identities different from their own. But they also come to view multilingualism as an asset that can be leveraged to create legitimate, acclaimed writing. It is through reading these mentor texts that students become comfortable with "naming their world" in a heteroglossic manner, instead of feeling tied to a single dominant English language. Bakhtin's (1975) notion of heteroglossia is not much different from translanguaging theory, as both terms allude to the fluidity and mobility of our linguistic repertoires. Heteroglossia is most frequently used to study student writing and points to the heterogeneous signs and forms in meaning-making. Instead of composing in a unitary language, those who employ heteroglossia tend to weave between multiple language varieties, thus creating dialogue between multiple discourses.

In this study, participants appeared to exhibit multivoicedness as a natural byproduct of their multilingual status. A heteroglossic lens to study their writing shed further light on their identities outside the typical academic box. Believing that these young people are the future Julia Alvarezes and Chang Rae Lees means that we must think deeply about how to strengthen and build upon this pre-existing rhetorical skill. Kiramba's (2017) investigation of translanguaging writing practices in a multilingual, rural fourth grade classroom in Kenya revealed that students struggled to strike a balance between their authorial intentions and the authoritarian single-

voicedness required by the school and national curriculum. Thousands of miles away in Massachusetts, the MLL participants of this study are no stranger to this tension. By juxtaposing informal Englishes with academic discourse gained from class, these seventh graders treated writing as an outlet for their lived experiences, worldviews, and typically silenced voices. But they were simultaneously left with concerns like “Does it sound good?”, “Will I get a good grade?”, and “How do I make it sound ‘professional’?” Some of this insecurity is within our locus of control. We can collaborate with other educators and researchers to teach effective heteroglossic writing and encourage students to adopt multiple voices for the relevant context and audience.

Given these pedagogical suggestions, it is important to acknowledge that no matter how much we as educators try to adjust our pedagogy to focus on the expression of identity and agency of our students, we cannot do it alone. Our standard English-centric system is held up by misinformed curriculum writers who may not prioritize the needs of MLLs, politicians who only see the macro-level data of academic performance, administrators who are obsessed with improving test scores, and an American culture that does not value, let alone encourage, multilingualism. In order for a widespread pedagogical shift to be effective, we must invite other stakeholders to take an intentional interest in multicultural education and reflexively reconsider monoglossic ideologies.

### **Limitations**

This descriptive study is limited in that the population studied is incredibly specific. As a reminder, the participants were seventh-grade multilingual learners from a small, urban city in Massachusetts. Their labeling as Transitional MLLs, or students categorized as Levels 3-6 in their English language development, also influences my data and findings because the participants are not necessarily new to English or the language of U.S. schooling. Additionally, the overwhelming majority of participants were Spanish speakers. Therefore, the relevance of

this study is limited to middle school classrooms and schools with a high number of Hispanic/Latinx/e/a/o students. In fact, the participants' written translanguaging practices were somewhat easier to decipher because of my shared linguistic background with students as well as the alphabet and cognates that the Spanish language shares with English. A minority of participants (1-2 students) used Spanish words explicitly in their writing. Though none of those participants were included in the deeper analysis of the discussion of the study's results, I was still able to draw on my knowledge of the Spanish language to make sense of students' writing in English given their identities as Spanish speakers. Thus, my data analysis process involved translanguaging on my part as well.

When addressing the research question (How do 7th grade multilingual learners express their identities in their school-based, academic writing?), we must remember that I am only describing and analyzing what students already do in the classroom given a primarily teacher-created curriculum. Before we can devise new solutions or pedagogical strategies to promote translanguaging and heteroglossic writing with multilingual students, we need to first understand how young people respond to pre-existing lessons that are often motivated by different goals. Usually, administration and curriculum writers prioritize standardized academic standards above student voice or multiculturalism. While we begin to rethink our intentions and pedagogical approaches as educators, this study offers an inside look into a few multilingual middle schoolers' minds and their engagement with school-based writing. This information will then lead us into more well-informed action-based research.

### **Further Research**

Researchers might consider studying the current state of writing instruction, and how much of it prioritizes or values identity development. My study is limited in that it does not hold a magnifying glass over the teachers' instruction and pedagogical practices. Before changing the

framework of writing instruction for MLLs, we have to understand the perspectives of language educators, and how they teach and think about writing currently.

The findings of my study are consistent with the work of scholars who argue that translanguaging is not a practice of deficiency (Dovchin & Canagarajah, 2019; García & Lin, 2017). They also view heteroglossic writing as a representation of unrevealed, often contradictory identities. Through thoughtful analysis of the participants' texts, we were able to see greater potential in classroom spaces to affirm translanguaging or heteroglossic writing as a form of identity expression and a valid literacy practice.

When the system shifts its goals to prioritize the natural learning patterns of multilingual students, not just monolingual academic standards, a new question for research might be: How do we teach and promote effective heteroglossic writing in multicultural classrooms? In other words, if we use Julia Alvarez and Chang Rae Lee more frequently as models of strong writing, what literacy-based practices can we draw upon so that students learn how to emulate their use of language?

Kiramba (2017) notes that “instead of the schools empowering learners to discover and create their unique identities informed by their experience and interpretation of the world around them, schools indoctrinate learners to perpetuate the monolingual view of literacy” (p. 127-128). Dayana, Marisol, Mario, and Jordan's use of multiple languages, their own experiences, and observations suggests a deep need and desire to value multilingualism more authentically in formal education systems. Their common insecurities surrounding their academic English literacy show that our current approach to teaching writing can often silence students' multiple identities and voices. If we truly hold multilingualism in great esteem in our education system, then our regular practice as language teachers should also reflect that. Heteroglossic writing is worth further exploration in our language classrooms because it shows that the highly valued academic language in schooling can and should coexist with other

languages in order to produce strong writing. It is through translanguaging that we unveil more about characters' inner lives, connect with our readers, and express our identities as storytellers.

Another limitation of my study was the demographics of the participants. Further research of how MLLs of other native languages express themselves in school-based writing could confirm whether these practices of translanguaging and drawing on lived experiences are universal or shared across cultures. Due to large gaps in the current literature of language and identity, it would be beneficial to conduct more studies with MLLs at the middle and high school levels.

These research questions require that we understand translanguaging and heteroglossia as functions of identity. Instead of nitpicking the ways in which our student have not “met the objective” or followed “standard English conventions” in their writing, we can reframe their weaving of languages and experiences as opportunities to (1) learn about the students' identities and funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005) and (2) ensure that their diverse use of language aligns with their unique authorial intentions.

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## Appendix A

### Demographic Info & Language Learning Survey

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Language Learning Survey

## Language Learning Survey

If you are taking this survey, you have agreed to be a part of Ms. Wan's research project about how multilingual students express themselves in their writing.

The goal of this survey is to learn more context about your experiences learning multiple languages, including English. Please answer the questions honestly and to the best of your ability. Your answers will have no impact on your grade in ELA class.

You can ask me questions about this research study at any time. If you decide that you do not want to finish, you can ask me to stop. You can change your mind at any time.

\* Indicates required question

*Skip to question 1* *Skip to question 1*

### **Basic Information**

1. **ELA Class Color \***

*Mark only one oval.*

- Red
- Yellow
- Green
- Blue
- Purple

2. **What is your current age? \***

*Mark only one oval.*

- 11 years old
- 12 years old
- 13 years old
- 14 years old

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Language Learning Survey

**3. Which country were you born in? \****Mark only one oval.*

- Honduras
- El Salvador
- Guatemala
- Brazil
- Haiti
- U.S.

**4. If you were born in a country other than the U.S., at what age did you move to the U.S.? If this question does not apply to you, write "N/A". \***

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**Learning your First Language****5. What is your first language? If you have more than one, write them in the "Other" box. \****Mark only one oval.*

- English
- Spanish
- Haitian-Creole
- French
- Portuguese
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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Language Learning Survey

- 6. **What is your first memory of learning your first language? Who taught it to you? \*  
What was it like? Describe the situation in detail in at least 2 sentences.**

-> My first memory of learning \_\_\_\_\_ was in...

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- 7. **Which language domain (Listening , Speaking , Reading , Writing ) of \*  
your first language do you feel the MOST confident in? Explain why in at least 2  
sentences.**

-> I feel the most confident in \_\_\_\_\_ my first language because...

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- 8. **Which language domain (Listening , Speaking , Reading , Writing ) of \*  
your first language do you feel the LEAST confident in? Explain why in at least 2  
sentences.**

-> I feel the least confident in \_\_\_\_\_ my first language because...

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**Learning Other Languages**

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Language Learning Survey

9. **How many languages are you fluent in? Fluent means that you can confidently communicate with someone else in this language.** \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

10. **Name all the languages that you are fluent in.** \*

--> I am fluent in...

\_\_\_\_\_

11. **Which language do you feel the most confident in? Explain why in at least 2 sentences.** \*

--> I feel the most confident in \_\_\_\_\_ because...

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2/13/24, 2:14 PM

Language Learning Survey

12. **In what situations do you write in other languages? Check all that apply. \***

*Check all that apply.*

- Writing in other languages in class
- Writing text messages in other languages
- Writing stories in other languages
- Writing poetry in other languages
- Writing music in other languages
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**Learning English**

13. **At what age did you start learning English? What is your first memory of learning English? Describe the situation in detail in at least 2 sentences. \***

--> I started learning English when... I remember...

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Language Learning Survey

14. **There are many other places that you can learn English besides school. Check the ones below that have helped you the MOST to learn English.** \*

*Check all that apply.*

- At home with family and relatives
- Talking with strangers (i.e. at stores, restaurants, and other public spaces)
- TV shows, movies, Youtube videos
- Social media
- Listening to music in English
- Online language-learning apps
- With friends outside of school
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

15. **Being English-proficient in school means that you can read, write, listen, and speak English at a 7th grade level. Which language domain (Listening , Speaking , Reading , Writing ) of English do you feel the MOST confident in? Explain why in at least 2 sentences.** \*

--> I feel the most confident in \_\_\_\_\_ in English because...

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Language Learning Survey

- 16. Which language domain (Listening , Speaking , Reading , Writing ) of English do you feel the LEAST confident in? Explain why in at least 2 sentences. \*

--> I feel the least confident in \_\_\_\_\_ ... because...

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- 17. In what situations do you feel the most comfortable using English? Explain in at least 2 sentences. \*

--> I feel most comfortable using English when... because...

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- 18. What is the most challenging part of learning English in school? Explain in at least 2 sentences. \*

--> The most challenging part of learning English in school is... because...

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Language Learning Survey

19. **What is the most challenging part of WRITING in English in school? Explain in at least 2 sentences.** \*

--> The most challenging part of writing in English in school is that...

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20. **What kind of writing in English do you enjoy? Check all that apply.** \*

*Check all that apply.*

- Writing in my diary or journaling about my life
- Writing poetry
- Writing music
- Writing realistic fiction stories
- Writing fantasy or other non-realistic stories
- Writing research-based essays
- Writing argument essays
- Writing literary analysis essays
- Writing text messages
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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