

Language Biographies as a Multimodal Pedagogical Tool in Additional Language Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

This article argues that multimodal language biographies are an effective tool for learning additional languages, especially where Arabic is the first language and English the target language. By examining how Arabic-speaking students position themselves in multilingual environments, the study shows how language biographies illuminate learners' attitudes toward acquiring English. Based on data from 12 adult Arabic-speaking learners of English in South Africa, the findings reveal how students construct their linguistic identities and negotiate the relationship between Arabic and English. The results support the claim that multimodal language biographies function as valuable pedagogical and assessment tools for both teachers and students. As a phenomenological approach, they help participants interpret their linguistic life worlds and articulate their positioning within diverse multimodal contexts. The study highlights the importance of valuing students' full linguistic repertoires-Arabic, English, and dialectal varieties- as instructional resources. It recommends using language biographies for student self-assessment and for teacher assessment practices that extend beyond verbal interaction in bilingual learning spaces.

Keywords: Additional language learning, Language biographies, linguistic repertoire, multimodality, pedagogical tools, phenomenological approach.

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1. Introduction

This study investigates language biographies as a multimodal pedagogical tool for Arabic-speaking learners of English¹ as an additional language in South Africa. Busch (2015) defines language biographies as a personal account of an individual's experience with language, emphasising their role in tracing the lived dimensions of language use. Research by Cannon and Marx (2024); Motamedi, Murgiano, Grzyb, Gu, Kewenig, Brieke and Donnellan (2024); Crisfield (2022); Crowe and Guiberson (2022); Ndiribe and Aboh (2022); Kusters, De Meulder and Napier (2021); Kusters and Hou (2020) and Kusters and De Meulder (2019) indicates that in additional language teaching and learning, language biographies, viewed as a multimodal pedagogical tool, encourage students to reflect on their language learning journeys through multiple modes, fostering critical engagement with their experiences and identities, and promotes deeper understanding of language and culture. International and national studies on language biographies as a multimodal pedagogical tool in additional language teaching and learning have been conducted in a variety of contexts. For example, Cannon and Marx's (2024) study provides a wide review of research methodologies across language studies with deaf and hard-of-hearing multilingual students. Crisfield's (2022) study, "Context-Driven Research on and for Multilingual Students", provides a similar overview. The projects described explore different facets of second language acquisition (SLA) from the perspective of teachers, school leaders, and parents. Crowe and Guiberson (2022) conducted a study on language development, assessment, and intervention for d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing multilingual students. Kusters and De Meulder (2019) researched how language portraits embody multilingual and multimodal repertoires, discussing the use of language portraits (LP) as a research method to investigate the

¹ The term "Arabic-speaking learners" designates participants whose L1 is Arabic and whose language biographies reflect their Arabic linguistic backgrounds, dialectal repertoires, and prior schooling experiences. Arabic is prominently featured in the study because it serves as the foundation from which participants engage with English as an additional language.

embodied multilingual repertoires of people who use both spoken and signed languages. The authors argue that the multimodal language biography is an effective tool for learning additional languages. By examining students' attitudes toward language learning, this study proposes that language autobiographies can enhance teachers' understanding of how students position themselves in multilingual environments.

This study is grounded in the theoretical assumption that an individual's first language (L1) serves as a practical resource for learning an additional language, based on Cummins' (2008) theory of linguistic interdependence. Cummins' (2008) theory proposes that cognitively and academically beneficial forms of bilingualism can be achieved with adequately developed first-language (L1) skills. Two hypotheses are formulated and combined to reach this conclusion. The "developmental interdependence" hypothesis proposes that the development of competence in a second language (L2) is partially a function of the type of competence already developed in L1 at the time when intensive exposure to L2 begins. The "threshold" hypothesis proposes that there may be levels of linguistic competence that a bilingual child must attain, both to avoid cognitive disadvantages and allow the potentially beneficial aspects of bilingualism to influence their cognitive and academic functioning. These hypotheses are integrated into a model of bilingual education in which educational outcomes are explained as a function of the interaction among background, child input, and educational treatment factors. Considering that teaching and learning are human activities that occur in real-world social and cultural contexts, this study combines Cummins' theory with the concept of scaffolding in Vygotsky's activity theory (1978), which posits that language is learned using tools. The theoretical framework of Vygotsky's theory is an integrated system of conceptual tools and theoretical approaches, providing a conceptual model for analysing the relationship between humans as subjects and the external environment (Bake, 2018). This study also draws from Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2001) conceptual ideas on multimodality, which affirm the multiple ways in which language is expressed and insight is gained. These were used to construct the theoretical framework. In

their 2001 work, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's (2001) conceptual ideas on multimodality, particularly their focus on the interplay of different modes of communication and their social semiotic approach, were incorporated into the field of discourse analysis and communication studies.

Ndiribe and Aboh (2022) focused their research on multilingualism and marginalisation in a Nigerian context, contending that multilingualism is not a new phenomenon, but rather a relatively widespread one around the world. The field of language education needs to consider and adapt to this reality, as multilingualism presents both opportunities and challenges for all educational systems. In fields such as linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and education, multilingualism should be researched from various angles because it is a multifaceted phenomenon. The research aim, to investigate how language biographies serve as scaffolds for language teaching and learning, focused on the teachers' and the students' use of language biographies to reflect on the process of language teaching and learning.

This study aims to enhance language teaching activities by utilising students' L1 as a tool in communicative teaching. It questions the monolingual teaching central to the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach by showing that integrating a student's L1 does not contradict the central concept of the CLT. Instead, integrating the L1 with other language teaching methods can enhance interaction, engagement, and participation. Students are more capable of meaningful communication in a relaxed atmosphere. Such bilingual strategies can be a powerful resource in promoting more cognitively engaged learning (Cummins, 2008; MacSwan, 2017). This can maintain fluidity and interdependence between L1 and L2, creating an *Ubuntu* translanguaging teaching and learning model (Makalela, 2015), where languages blend into one another and multilingual social, linguistic, and capital resources at the learner's disposal are acknowledged and utilised (Makalela, 2014). The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the discussion on language portraits and their importance as a research tool in language teaching and learning, as well as teacher training.

This study is guided by the following research questions, which focus on the pedagogical and experiential value of multimodal language biographies for Arabic-speaking learners of English.

- 1.1 To what extent can language biographies scaffold language teaching and learning?
- 1.2 How do Arabic-speaking learners of English construct and represent their linguistic identities through multimodal language biographies?
- 1.3 What insights do multimodal language biographies provide into learners' attitudes, motivations, and emotional experiences in learning English as an additional language?

2. Theoretical Framework

Three linguistic theories underpin this study. First, the concept of interdependence in L1 and L2 development originates from Skutnabb-Kangas and Toukomaa's (1976) work based on the language development of Finnish immigrant children in Sweden, where they found that "the degree of L1 development had a significant influence on L2 development" (Verhoeven, 1994, p. 382). Later, Cummins (1978, 1979) conceptualised this assumption in a theory known as the linguistic interdependence hypothesis and proposed a pair of correlated hypotheses. Similarly, the central argument of the developmental interdependence hypothesis is that the L1 is a potential resource for scaffolding and overcoming difficulties faced by students in their collaborative L2 learning (Ferguson, 2003) and that "the level of L2 competence which a bilingual child attains is partially a function of the type of competence the child has developed in L1 at the time when intensive exposure to L2 begins" (Cummins, 1979, p. 233). Cummins discussed language and literacy skills that can be transferred from one language to another. Then, in 1981, Cummins elaborated upon the interdependence hypothesis, stating that the relationship between L1 and L2 is not unidirectional. He argued that the transfer is not only from L1 to L2, but reciprocal, and that the transfer of skills and cognitive development can also occur in the other direction (Cummins, 2008). He critiqued the assumption inherent in the idea of two solitudes in bilingual education. His criticism is directed at

the presumption that foreign language classrooms should be taught exclusively in the target language and that bilingual programs should maintain a rigid separation between the two languages to ensure successful L2 learning (Cummins, 2008; Cummins, 2017). A key aspect of developing language and literacy is to keep students active, value their motivation and learning abilities, and position them as “contributing to knowledge making” (Lundgren, 2015, p. 6; Cummins, 2014). Connecting curricula to students’ lives, drawing on their prior knowledge and experiences, and valuing the linguistic and cultural capital students bring to the classroom can be identity-affirming (Cummins & Early, 2011).

Secondly, the scaffolding metaphor, coined by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), which is also an important sociocultural concept, is involved in and operates within Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (ZPD). The latter is embedded in interactions between a novice (student) and an expert (teacher) (Khaliliaqdam, 2014). According to Vygotsky (1978), scaffolding can help students reach their full developmental potential during interaction with a more knowledgeable other when learning an additional language. Scaffolding requires a knowledgeable person to use tools to assist the novice in more complex problem-solving, which the novice may not be able to achieve independently (Rambe, 2012).

Thirdly, the concept of multimodality was introduced in Halliday’s (1978) social semiotics theory of communication, which shifts the focus from linguistics to semiotics. In other words, language is not the only mode of communication; rather, it should be understood as a communicative resource through which interaction takes place and meaning is made, distributed, and interpreted (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). Communication and meaning-making sources include gestures, pictures, and movement. Therefore, discussing and enforcing the concept of monomodality in multilingual and multicultural schools and higher education institutions may not be rational or realistic (Kendrick & Potts, 2015; Stille & Prasad, 2015). Drawing on the theory of multimodality, the study explored the potential contribution of language biographies as a mode of communication and a resource for meaning-making in language teaching and learning.

These theories, when combined, constitute the theoretical and analytical framework for this study. This study claims that language biographies can play a role in scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978) of additional language teaching and learning (Cummins, 2008). These biographies can provide teachers and students with alternative semiotic resources to reflect on the process of language teaching and learning of additional languages using multimodality (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). Using language biographies as a reflective, diagnostic tool may help teachers and students articulate personal narratives about themselves and their learning experiences. For instance, students may better understand how they position themselves in a multimodal context. Similarly, teachers may identify challenges and problems that might impact students' academic engagement and performance and suggest possible solutions.

3. Literature review

Research on language autobiographies aims to illuminate language learning trajectories and enhance the visibility of linguistic diversity in education (Potolia, 2024). This approach facilitates understanding of language acquisition mechanisms and plurilingual awareness, informing the development of teaching materials and strategies (Oikonomakou, Kokkinos & Potolia, 2024). A qualitative study by Oikonomakou, Kokkinos, and Potolia (2024) demonstrated how language autobiographies as a reflective practice foster critical linguistic awareness among students regarding language ideologies and stereotypes, contributing to teacher professional development in European multicultural classrooms. Furthermore, integrating multilingual and multimodal approaches expands upon traditional monolingual and unimodal language-learning paradigms, enriching our understanding of communicative repertoires within diverse cultural contexts (Swanwick et al., 2024). The richness of knowledge gained by critiquing and extending such processes can be harnessed to underpin the development of more meaningful assessments and intervention programs that currently tend to be rooted in Western epistemologies, which fall short of capturing the multifaceted nature of language development in different contexts.

Combining visual (drawing, colouring, etc.) and narrative elements,

language biographies offer a multimodal approach to understanding language learning (Kusters & De Meulder, 2019). The educational value of these approaches in multilingual contexts stems from determining students' self-positioning within a multimodal representation and its impact on their learning (Norton, 2010; Bock & Mheta, 2013). Language portraits allow students to graphically visualise their linguistic repertoire, encompassing their "lived bodily and emotional experience of language", and their "ideologically informed ideas about, attitudes to, and stance-taking towards particular languages or modes of speaking" (Busch, 2018, p. 4). Crisfield's (2022) research on international schools revealed that language approaches were often driven by either ideology or practicality, frequently adapting methods developed in other contexts for different purposes. The study explored SLA from the perspectives of teachers, school leaders, and parents, finding that student linguistic and cultural development was often prioritised through Western, English-centric curricula and pedagogies, frequently viewing student diversity as a challenge rather than an asset. The project subsequently profiled schools that actively prioritised support for linguistic diversity (Crisfield, 2022).

In many linguistic studies, language portraits were initially employed as a language awareness tool within educational settings (Busch, 2018). Originating in the early 1990s, their use was prompted by the increasing multilingualism of European classrooms, a development largely driven by immigration and demand for migrant labour (Busch, 2006). Although initially designed for use with children, the application of language portraits expanded in 2002 when Busch, working within a diverse, multinational, and multilingual team of language educators, introduced language portraits as an icebreaker activity for adult participants (Busch, 2006). Since then, the tool has been adapted in various educational contexts, including additional language learning and teacher training (Kusters & De Meulder, 2019).

Recent research positions language biographies as a valuable multimodal pedagogical tool in additional language teaching and learning. They offer insight into learners' beliefs, experiences, and sense of agency, thereby supporting a more holistic, personalised

approach to language education (Potolia, 2024). Busch (2015) contends that using tools such as language portraits and biographies yields essential understandings of multilingualism and linguistic diversity, and that their integration into educational settings may support the development of reflective and contextually appropriate language practices.

Swanwick *et al.* (2024) employed multilingual and multimodal methodologies to investigate the situated communication practices between d/Deaf children and their caregivers. Their study demonstrates that such approaches go beyond traditional monolingual and unimodal research and assessment tools, but still often fall short in inclusivity, analytical depth, and contextual sensitivity. These limitations are particularly significant when designing early intervention strategies for multilingual and migrant deaf learners. Nevertheless, the multilingual and multimodal frameworks adopted in their research offer a more nuanced and equitable lens through which to understand and support the communicative experiences of these learners (Swanwick *et al.*, 2024).

Hautemo and van der Merwe (2022) explored the multimodal nature of the Wikipedia platform as a pedagogical tool that engages students—through translation activities—with authentic digital materials, thereby fostering innovative language teaching methodologies aligned with 21st-century skills. In their study, Wikipedia was used by pre-service language teachers at a tertiary institution in Namibia to translate content from English (the source language) into Oshikwanyama and Oshindonga (the target languages). The researchers employed activity theory as the guiding theoretical framework to examine how language mediation occurs within this context. A qualitative research approach was adopted, grounded in a case study design. The findings indicate that the Wikipedia translation task addresses the educational imperatives of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and contributes to the development and elevation of local languages at the tertiary level. Furthermore, the study demonstrated that Wikipedia translation serves as an authentic language learning activity within a CLT framework, effectively leveraging a technology-rich environment to support

holistic language acquisition (Hautemo & van der Merwe, 2022).

Language biographies were used as scaffolding tools to explore how students position and shape themselves within the language framework and reflect on their language learning experiences. The intention was to determine the meanings that students attribute to their linguistic repertoires. Cannon and Marx (2024) suggest that research interest in multilingual students and, more specifically, immigrant populations has increased in recent years.

This is equally true for students who are d/Deaf and hard of hearing (d/Dhh) and come from families that do not use the spoken or signed languages of the wider community at home — referred to as d/Dhh multilingual learners (DML). This group may also include recent immigrants navigating linguistic and cultural transitions in a new country, commonly identified as immigrant DML (IDML) (Cannon & Marx, 2024). Cannon and Marx highlighted significant gaps in the current literature concerning the educational needs of these learners, underscoring the necessity of more inclusive research to better support their complex linguistic and academic development. Similarly, Ortega (2020), in her research on heritage language development from the perspective of bilingualism and social justice, addresses key conceptual and methodological challenges associated with studying the linguistic trajectories of heritage language speakers. Using a bilingual-social justice lens, Ortega contributes to a more equitable understanding of language learning processes among linguistically marginalised populations. Ortega (2020) examined themes including the early but varying timing of heritage language learning; the surrounding linguistic environment, including the link between parental input and linguistic outcomes and heritage language speakers' bilingualism, multilingualism, and multi-lectalism; the framing of literacy in the minority language; and the unique and language-shaping experiences of minoritisation, many of which are often outcomes of immigration.

Salö's (2018) research on social theory in the language sciences presents Pierre Bourdieu's sociological gaze, agenda, and approach to scholars of language, offering a social theoretical framework within which sociolinguistic questions may be fruitfully investigated. The research outlines Bourdieu's dual conception of social life and

presents key thinking tools, namely, field and habitus, with which this dualism may be explored empirically. In addition, it locates work produced at the nexus of sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, where Bourdieuan insights have been productively employed. Salö (2018) argues that Bourdieu's gaze and approach import a solid social theoretical base for comprehending human practice, including linguistic practice, which offers a plausible framework to help account for the relationship between the market side of language and its embodied manifestations.

4. Research Design and Methodology

A qualitative action-based research approach was applied in the design of this study. The research employed ethnographic methodology, which was conducted over an extended period (six months) in a classroom setting. Language biographies formed the primary data for collection. This study includes elements of both interpretivist and critical paradigms (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). It instantiates the interpretivist paradigm by describing how research participants position themselves (an emic perspective) and attempts to explore students' perceptions and understanding of language and identity. This study aims to improve teaching practices and empower students by recognising the value of their linguistic and cultural capital (funds of knowledge). This study was conducted in an English language school in central Cape Town. Twelve Arabic-speaking students were chosen as the research participants to address the research questions.

Before the data collection phase, a meeting was held with the participants, during which they were provided with a general understanding of the research's nature, enabling them to make an informed decision about whether to participate (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). In the consent letter, participants were explicitly informed that their participation would be voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any time (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Confidentiality was ensured using pseudonyms instead of participants' real names (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). The interviews conveyed questions and concepts explicitly "within the grasp of the respondents" (Cohen et al., 2010, p. 322). All interviews were conducted in Arabic, allowing

students to express their thoughts and feelings in the language with which they are most comfortable. Moreover, participants were not obliged to answer any questions they preferred not to.

The idea for this study stemmed from the first author's 2018 PhD study, which was conducted on Arabic-speaking students learning English in South Africa. Due to the nature of the topic, a qualitative research approach was applied in the design of this study. The research was conducted at an English language school in central Cape Town. To ensure "the issue of fitness for purpose" (Cohen et al., 2010, p. 361), the sampling strategy was based upon the research question(s) (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Accordingly, a group of twelve Arabic-speaking students was selected as the research participants. Their ages ranged from 25 to 40, with five males and seven females. Each interview was approximately 40 minutes, and each participant was interviewed only once.

Language biographies and semi-structured interviews were the methods of data collection, selected to enhance an understanding of the pedagogical value of language biographies and gain further insight into how students frame their linguistic repertoires. Each student was given a blank full-body silhouette and asked to colour it in with different colours to represent the languages and dialects that play a role in their lives. The body may be perceived as a container for language (Coffey, 2015). Participants were asked to consider the languages they believed might contribute to their identity. This includes the languages they know, which form part of their past experiences, and even those they do not know, which might be part of their future expectations. Kusters and De Meulder (2019) state that language biographies can include languages that participants could not learn or have stopped using. In other words, the language biography became a mode where students could display their relationship to various languages they know and perhaps want to learn (Kusters & De Meulder, 2019). The analysis of the portraits and the narratives respondents provided followed a systematic process to make their voices heard and identify the critical factors that have influenced their experiences in language learning. This can be achieved by analysing and interpreting the meanings the participants associate with particular colours and body parts.

An initial meeting was held to explain to participants how to colour in the blank human silhouette. Participants had the opportunity to ask questions and articulate their language learning trajectories and linguistic practices. After completing the colouring exercise, students were asked to reflect on their linguistic histories. The linguistic histories were conducted orally to trigger their memories by asking the research participants questions such as, “Why are you studying English?”; “When were you first introduced to English as a subject, and at what stage?”; “How was your first experience of learning English?”; “Moreover, how has this [first] experience influenced your intention to learn English?” Students were then asked to record the histories in writing and email them to the first author of this study. After completing the intervention in which students’ first language was acknowledged (Cummins, 2008) and used as a tool and resource to scaffold their learning (Vygotsky, 1978), students were asked to reflect on their experience of learning English using a language biography (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001).

5. Data Analysis and Discussion

اللونه الأخضر وهو (حب اللوان عندى واحترته ليمثل اللغة العربية
 وازتاز اقلية الحيم باعتبارها لغة الام ولغة القران
 الكريم
 واللونه الازرق واحترته ليمثل اللغة الانجليزية وشمل
 الشاق لتواصل مع بقية دول العالم

Fig.1 Hadeel’s narrative

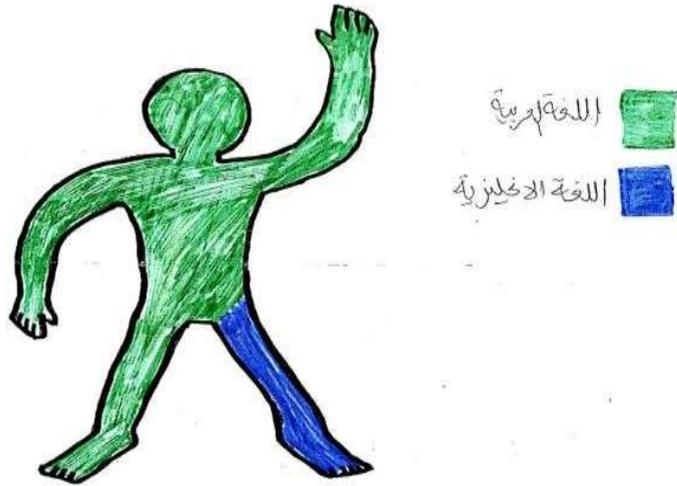


Fig. 2 Hadeel's Portrait [green = Arabic; blue = English]

Hadeel is a Libyan in her mid-thirties. She was born and raised in Libya, where Arabic is her first language and mother tongue. She came to South Africa in 2012 to pursue higher education. She was studying for her master's degree in physiotherapy at the University of the Western Cape when the data for this study was collected. Her first encounter with the English language was in preparatory school (i.e., grades 7, 8, and 9), where she learned basic English grammar.

Hadeel's portrait will be examined first. This study contends that although she presents herself as bilingual, most of Hadeel's portrait is coloured in green, which represents Arabic. She only coloured one leg blue to represent English. She explained that Arabic is her first language and the language of the Qur'an. She sees her first language as a strength and takes pride in it, stating that she has had no learning difficulties in her home country because Arabic is the medium of instruction and learning, which she "used to hear all the time at school, mosque and when watching TV". Drawing from Hadeel's biography, as an example, she and other students were in a similar situation (as gleaned from their coloured-in silhouettes), where students were permitted to use their native language when they

struggled to find the correct term in their English classes. In this way, using language biographies to understand students' expressions of their diverse perspectives may facilitate the development of alternative learning strategies (Busch, 2006).

For Hadeel, her left leg, coloured in blue, signifies her ability to function and interact with English speakers, which she considers a universal language. Her narrative of the coloured portrait emphasised Hadeel's goal of learning English. Her statement illustrates this: "learning languages is imperative as it keeps you updated with the latest, allows you to learn more, and facilitates communication with others." This allowed the first author to utilise the student's desire to study English as a motivation to help her continue to improve her English language skills.

Analysing Hadeel's narrative, she explained that her anxiety about learning English originated from her previous experience studying it back home in Libya:

I felt overwhelmed and did not belong in that classroom. Even though I told the lecturer I did not understand what he was saying in English, he ignored my words.

According to her account, Hadeel's teacher employed a monolingual approach, which she found difficult and excluded her linguistic capital (i.e., her first language). Hadeel's reflections on her first experience learning English in her biography highlighted a potential downside of teaching additional languages using the monolingual approach. These insights, derived from Hadeel's language biography, aided in developing the intervention and selecting materials and resources that the first author has incorporated into her classroom.

In her narrative, Hadeel framed herself as a powerless individual who felt isolated due to her inability to master the new language (English), and she held her university teacher accountable for this. This study contends that Hadeel may have felt that a monolingual teaching pedagogy "effectively prevented" her from learning a particular literacy (Kaschula & Anthonissen, 1997, p. 86). Hadeel stated,

...because the teacher ignored that I did not understand English,

and he did not understand how I felt. Because of my disappointment, ... I quit my studies for one year.

One salient factor in Hadeel's biography is teachers' ignorance of students' psychological and emotional state and its impact on students' lives, which may result from the exclusion of linguistic and cultural capital they bring to the classroom when taking a monolingual approach. If Hadeel's instructor had used a language biography, he might have been able to pick up Hadeel's frustrations and language-learning inhibitions.

Unlike the monolingual approach, bilingual teaching provided Hadeel with a comfortable environment and the opportunity to succeed in learning English. This is evident from her narrative, when she described a different experience with learning English from a bilingual approach:

The English teacher was considerate and aware that we had just started learning English. He helped us and explained the lessons so that we could understand. His teaching style inspired me and allowed me to see the beauty of learning English, which was the motive that triggered my desire to learn the language.

Prior to this study, the first author was already familiar with Cummins' (2008) arguments and subscribed to Vygotsky's scaffolded approach to learning (Vygotsky, 1978); however, she only realised the depth of the challenge set out in this study when she had the students colour in the silhouettes and articulate their narratives. The first author realised, due to the coloured silhouettes, that she had to acknowledge and include the students' linguistic and cultural capital. This was further emphasised in Hadeel's reflection on her learning experience when she stated,

I enjoyed it [learning English] because I felt I belonged to the class. The fact that you [the teacher] allowed us to use our language [Arabic] made me feel at ease. I was excited as I could see the progress I had made... I no longer need my Sudanese friend to attend meetings with my supervisor to translate for us. I can communicate with her [the supervisor] without anyone to help me...

In conclusion, using the language biography as a multimodal

pedagogical tool enabled the teacher to reflect on the students' current level of understanding. In addition, it allowed students to reflect on their English learning experiences, which was a powerful aid for utilising students' first language as a resource to assist them in learning the English language, as well as improving teaching practices in the classroom.



Fig. 3 Ahmed's portrait [green = Arabic; blue = English; orange = Arabic dialects; red = French]

Like Hadeel, Ahmed is also Libyan and in his mid-thirties. He came to South Africa in 2013 to accompany his wife while she pursued higher education. He then decided also to pursue an honours degree in social work.

When analysing his portrait, Ahmed describes Arabic, which he colours in green, as the language of the Qur'an, and the repertoire of

hope, giving, and comfort. He pictures English, which he colours in blue, as the register of knowledge, communication, and ambition through which he can satisfactorily express himself. Ahmed identified Arabic dialects as part of his linguistic resources and repertoire. Ahmed chose orange to represent these dialects, which he depicts as the repertoire of joy, giving, and role-modelling. In Ahmed's portrait, French appears in red; it is the language he also perceives as symbolic of ambition and his wish to learn.

Ahmed sees himself as multilingual. Interestingly, he allocated almost the same amount of space to each of his languages on his language portrait, indicating equal importance for all of them as part of his identity and the translanguaging between them. In Ahmed's case, the monolingual approach would also not have been practical, as his perception of languages is fluid and not rigidly separated (Cummins, 2008; Cummins, 2015).

Ahmed begins his narrative by describing himself as a privileged Arabic-speaking person. As he states, "We had never had any problems communicating with each other because we all speak and understand the same language." He then mentions a change in his attitude when English was introduced to him as a subject in grade 7. He identified two factors that contributed to his negative attitude towards the English language: unfamiliarity with the language and dissatisfaction with its teaching methods:

My problems started at preparatory school when I was supposed to start studying English as a school subject. I did not like English at that time because I was not used to hearing it. It was strange to me. What made it even worse was my English teacher. He was so strict, and I was so afraid of him that I forced myself to memorise words without understanding them. He used to punish us if he heard us speaking Arabic in class.

This highlights a downside of the monolingual approach: prohibiting the use of students' first language and perceiving it as a hindrance to learning rather than a resource (García & Wei, 2014; McKinney, 2015). According to Ahmed's account, using one's first language (i.e., Arabic) in the English classroom was an action that required punishment from the teacher. The significant themes that emerged

from this extract are the teaching method and the limitations of a monolingual approach. In other words, the teaching method used by Ahmed's English teacher generated his negative attitude towards the English language. Limitations of monolingualism refer to Ahmed's feeling of exclusion because of his inability to communicate in English, as he only spoke Arabic at the time; a feeling that made Ahmed think of abandoning English as a school subject, which he said would have felt like a blessing at the time:

My suffering lasted only for one year because, in the following year, English was banned as a school subject in my country. I was so happy to hear this that I did not think about the consequences then.

The background of Ahmed's narrative is that teaching English as a foreign language in Libya went through various stages. One of the important stages was Act No. 195/1986, created by the Minister of Education at the time, which stated that teaching English had been stopped. This halt occurred due to the decline in political relations between Libya and the West (Giaber, 2014; Mohsen, 2014). This ban persisted until the 1990s, when the Lockerbie case was resolved, and political relations with the West were restored.

In his narrative, Ahmed also mentioned two incidents that triggered his desire to learn English: one was an article he read, and the other was a child he admired for speaking the language.

In 1999, I was reading an article in a newspaper about computers and English. In summary, the article stated that by the year 2000 anyone who could not speak English and who could not use a computer [would be seen as] illiterate... in 2005 when I was attending the Tripoli International Fair,... a Korean exhibitor was talking in English to the audience, most of whom did not understand what he was saying except for a young girl who was able to communicate with that Korean exhibitor.

Ahmed reported that these two incidents generated mixed feelings in him. One was the sadness and disappointment that he did not speak English, and the other was a renewed determination and motivation to learn English:

I felt so bad and disappointed when reading the article [about

English and technology]. That feeling generated a desire within me to learn English. As a result of that incident at the Tripoli Fair, I decided to start learning English.

Regardless of his willingness and motivation, Ahmed was only able to study English after he came to South Africa in 2013 to accompany his wife while she pursued higher education. Ahmed reported that the first year was not easy. Moving to a new country with a different culture can be challenging, especially if there is also a language barrier. Ahmad described how they felt at that time:

At the beginning, it was challenging for us to live in the new society, to the point that sometimes we felt quite hopeless. We faced problems in our first months [in South Africa] because it was challenging for us to communicate with people.

However, Ahmed's feelings were overcome by the support his family and friends provided. The value of support and understanding is evident in Ahmed's narrative, indicating how this support facilitated his adaptation to the new social environment of South Africa and generated a strong motivation to communicate with others and learn about their culture:

The support of my family and friends helped me continue [to learn English]. I tried to adapt to the new society, and things gradually improved. I became keen to communicate with people and learn about their culture.

According to Hibbert and Walt's classification (2014: 190), Ahmed may be considered a self-driven learner whose enthusiasm and dedication gave him the confidence to overcome challenges in his journey to learn English.

These language biographies provided several insights to the first author, which she later implemented in her own classroom. Firstly, students' first language should be valued and utilised as a resource. Secondly, students' reflections on their learning may be used as feedback on how teaching can be adapted and improved. Finally, motivation is a vital factor that should be instilled and strengthened in both teachers and students.

Based on the details of their biographies, we can consider Hadeel and Ahmed resilient students who survived despite unfavourable

circumstances, and who developed coping strategies that helped them reach their literacy goals, including learning English (Hibbert & Walt, 2014, p. 194).

From the language portraits, we can deduce that, except for Hadeel, all the students see themselves as multilingual, or at least this is what they want themselves to be in their ‘imagined communities’. However, ‘under certain circumstances and for certain purposes, one identity will be more important to the individual than another’ (Alexander, 2002, p. 104).

The portraits suggest that these students’ identities are closely tied to their L1. At the same time, they perceive learning an additional language as a valuable addition that can enrich their linguistic repertoire and add another dimension to their identity. Therefore, allocating different spaces and colours to represent different languages does not mean perceiving languages as “separate identities” but rather as a variety of resources that underpin one’s linguistic repertoire (Busch, 2012, p. 515).

6. Findings

6.1 Insights from Language Portraits and Narratives

The language portraits created by participants revealed complex linguistic identities shaped by their individual experiences, cultural backgrounds, and aspirations. The use of colours and body parts in these portraits symbolised participants’ emotional affiliations with various languages, underscoring the necessity of recognising and valuing students’ linguistic competencies (Coffey, 2015). Furthermore, the narratives provided a nuanced understanding of participants’ motivations, challenges, and perspectives concerning language acquisition, thus offering a reasonably objective lens through which to view their experiences.

6.2 Pedagogical Implications

Language biographies have been shown to support identity-affirming pedagogical practices. This aligns with Cummins’ (2008) assertion that curricula should be connected to students’ lived experiences. Educators who integrate students’ first language (L1) into second

language (L2) instruction create a comfortable and intellectually stimulating environment, thereby facilitating meaningful communication. This approach challenges the monolingual biases inherent in CLT and advocates for translanguaging as a valuable pedagogical resource (Makalela, 2015).

6.3 Multimodal Learning

The multimodal characteristics of language biographies encourage a holistic approach to student engagement, combining cognitive, emotional, and creative dimensions of the learning process. Participants reported increased self-awareness and motivation, emphasising multimodal resources' critical role in language education (Stille & Prasad, 2015). This finding suggests that incorporating diverse modes of expression may lead to reasonably objective assessments of student engagement and learning outcomes.

7. Conclusion

This study underscores the pedagogical significance of multimodal language biographies in the context of additional language teaching and learning. By integrating students' L1 and employing various multimodal tools, educators may cultivate inclusive, identity-affirming environments that promote enhanced engagement and meaningful communication. Language biographies serve as a medium through which life stories, personal experiences, and perceptions are articulated, enabling educators to better understand how students perceive, position, and reflect upon themselves and how they derive meaning from their experiences.

Consequently, language biographies can be conceptualised as:

...situational and context-bound productions created through interaction among participants, framed by specifications (such as silhouettes, drawing prompts, and colour ranges) and the educational setting" (Busch, 2018, p. 7).

Students often view themselves as bilingual, recognising that their understanding of language transcends mere linguistic utility; it is also a social practice through which individuals interact with and negotiate their identities. From the students' perspectives, it became evident in this study that identity encompasses various factors,

including linguistic repertoire, personal experiences, environment, attitudes, beliefs, morals, and ideologies—all represented in their L1. This aligns with Childs' (2016) argument that excluding students' L1 may lead to dehumanisation, as well as Cummins' (2008) assertion that disregarding students' first language equates to disregarding their culture, life experiences, and linguistic resources. Such exclusion fosters uncertainty, intimidation, and alienation, adversely affecting language learning.

The importance of a multimodal approach lies in its potential to empower students by giving them a voice in their learning journey. Tools such as language biographies yield critical insights into multilingualism and linguistic diversity, enhancing students' awareness of their actual language practices. Understanding how students articulate their own positions and attitudes through language biographies may inform the development of alternative learning strategies. Recognising the meanings students ascribe to their linguistic repertoire and their role in their education may significantly contribute to their knowledge growth by allowing them to leverage their existing knowledge and appreciate the linguistic and cultural capital they bring to the classroom. Connecting curricula to students' lives, drawing upon their prior knowledge and experiences, and valuing the linguistic and cultural capital they contribute can be identity-affirming. This approach may potentially scaffold students' participation and lead to successful learning outcomes (Cummins, 2015; Lundgren, 2015).

In conclusion, to enhance the utility of language biographies as a resource for capturing the richness of past experiences and informing a deeper understanding of the teaching and learning process, teachers are encouraged to utilise this approach not only with their students but also for self-reflection. This practice will enable teachers to evaluate how their learning experiences have shaped their own epistemology and teaching practices and consider potential avenues for improvement. Biography may also serve as a lens through which students can articulate their positioning within multimodal contexts, their challenges in additional language learning, and the implications for their educational experiences. Reflecting on these aspects from an African perspective may even facilitate the decolonisation of

curricula in many contexts, rendering teaching and learning more meaningful and impactful.

8. Limitations and Recommendations

The limitations of this study primarily relate to its restricted generalizability due to a small sample size of twelve adult Arabic-speaking learners of English in South Africa. This limitation affects the applicability of the findings to broader populations with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, the cultural context of the South African classroom imposes further constraints on the results, as existing norms and sociolinguistic factors may significantly influence learning outcomes, thus limiting their transferability to different settings. Therefore, it is recommended that future research build on this study by incorporating larger and more diverse samples. This would strengthen the findings and make them more applicable to other learner groups and cultural environments.

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