The Story of Two Female Multilingual Teachers: Teacher Identity and Locality

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Having been English as an Additional Language (EAL) speakers and having taught English in diverse cultures, religions, races, and abilities, we have both formed multiple identities. In this collaborative autoethnography, we present our struggles with teaching EAL and how our identities as teachers and teacher-scholars were shaped by the local cultural and social values of our teaching and learning contexts. By reflecting on our past perceptions and experiences, we began to realize that multilingual teachers' identities are complex and involve tensions and conflicts. However, these conflicting experiences have developed resilience in us and helped us understand what it is to be a multilingual and transnational teacher. By comparing our past struggles with future teaching goals, we reconceptualized our classroom teaching pedagogies and understand that being a multilingual teacher is about adapting to the needs of the students and equipping them with the tools necessary for their success.

We wrote this paper to argue that local practices (Pennycook, 2010) have to be recognized and implemented by English language instructors because they reflect cultural and social aspects of language learning, which is an essential part of being engaged with a foreign language. In this collaborative autoethnography, we look at our teacher identities through Pennycook's concept of locality, which views language as a local practice. Language as a local practice encompasses "perspectives, the language ideologies, the local ways of knowing, through which language is viewed" (Pennycook, 2010, p. 461).

Pooja: Juggling and Transforming Teacher Identity Formed in Transnational Spaces

I am an Indian-origin multilingual transnational teacher and student who has lived and worked in India and Saudi Arabia, earned a master's degree from the UK, and is currently pursuing a doctorate from a university in the United States. I've developed a transnational identity as a result of my experiences studying and teaching English as an additional language in multilingual environments. I chose to write about my experiences as a transnational teacher in Saudi Arabia for the purpose of shedding light on the challenges and conflicts that come with being a teacher in a foreign country. Transnational teachers often need to juggle and negotiate their identities to resolve conflicts that may arise in their classrooms. Through my narrative, I also highlight that second language teachers need to consider their students' needs and prior experiences and continue to challenge their assumptions and beliefs throughout their teaching in order to promote effective language learning.

Bringing my Western-based Teaching Identity and Practices into the Saudi EFL Classroom

After teaching English to middle school students in India, where I gained some teaching experience, I decided to earn a degree in English education. I joined an MA in teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) program in the United Kingdom in 2009. Throughout this teacher education program, I was profoundly influenced by SLA theorists who emphasized subconscious language learning or

creating a natural environment for students to learn rather than studying grammar and other linguistic forms consciously (Krashen, 1985; Schmidt & Frota, 1986). In October 2010, I successfully completed the program.

Upon graduation, I began searching for TESOL-related positions in the UK. I also subscribed to numerous job search websites. However, due to my status as a non-native English speaker, I was unable to find any jobs. After a month of struggle, I decided to return to India, despite knowing that it is difficult for a master's degree holder to get a job at a college in India until they pass some competitive exams and earn a higher master's degree such as Master in Philosophy. Later, I learned from one of my Saudi classmates that teachers with an MA in TESOL from a western country are in high demand in Middle Eastern universities, particularly in Saudi Arabia. Since I had never taught at a college level before and was unable to find employment in the United Kingdom, I decided to apply for a position at a Saudi Arabian university. To my surprise, I received a positive response and was hired as an EFL instructor at a community college. I immediately returned to India to apply for a work visa and verify my degrees (one needs to verify their degree if they want to work in the Middle East). Within three months, I was able to finish all my paperwork and travel to Saudi Arabia with my husband.

In January of 2011, I began teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at a girl's college within a public university in the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia's teaching and learning culture was quite distinct from those of India and the United Kingdom. In Saudi Arabia, the majority of colleges have separate sections for male and female students. Female teachers are hired for the girls' section, while male teachers are hired for the boys' section. In addition, women of all religions are required to wear the "abaya," the traditional dress of Saudi women that covers the entire body. I quickly adapted to the new culture and practices, despite not being accustomed to wearing such clothing. Since India is a multicultural nation where people of various religions, including Muslims, reside in each state, it was not too difficult for me to adapt to Saudi culture. Moreover, I was mentally prepared to wear such attire and fully cover myself in public because, during the course of my paperwork, I became more acquainted with Islamic heritage and Arab customs. To some extent, this practice also influenced my teacher identity, as I became more cautious with my classroom teaching practices, especially when it came to discussing forbidden topics in Islamic culture, such as alcohol, tattoos, etc. Since India and Saudi Arabia are both Asian countries, there are also similarities between them, such as the fact that we do not discuss sex openly in India and that Indian families expect women to wear what is deemed appropriate attire. Adapting my classroom instruction to the religious values of Saudi Arabia was, therefore, not particularly difficult. However, adjusting my classroom teaching and practices according to my students' needs was a challenge indeed, for my teacher identity was re-shaped by my MA TESOL degree, which was mainly based on western-based pedagogies.

My teacher identity was largely influenced at the macro (societal) level, followed by the meso (institutional) and micro (classroom) levels (De Costa & Norton, 2017). My beliefs that western teaching methods are preferable for teaching English as a second or foreign language and that teachers can apply globally accepted teaching practices to local contexts affected my classroom practices. Based on the belief system that I had developed in the UK and institutional policy, I began incorporating English-only pedagogies and discourses into my Saudi EFL classroom. For instance, I restricted my students from speaking Arabic in class. This practice was based on the widespread belief that use of a first language hinders second language acquisition (Krashen, 1985). I also

began to rely more on the implicit method of instruction, in which students discover grammar rules and vocabulary on their own rather than having the teacher explain them explicitly (Schmidt, 1990). Even though I used an explicit teaching approach in India, earning an MA in TESOL fundamentally altered my outlook on the profession and the way I approached my Saudi classroom.

As my Saudi classroom was composed of students of varying abilities, my students' responses to my teaching strategies varied. Students who had spent time in the United States or other western contexts or who had attended a private school responded positively to these strategies. Those who had attended government schools for their education and had never traveled abroad reacted negatively. These students were accustomed to learning grammar via translation. Even after a decade, I can still visualize their confused expressions. I can also recall their silence in my classroom, especially during group projects. As I prohibited these students from using Arabic or translations, they resisted participating in my classroom. A few students even requested a transfer to the class of an Arabic-speaking instructor. I felt terrible. However, I eventually discovered that one of the students had decided to defer the English course because neither my Saudi colleague nor I allowed Arabic in the classroom. When I told my colleague about this student, she told me that she did not believe in bilingual teaching methods and did not care if her students attend classes taught in Arabic and English by other teachers. She, like me, believed that teaching English required using only English. Even the curriculum was designed with the assumption that students should not use Arabic in the English classroom. I never imagined that a student would stop learning English as a result of my instructional practices or assumptions. I had a moment of self-realization and self-discovery at this time. I began to question myself!

Mixing and Transforming my Identity

I began to wonder whose fault it was. Teachers? Educational institutions and their policies? Or teacher preparation programs that do not take into account the local context and the needs of students when preparing teachers? I sat down and began to consider my classroom practices. This reflexive attitude made me realize there was a gap between my imagined classroom practices and the reality of my students. I began to question my assumptions and beliefs. By challenging my assumptions, I abandoned the technician role of a teacher who simply follows standard procedures (Kumaravadivelu, 2003) without questioning their beliefs and looking at their practices through a critical lens (Freire, 1998; 1968/2000).

Gradually, I began to make adjustments to my classroom teaching methods. Keeping institutional policy in mind, I adopted a hybrid identity. A hybrid identity is a combination of two or more identities, allowing multilingual people to make use of their different identities (Canagarajah, 2002). I allowed my students to use Arabic at the start of each assignment or activity so that everyone understood what was expected of them. Students would engage in conversation in Arabic and explain the assignment to one another before presenting their work in English. Occasionally, depending on the topic's complexity and the needs of my students, I also allowed advanced students to translate Arabic words or information for other students.

Considering the experience of the Saudi student who dropped my class and the class of another teacher without discussing her needs with us, I also decided to create a dialogic learning environment in my classroom. Although things have begun to change in Saudi Arabia, they were very different a decade ago. In Saudi Arabia, women lacked free will and were prohibited from expressing their opinions. Understanding the needs of

my students and viewing them through a historical and cultural lens, I came to realize that my female students needed to feel empowered and have a voice and that my classroom would be the first step in preparing them to achieve this goal. For this reason, I began implementing minor adjustments to my teaching. For instance, I asked my students to choose a topic for their discussions and assignments. I also created multiple contexts for classroom discussions, given some students may feel more comfortable talking in small groups over large, whole-class discussions. In these spaces, I also encouraged my students to discuss openly what they liked and disliked about my classes. As I was able to abandon dominant ideologies by adapting my teaching practices to meet the needs of my students, I also flattened the hierarchy between my students and me.

WHO AM I NOW?

My identity as a language teacher is also shaped by my current experiences as a doctoral student, which I will briefly reflect upon to connect to my previous teaching experiences. My learning experiences in the United States remind me of my students' struggles and the importance of a teacher considering a student's cultural background. For instance, when I write a course paper or any other assignment, I often struggle between the American and Indian ways of writing and thinking. I understand that, in order to achieve academic success, I must socialize in American discourse communities. However, it is not easy for me to do so. Luckily, I have professors who recognize that it is difficult for a multilingual student to abandon one identity and adopt another. My professors give me ample opportunities to consider my identity and negotiate with them. These experiences allow me to place myself in the shoes of my students and understand what it means to be a multilingual educator. I've come to the realization that a multilingual classroom environment requires negotiation and flexibility and that language is not an entity, as Pennycook (2010) emphasized.

From a socio-cultural perspective, identity is dynamic and evolves with time and space (Norton, 2006). Similarly, I believe that my teacher identity has evolved with time and space. I would like to conclude my experiences with the following quote:

> I hold that my own unity and identity, in regard to others and to the world constitutes my essential and irrepeatable way of experiencing myself as a cultural, historical and unfinished being in the world, simultaneously conscious of my unfinishedness. (Freire, 1998, p. 51)

ALEXANDRA: TRANSFORMATION OF TEACHER IDENTITY THROUGH LOCALITY

I am a multilingual female teacher, a Ph.D. student at a U.S. university in Western Pennsylvania, who was born in Kazakhstan, grew up in Russia, and used to study in France. I have taught English and French to Russian students at various levels and Russian to American students at a western university in Pennsylvania. I have been engaged in different cultures throughout my teaching career and this experience, as well as my role as a language learner, played a crucial role in forming multiple identities, which I am eager to reflect on.

I argue that instructors, possessing multiple identities, bring various dispositions into the classroom and, depending on their local practices, different methodologies. Relying on Bourdieu's idea that everyday practices become regulated and form ways of thinking (as cited in Pennycook, 2010), I believed that instructors from two different countries, Pooja and I in particular, would have distinct pedagogical strategies in the same classroom due to their local practices.

Raising my Identity in Russia

I started teaching when I was an undergraduate student in Russia, and I used to work with young learners whose native language was Russian. After graduation, I earned a position at a local language school in southwestern Siberia, Russia, which was attended primarily by Russian-speaking students. My classrooms lacked cultural diversity, and it impacted my teaching approaches because I could easily use translation in the classroom instead of finding appropriate definitions for some words or phrases. Unlike Pooja's experience, translation was allowed in my classrooms, and students used it a lot during classes. I still feel that that experience put me through a lot of challenges as an English instructor. For instance, using the native language in a monolingual classroom did not give me a chance to know multiple cultures and students' diverse backgrounds. It also led to the lack of practice speaking English in the classroom, which made my students unconfident in their speaking abilities. The translation approach increases students' comfort with speaking their native language and decreases their motivation to speak English. Accordingly, a lot of approaches that work in multilingual classes do not work in monolingual ones. For example, paraphrasing, or using definitions to explain certain words and phrases, works perfectly in diverse classrooms. Also, when students from different countries work in pairs, the only language they share is English, so they try to find a way to explain everything in English, whereas the students I used to teach in Russia often switched to Russian for explanations.

Developing my Identity in France

As Pennycook (2010) states, "our everyday activities are always in places that become part of the process" (p. 56). Therefore, I did not want these activities to become my practice, and I moved forward with my local teaching experience and went to France. After several years of teaching practice and pursuing my teaching education degree in France, my teaching values and beliefs changed due to the local cultural and social values of my learning context. I was engaged in a French locality, which taught me various concepts about the student-teacher relationship, which seemed to be relatively casual and honest. I had a literature course back in 2013 at Francois Rabelais University in France, where one of my classmates pointed out that the professor's manner of teaching was not quite understandable for students and offered some suggestions. For instance, she noticed that the pace the instructor was teaching the class seemed too fast for her and other students. To my great surprise, the instructor agreed! This was a valuable lesson for me as a teacher because in a Russian classroom, a teacher-centered approach is most common. There is not much negotiation between a student and an instructor; consequently, students try to keep quiet even if they disagree with something because there is more fear than learning in most classrooms in Russia. I decided then what kind of instructor I wanted to be: the one who hears students' opinions and listens to them. Although my local background was different, I felt that I could change it. After returning to a faculty position at Omsk State University in Russia, I allowed my students to speak up, to provide me with fair feedback about our classes, and to be flexible towards students' challenges and difficulties. My approach was sensational for students, because it put them in the center of a learning process and gave them a voice in the classroom.

My next attempt to shape my English teacher identity by the local context and practices happened in London, where I had a chance to work with multilingual students and learn how to teach multicultural students. I leaned on Pennycook's idea: "to speak of language as a local practice is to address not only the embeddedness of language in place and time but also the relation between language locality and a wider world" (Pennycook,

2010, p.78). I aimed to learn "local" there, finding some similarities between my home local and London local in the sense of teaching, and I found a lot of locality in one single classroom due to its multiculturalism. An interesting fact was underlined by Pennycook (2010) that "languages are always adaptable" (p. 97). For instance, some regions of Northern Russia have more than a hundred words to describe snow; others use multiple words for various kinds of fish depending on the region where they live. I found the case to be the same in the UK. There are hundreds of words the British use to describe the weather. So, while teaching students whose locality is different, instructors might have a lot of challenges since they are not aware of these details.

My teacher identity expanded in London due to several reasons. First, the classroom was filled with students from different countries, which made it impossible to use a translation approach. It challenged me to find necessary and easy definitions and explanations for students to understand. I started using a lot of pictures so that my students could visually imagine the things we were talking about. Second, all of them brought their cultures, religions, ethnicities, and traditions into the classroom. We shared our diversity and learned from each other by expanding our knowledge about different countries. Finally, my professional identity developed due to the new materials used in the classroom. I had to work with books, files, and create presentations based on the topics I previously had not included in my classroom discussions. Thus, my teacher identity was shaped in London in several ways.

Shaping my Identity in the USA

Though, my teacher identity had been shaped by creating new methodological materials and working with students with various levels of English and diverse backgrounds in Omsk, Russia, and in the UK, I felt the necessity to deepen my knowledge and broaden my practices even more. I went to the United States to study and teach at a program that provided me with a tremendously important experience. According to Pennycook (2010), "diversity, however, wears the face of discernible difference, and rarely includes sameness" (p. 49), so I aimed to find this diversity in teaching methods and approaches. I found out a lot about the U.S. classroom setting and approaches to teaching and studying. For instance, asking for a course evaluation to improve my teaching, being open to talk about my personal life outside academia, respecting students' needs and addressing their concerns by answering emails in a quick manner, and using up-to-date materials. My identity changes every time I enter a Russian language or English language classroom. It changes when I communicate with my students during office hours, and it changes when we organize events on campus. My teacher identity is complex, multicultural and multilingual, and as many think, I cannot separate my identities; they are flexible, but inseparable. When I enter the classroom, I do not choose my identity, but rather use all of them simultaneously. So, our identities are influenced by the language practices that we use, thus, connecting them with a particular locality where we use them.

Overall, locality impacts our teacher identities in a lot of ways. First, we can transform and rearticulate our locality or adapt to other localities that have become global. Second, differences can be beneficial for global learning since we can share the experiences and practices we have been engaged in. Finally, if we think about *language as a local practice*, we include cultural aspects in it as well as its historical contexts, which play a huge role in its understanding. I would like to conclude with Pennycook's (2010) words, which underline the importance of locality: "however global a practice may be, it still always happens locally" (p. 128). From my experience, if an ESL/EFL

instructor is not aware of local practices, it might be quite challenging to transfer the cultural and social aspects of language to students. As the meaning of certain words may vary depending on regions and areas, the intonation of sentences, pronunciation, and even grammar structures can be different. Thus, it is necessary to look at language as a practice that reflects the social and cultural sides of life rather than a structure that is quite abstract (Pennycook, 2010). For instance, when teaching multilingual students, I lean on their experiences and their visions of the world to better understand some concepts of language. The main challenge for me as a teacher and a student is to learn about local practices may be hidden and only can be learned over time and practice. For example, being a Ph.D. student in the U.S., I need to adopt new local practices that I have never been engaged in before, but this is what helps me to shape my identity.

Moving Forward: Reconceptualization of Language Teaching Based on Local Practices

In this section, we share themes emerging from our narratives coupled with specific implications that can be used to reconceptualize the concept of language teaching and its connection to locality, which plays an important role in an EFL or ESL classroom. Shaped by multiple localities and various cultures, you could find some similarities in our stories as well as some differences concerning our ideologies and views. We both were able to shape our multiple identities through our teaching experiences in various contexts and localities, and we share the idea that a single way of teaching does not exist due to the diversity of language classrooms. Pooja's experience showcases that multilingual teachers are constantly required to challenge their assumptions, while Alexandra's experiences demonstrate that local practices have a great impact on what instructors bring into their classrooms.

Multilingualism, Translanguaging and English Language Teaching

Most classrooms are multilingual, and students come from various places having different backgrounds as well as diverse local language practices, which might have positive and negative impacts as well. Teachers should know about their students' differences and consider them as their strengths rather than weaknesses so that students can successfully lean on their background experiences and use their previous knowledge to build new language practices. Thinking about multilingual students coming from different parts of the world makes us claim that social practices students possess affect the methodology that should be used in the language classroom. According to Cenoz and Gorter (2019), "multilingualism has a social dimension because multilingual speakers learn languages while engaging in language practices in a social context" (p.132).

The concept of "locality" also helped us break monolingual myths, practice translanguaging, and decolonize our classroom practices. As our stories highlight that *translanguaging*, as opposed to standard English, allows multilingual students to utilize resources from languages they know/speak/write to explore concepts, ideas, and to construct knowledge (Garcia, 2009, p.140). Therefore, we believe that it is important for ESL/EFL teachers to consider the local needs, as it can assist them to come up with their own methods and practices or language forms rather than relying solely on fixed or predefined approaches (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). This, in turn, can help them understand that language teaching is not a cookie-cutter approach.

We also believe that non-native English-speaking teachers, native English-speaking teachers, policymakers, and all those associated with English language teaching need to reconceptualize what language means and how languages should be taught. We need to abandon the thinking of considering languages as something fixed or rigid. This practice

will also stop us from falling into the trap of the deficiency label of the non-native speakers (see Canagarajah, 2012). In short, the need is to welcome multilingualism and translingualism as teaching resources in our classrooms.

Language Teaching as a Local and Social Practice

We also support the idea of Pennycook (2010) who states that "languages are a product of the deeply social and cultural activities in which people engage" (p. 1), referring to language as a local practice, and that is how we perceive it. We know that ideologies are originally born in families where students form their values and beliefs. Furthermore, they interact with various communities, and their ideologies either shape or change depending on their experience. Thus, we are exposed to various language practices throughout our lives, all of which come from local practices. For example, English is not considered an official language in Russia, although students learn this language from a very early age, and schools are planning to make the Final English State Exam mandatory for all students. Obviously, practices in English classrooms in Russia greatly vary from those in Saudi Arabia and India, and they are completely different in the USA, considering the nativism of the language. This standardization is common for academic English or international exams, although regarding various contexts this way might not be suitable for everybody. So, second language instructors should consider various localities and students' different backgrounds to respond to students' needs.

We find locality pivotal in shaping language teachers identities and classroom pedagogies. We believe that locality is all about treating language as fluid. It also refers to taking into account the social and cultural values of a local (educational) community. Something similar to what Bourdieu highlighted. Bourdieu (1977 as cited in Pennycook, 2010) suggested that "we need to account for both time and space, history and location" when we consider language as a (local) practice (p. 2). However, it is important to understand that local context or being local is not limited to physical and temporal locality (Pennycook, 2010, p. 461). One should not mix local practice with "language use in context" (p. 461). Language as a local practice encompasses "perspectives, the language ideologies, the local ways of knowing, through which language is viewed" (p. 461). This means that language emerges from the activities; they are not predefined or limited to a particular context or space. As Pennycook (2010) also pointed out, "to speak in terms of language as a practice," we need to move away from the "attempt to capture it [language] as a system" (p. 9).

Our Final Thoughts

Though we have practiced and continue to practice different ways to deal with the complexities and conflicts that arise in our classrooms, we both consider the students' needs and local context crucial for teaching English as a second or foreign language. Finally, and most importantly, based on our experiences, we strongly believe that teacher training programs should train new teachers to learn to be reflexive in their attitude rather than merely focusing on teaching approaches and methods. By practicing reflexivity, teachers can display transparency in their classroom teaching and understand their intentions, teaching goals, and pedagogical choices (Greene & Park, 2021, p. 25) and move beyond methods (Kumaravadivelu, 2003).

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