

Learning About My L2 Learner Identity Auto-Ethnography; Language, Culture & Communication

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Abstract

Being a teacher, is one of the most daunting tasks in the world. You are not just responsible for your duties but also the future of all those that will be studying with and from you. It is simultaneously a very rewarding and a very high risk job that one can have where a teacher has the power to either make or break the students' life. As an L2 English teacher from Pakistan, I identify myself as a Muslim, a daughter, a reader and most importantly a student. My religious identity is a huge part of who I am and affects all my other characteristics that I also identify myself with because learning and teaching has extreme significance in my religion. Teaching is considered the profession of the prophets that were specifically chosen people thus making this an utterly noble profession and on the other hand, learning is something that never stops and is ongoing throughout a person's life. At times, it also involves a lot of unlearning as well so as a person, we are always learning and changing.

Keywords: L2, Auto-Ethnography, Language, Culture, Communication

Introduction

My identity as a daughter is also a big part of me where I am blessed with supportive and understanding parents who try their best to provide their best for my ease and needs for which I am forever grateful. They are also one of the biggest influences in my life and a huge part of who I am as a person and how I view the world around me. My identity as a reader allows me to view this world beyond what can be seen by naked eye and at times help me escape for the harsh realities of life by providing a little solace where I dive into the world of imagination created by someone who is completely unknown to me. It also enables me to view the world around me in a more distinct way where I can view things from a lot of different perspectives and theoretical lens at times.

My main objective for this type of research was to be able to understand my own self better and to try to connect the things I remember from my own experiences with the language attaining skills and the theories relevant to it. This allowed me not only to understand my own learner identity better but also give me insight for how I can improve my L2 teacher identity. I believe it is crucial for L2 teachers to be aware of their own struggles and techniques they utilized, whether consciously or unconsciously, to attain L2 language skills

Learning About My L2 Learner Identity
Auto-Ethnography; Language, Culture & Communication

themselves. This information can then serve as an understanding for the issues or hardships that L2 students are facing and the L2 teacher might be able to come up with better and more practical solutions rather than just providing theories for possible solutions.

For this reflection, I gathered my data from memory, textual artifacts and photographs I have from my lifetime and explored them chronologically in order to formulate an understanding of my language awareness at different stages of life as well as which factors might have contributed more in enhancing my language skills by acting as intrinsic or extrinsic motivation. By doing so, I was able to understand my own agency behind how I improved my language proficiency and gave me some insights on how I might also be able to drive that sense of agency in my own L2 learners.

This self-ethnography allowed me the chance to discover a lot of things about myself and my language skills that I had not viewed as such previously. I found that while I used imagination, I did not put myself into any of the imagined communities and neither was I ever a part of any community of practice. If anything can be considered as my imagined community, it would include me imagining myself as a character that was also a part of the novel or story I read and communicating with the novel characters in my imagination. My biggest motivation for English language skills came in the form of comics, animated movies and music all of which fall under the category of pop-culture. This source was a part of my language journey not only when I was consciously making effort and already familiar with the language and its different skills but also at the time, when I could barely understand language and was still in the process of formulating my understanding of L1 from my environment.

Understanding my L2 Identity

In order for me to understand my L2 learning identity, I will start my reflection from the time I started acquiring languages from my surroundings. For the sake of clarity, I am going to divide the stages of my language learning and acquisition into four different parts and go through them chronologically. The division is based on the different age levels and will help to see how the language learning was driven through various stages of my life too.

i. Early years to grade 5 (Interacting with different languages):

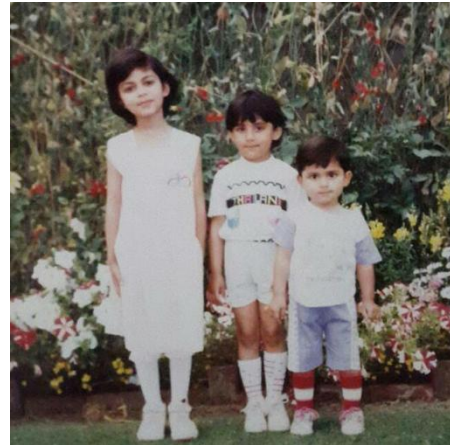
Before I explain my first interaction with L2, it is vital to understand my family setting and background as well. I am a Pakistani national and come from a culture where multiple languages are natural part of culture and everyday living. I also belong to a military background and am a third daughter therefore, by the time I was born, I had 2 elder sisters and the eldest was already enrolled in formal education system while the other was enrolled when I was around 5 or 6 months old. English learning was already in the setting for me along with my father's heavy interaction and usage of the language due to his work. We also had access to English music, animated movies and various English comics and magazines that my father would regularly sent when he was posted in Europe.

*Learning About My L2 Learner Identity
Auto-Ethnography; Language, Culture & Communication*

In this picture from spring 1995, I am standing alongside my elder sisters at 2 years and 3 months of age.

My father's work also had us move and live in three out of the four provinces of Pakistan. As for the fourth province, my maternal grandparents were settled there and we would visit then every year for at least a month during the summers and during the winters we were visited by them. By doing this, we were regularly exposed to Sindhi language as well as pure form of Urdu language.

In this picture from spring of 1997, at 4 years and two months, I am standing alongside my 2 years old brother in front of Khyber Pass which is the landmark of the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. I studied for 14 months in this province and was exposed to a new culture during this time. During this time, my father had recently returned from abroad and had



certain softwares in his pc where he had different animated games suitable for ages for all four of his children. My brother learned the English alphabets through these games and I learned how to learn and maths skills.

My family was also mostly posted in the most populated province of the Pakistan, i.e. Punjab, where we also constantly went to meet with my paternal grandparents and all my cousins too which exposed us to Punjabi language and rural culture as well. All four provinces have different

languages prevalent alongside the national language that is Urdu.

My interaction with English was mostly at home or at the formal military events we attended and where my sisters were more on the studious side of personality, I was, in my parents' opinion, always more inclined towards animation, colours, music and graphic story books. My favorite toys were legos and building blocks as they allowed me a chance to utilize my imagination and create stories and different worlds than what we usually saw in the Disney or warner brothers animations.

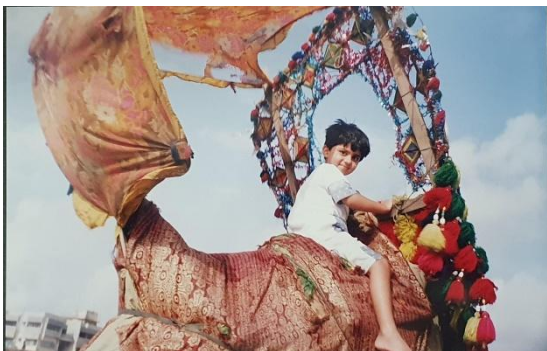


*Learning About My L2 Learner Identity
Auto-Ethnography; Language, Culture & Communication*

According to my mother, the first time they noticed me inclined towards English books was when I was around 1 year and 8 months old and would take every chance I could get to have my hands on the comic books that my sisters tried to keep out of my reach in order to study the animation and make stories out of the characters expressions and actions that I could interpret however I want since I was not familiar with any written language yet. A habit that now my eldest sister has also noticed in her daughter.



As I grew, I used a lot of imagination to play by myself or make stories out of comics and the cartoons I saw along with my siblings. As I played on my own a lot, the use of imagination and having myself as the central character of my story also enabled me to build my confidence in myself. At 5 years of age, I travelled without my immediate



family, with my maternal uncle from my grandparents place in Hyderabad to Karachi which is the biggest city in the province of Sindh. In my 3 days trip to a city 2 hours away from my family, I went and saw different things for the first time like an aquarium, the biggest joyland in Pakistan at that moment, the monument where they have buried the father of the nation. I also went to the beach for the first time and experienced camel ride. Throughout this trip, I was constantly exposed to Sindhi language and

pure Urdu which is quite different from the variations of Urdu spoken in other parts of the country. At the same time, my uncle also kept my English language skills engaged by asking me to name everything in English or read the names on the boards.

As I grew up, even though, I could completely understand the meanings behind the words I was reading, I still enjoyed the process of reading a lot. This was also a habit that was picked up due to my parents own habit of reading as well. Every month, they got us multiple different magazines filled with stories for children in Urdu while we also read the comics in daily English newspaper and the Disney weekly newspaper on every weekend.



Learning About My L2 Learner Identity
Auto-Ethnography; Language, Culture & Communication



All along my early student years, I was unaware of the concept of libraries and relied on my parents and teachers a lot for knowledge about things that I was not aware of. At the same time, I was constantly using my imagination to write however I could in my English creative writing classes where I was at times also made to take part in the debates where we had to deliver a speech on the annual day in front of the entire school and attending parents of the students from kinder garden to grade 1.

From grade 2 to grade 5, I was in a different school and city. The studies were conducted in a mix of Urdu and English but oral production and creative writing were not practiced. My first interaction with library setting was during grade 5 and extremely confusing where we were told not to speak at all, which is understandable but also, not to touch any of the books in the shelves

or book racks. The school had a specialized and extremely graphic version of storybooks that we were given such as the ugly duckling, Thumbelina and such.

ii. Grade 6 to Grade 12 (Banned from reading story books or novels borrowed from the school library):

In 2004, we moved to one of the biggest and most developed cities of Pakistan and settled there even after my father's retirement. I got admission in grade 6 in 2004 and it was a radical change for me as I was coming from co-education school of a small city where everyone interacted with each other to the most famous all-girls military school in the country which is notorious for being difficult to get admission in. The change in school, move to a big city and the general mood of the people in the city was also very different. In the school, the students were snobbish and cared a lot for the rank

of their fathers and outside it, people barely interacted with each other and in an apartment building with only 6 families living together, one family would only know the one living opposite to them.

In the school, the accent, pronunciation, how you looked, what you brought for lunch, how you scored, if you have siblings, what kind of personality your sibling have, all of these set a premise for what you could do and what you could not. The teachers were mostly not helpful at all as they were overworked and overstimulated at times as well with more than 40 students in each class and a full schedule with only 20 minutes of break at times. During this, I was alienated in the classroom environment a lot not because my grades were not good or my personality was bad but



*Learning About My L2 Learner Identity
Auto-Ethnography; Language, Culture & Communication*

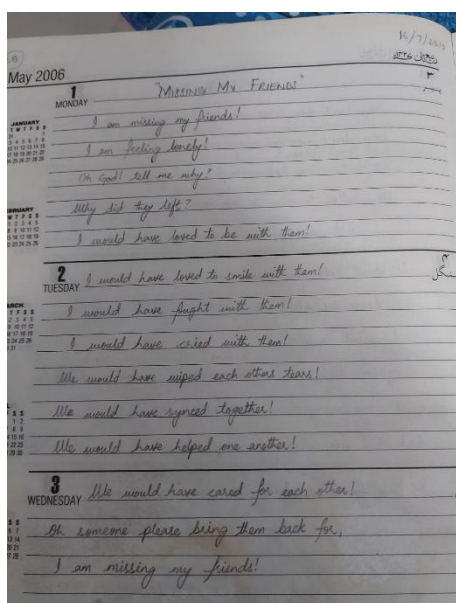
because my spoken skills, which had not been used in around 4 years did not match my written skills for neither English nor Urdu language.

At home, the media that my siblings and I were exposed to and for how much time was also extremely limited and strictly monitored due to which we only saw animated movies or children's movies in English when we would buy 2 or 3 CDs once a month. I was more familiar with studio ghibli movies and others that were not screened on the television channels. This was radically different from other students in my classes who were exposed to a lot of media and content from many different countries that they could view on televisions at their home. This caused a lack of context on my part as well whenever my fellow students would discuss which program or episode they had seen the previous day thus limiting my confidence in myself and my ability to produce language a lot. This was also due to the fact that I was bullied a lot more during my high school years from grade 9 to 12 when my elder sister had already graduated from the school and my father was posted in a different city.



I felt like other trying to fit in an in-group and this had a huge impact on my mental health and I barely had any friends due to which I turned to writing short poems. I could not write a lot at home for the fear of being discovered which lead me to throw away a huge part of my writings too at time because I was afraid of being judged and mocked even more. The only friends that I did have were my childhood friends who had also moved to the same city because of their father's posting.

Another thing that made me stand out was the fact that even though the school's rule was that every week during the library class, we were supposed to issue a book, read it and return



it in the next class, I offered to let one of my classmates use my library card to issue two books at once. The reason behind this was my mother did not allow me or my siblings to borrow books from the library. Even if the book would always stay in bags. During this time, all that I read and reread were the stories that were part of my curriculum which enhanced my comprehension, skimming and scanning skills. As we grew older, my sisters started to get the novels in pdf form and even later, they were allowed to buy novels. I was only allowed to read some that my sisters had approved during the vacations after my grade 10, where I had to wait 3 months for the results and admission in grade 11 and after my grade 12, whose result came 2 months later and then I had to apply for the undergraduate admission. After my grade 10 exams, I finished the Twilight saga within a fortnight and after my grade 12 exams, I finished the

*Learning About My L2 Learner Identity
Auto-Ethnography; Language, Culture & Communication*

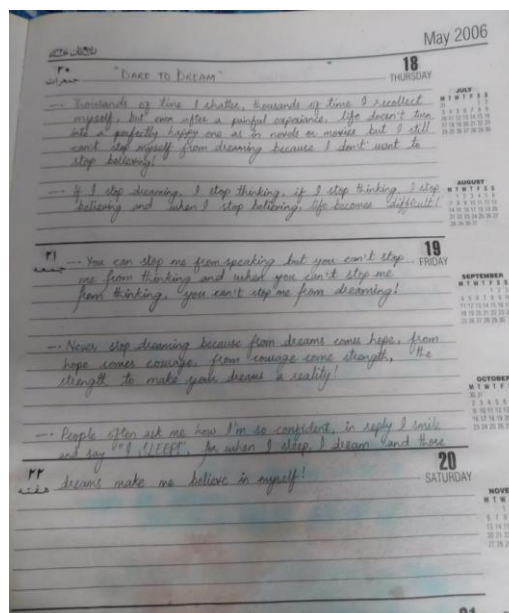
Inheritance Cycle which is also a tetralogy within a week.

During grade 11, everyone has to get readmission in the school on the basis of their grade 10 scores which I welcomed as a fresh start but a lot of students remain the same. What it did allow me was interaction with fresh batch of strangers who were not welcomed by the old students but were confident in their own individuality and skills. During grade 11 and 12, my own English and Chemistry teacher helped me a lot to gain back my confidence. I still stood out because the media I consumed was mostly Korean and Japanese content but I made friends that helped me regain my identity as a person that I did not know I had lost as well as brave enough to share my writings with others.

By the time, I graduated from grade 12, I had a good and supportive group of friends who not only supported me mentally but also pushed me to pursue my love for reading and writing English. I was happy with my language skills, I did not think much of it even when people were starting to tell me my English language skills are very good. I considered it a foreign language that allowed me escapism by reading fiction and nothing more. It was not a part of my identity as an individual.

iii. Embracing My Passion for Reading and English Language:

In Pakistan, when one wants to pursue undergraduate studies, they have to search about the field they want to go in and apply there themselves. You can apply in four different disciplines and can get admission in more than one as well which allows you the choice to pick whichever major you want. During all of this, the school where you were studying before does not help you and there is student counsellor or career counsellor in the school either so many people do not know what they want to do until it is very late.

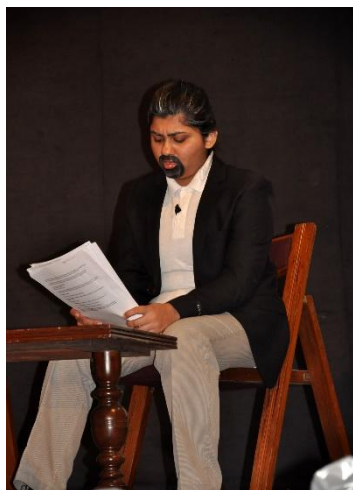


*Learning About My L2 Learner Identity
Auto-Ethnography; Language, Culture & Communication*

I was fortunate enough to know what I want to study but not familiar with which universities offered the studies that I want. I only knew of the universities that offered medical or engineering as my sisters were in these fields and all the students in high school also only studied science subjects. Arts or social sciences were not an option. I applied to only three universities in only the major of English Language and Literature. Fortunately I was cleared the written and interviews for all three universities and decided to go for a government run university as opposed to the two private ones which were far from my home. In this picture from first semester, I am standing in the fountain garden of my university after successfully giving my first ever presentation and viva.



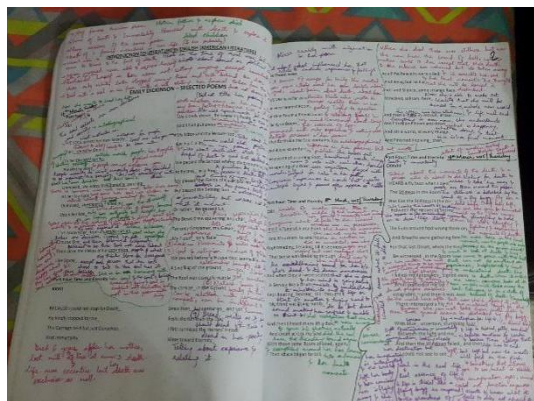
During the four years in my undergraduate studies, the internet became readily available to everyone and cellphones became common as well. These changes allowed room for more exposure to different media and cultures. With the major I had selected, my parents were also caught by surprise as they thought I would go for fine arts and not literature. The real reason I had done as such was so that I could read under the excuse of reading for my studies and no one would be able to object.



These four years, also allowed me the opportunity to hone my skills and grow my language skills in a community of practice where everyone's goal for the next four years was the same even if the passions differ. The varying projects that were often group work and for literature courses always meant something involving role-play or creative writing really helped me get into a comfort zone with myself and make peace with my interests as well. Our teachers made sure that we make use of a lot of creativity and produce the language as well, be it in the form of dialogues we had memorized, by presentations or sometimes even just viva or interviews in which we were only allowed to use

English language.

For me, this was the time where teachers allowed the students to ask questions and motivated us to do more than just listen and reproduce what they had memorized really helped in easing English as L2 in my student identity. This is a picture of my book for modern poetry and the notes that I made on my own during the class based on my understanding as well as my classmates' point of views. Another factor that really motivated me to learn more



Learning About My L2 Learner Identity
Auto-Ethnography; Language, Culture & Communication

was also that my teachers made use of all forms of pop culture in their studies and our projects as well. If videography was becoming a trend, we had to shoot a music video for a poem that we were not familiar with. If graphic designing was popular then we had to design a whole design magazine on it. Sometimes we were made to participate in different competitions for dramas or script writing and other times, we were pushed to submit some pieces of writing for university magazine as well. While we were studying short stories from different cultures of the world, we had to write a short story or a specifically structured novel too.



The eight semesters that I spent in my university gave me time to grow, reacquaint myself with my passion and helped me learn my learner identity where I was not just someone who knew a language on surface language rather a proficient user of it. In a society, where English language is considered a privilege and status of symbol, I became not just a proficient user but with the constant practice and input from so many sources, I developed an accent without trying due to which I was confused as a foreigner by

language professionals as well despite never ever being abroad. I was also able to finish my undergraduate studies with a distinction.

These four years motivated me to go for further studies in order to fulfil my dream of being a teacher. While during my undergraduate, I saw and learned about what kind of language teacher I want to become, my graduate studies was an experience that also taught me what things I did not want to have as part of my L2 teacher identity. I was also able to further my knowledge of literature and psychology during this time while also trying to connect more to my identity as speaker of other languages. All this time, also gave me a chance to reclaim my identity as a writer and a poet.

Conclusion

This study has been a very meaningful one for me as it allowed me to look past a lot of times where I was just hurt before and did not want to recall, to see that language is a lot of things. It is a power, it is an identity, and it is not something that is just studies. Language is something that if actively used, is a part of the user. During this research, I also learned that a lot of theories that I have learned and came across during my current graduate degree were already being practiced unconsciously in different phases of my life.

THE PEOPLE NOW...

Move forward, step back!

Look ahead, go astray!

Crying over undesired results,

But cheating in life's face!

Posing to be honest,

& the mocking masks!

Smile on encounters,

But laugh behind their backs!

All being different,

But same black hearts!

Empty souls,

& that's all we got!

*Learning About My L2 Learner Identity
Auto-Ethnography; Language, Culture & Communication*

I also got to find out that I was always more inclined to learn when pop culture that interested me was used. I could see the pattern for it during my early years as well as my undergraduate studies where I was allowed to have access to a lot more written and spoken language as opposed to when my exposure was limited and creative writing not nurtured. This exploration of my own self also gave me the understanding of who I am as an individual. At the end of this research, I can confidently say that English language is a part of my identity and even if I am not a native user, it is still a part of who I am as a student, as a teacher and as an individual.



Maimoona Rehman

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So Many Wishes...

i wish i had wings so i could fly,
fly so high that i seem like a bird,
i wish to fly so I rush through the clouds,
as water pulsters down my face,
drip drop drip drop...
i wish to see,
see how far i could take you with me,
could i take you far enough,
to show you the edge of my sanity?
would i be able to show you my world?
the one where there are no wars,
the world where everyone is happy,
where everyone is peaceful,
everyone lives together,
lives in a world of magic and calm...
would you like to go with me?
would you like to help me?
help me grow wings and then,
may be i could show you
the beauty of my world...