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## An adolescent English learner's expression of self and identity through multiliteracy practices

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### ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study explores an adolescent English learner's (EL's) expression of self and identity through multiliteracy practices on paper from an ecological perspective. The study follows Anni, a fourteen-year-old adolescent EL in an "Advancement via Individual Determination" elective class in a high school in the southeastern United States. Analysis of interviews, observations, researcher's e-journals, and artifacts shows various aspects of the EL's self that she chose to share with others, transformations related to the stage of adolescence and her status as an EL, and the role of a multiliteracy assignment in her expression of self and identity. The study makes suggestions for further research and describes implications for practice.

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My culture, my love for music, peace, the child inside me, and my love for art are all the things that make me Unique and makes me ME! (Anni's Mandala essay)

English learners (ELs) in U.S. K-12 settings face a number of challenges, such as learning complex course content while having limited cultural and historical knowledge as well as gaps in their spoken and written English skills (August & Shanahan, 2017; "English-Language Learners," 2011). ELs in adolescence (12-19 years old) also engage with identity construction, needs for social interaction, and the pressure of standardized testing (Ortmeier-Hooper & Enright, 2011). One key to addressing such challenges is helping adolescent ELs develop their literacy in English because this is crucial for their academic success (August & Shanahan, 2017). English literacy also allows ELs to express their self-perceptions and negotiate these perceptions with others (Danzak & Wilkinson, 2017; Vasudevan et al., 2010). It is essential to consider differences in cultural expectations when providing literacy instruction in schools (Bloome, 1989), to take into account students' funds of knowledge, that is, the system of expertise embedded in community practices, and to address cultural aspects in L2 literacy instruction (Moll et al., 1992). Sableski (2007) describes how students often determine who they are (or realize their selves) when they engage in literacy practices and co-construct their identity in sociocultural context.

Many researchers have argued that it is important to provide ELs with opportunities to engage in literacy practices in various modes, such as textual, visual, audio, and spatial (Kress, 2009). Such multimodal literacy practices are defined as multiliteracies that is, situated multimodal meaning-

making practices that draw on various modes such as writing, reading, or drawing, and that are based on students' experiences and knowledge (Chen, 2016; New London Group, 1996; Takeuchi, 2015; Unsworth, 2001). Prior research shows that participation in multimodal literacy practices enhances students' confidence, allows them to share their backgrounds (Durst, 2012), helps them develop higher-order critical thinking (Buckingham, 2008), significantly influences their identity formation (Wake, 2012), affords them to engage in meaning-making in a multicultural classroom (Ajayi, 2009), and contributes to their academic success (Flottemesch, 2013).

Most studies of adolescent ELs' multiliteracy practices and identities have been conducted in digital environments such as Facebook, fanfiction.net, chat rooms, and other social media sites (Black, 2005; Chen, 2013; Dressler & Dressler, 2016). That is important work because technology provides language learners with a variety of ways to work on their selves and project their identities through different modes (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008). This research shows that language learners can become more motivated, enact various aspects of their identity, imagine and create multiple identities, and affiliate with and receive support from specific communities both translocally and transnationally (Ajayi, 2009; Black, 2005; Dressler & Dressler, 2016; Karam, 2018; Kim & Omerbašić, 2017; Lam, 2004, 2009; Wang, 2018; Wilson et al., 2012; Yi, 2013). Moreover, they can create a strong transcultural identity, an identity "constructed through the different cultural perspectives and literacies," through the literacy practices in the online communities (Black, 2006, p. 171). Adolescents' positioning is nonlinear

and dynamic. They make choices about the language use, share their linguistic challenges and accomplishments, and post about their growing cross-linguistic language awareness (Dressler & Dressler, 2016; Pasfield-Neofitou, 2011). Thus, prior studies on adolescent ELs' multiliteracy practices and identities in digital environments have shown that Web 2.0 tools can help record ELs' expressions of self and identity negotiation and have a positive influence through their rich array of affordances for interaction with others.

Some studies focus on K-12 ELs' literacy practices (e.g., Kibler, 2014; Yi, 2010), but few researchers have investigated the topic of adolescent ELs' expression of self and identity through multiliteracy practices without the use of digital tools. The only study, to our knowledge, is Harklau's (2000). She investigated adolescent ELs' "archetypal images of learner identity" at the end of secondary school and at the beginning of their community college studies (Harklau, 2000, p. 35). Data were collected through interviews, observations, and artifacts, which included multimodal literacy assignments such as "pictorial autobiography projects" (Harklau, 2000, p. 47).

Harklau's (2000) findings show that the ELs' representation in high school was as hardworking and well-behaved students, which resulted in the teachers' supportive attitude. In the community college context, however, professors often perceived the participants as rude or uncooperative because after high school adolescent ELs did not need instruction on socialization into college norms, behavior, and life in the United States and were relatively independent when compared to international EL newcomers. The curriculum also frequently targeted mainly the newcomers with the assumption that they were from a different country, thus devaluing "the hybridity and multiplicity of U.S. high-school graduates' ethnic affiliations," their experiences, and rich funds of knowledge (Harklau, 2000, p. 56). As in Yi's (2013) study, this often resulted in students' resistance to and complete rejection of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) classes, conflicts between adolescent ELs and teachers, and students' lack of motivation.

More research is needed to show how adolescent ELs express their selves and their identities through multiliteracy practices on paper because many adolescent ELs are often restricted in or have no access to technology in their classes and often do their multimodal writing assignments on paper. While studies of adolescent ELs' identity development in multiliteracy practices through digital media can be useful, we cannot assume that these findings will transfer to contexts where adolescent ELs engage in multiliteracy practices on paper due to differences in the affordances of the tools, the mode of interaction with other agents in the context, etc. While digital environments can serve as contexts of their own, paper, as one of the most traditional tools or resources used in classrooms, offers different affordances for expression of self and identity in multiliteracy practices. As Bonny Norton (2013) states,

Identity, practices and resources are mutually constitutive. This suggests that identity is influenced by practices common to institutions such as homes, schools and workplaces, as well as

available resources, whether they are symbolic or material. Examination of the practices and resources of particular settings, and of learners' differential access to those practices and resources, offers a means to theorize how identities are produced and negotiated. (p. 2)

Thus, exploratory research studies on adolescent ELs' expression of self and identity through multiliteracy practices on paper will fill the gap and complement prior studies on this topic, as paper is a widely used resource in high schools globally and has a substantial influence.

Our study asks the following question: "How does an adolescent EL express her self and her identity when she engages in multiliteracy practices while working on a longitudinal multi-step classroom project?" To understand our EL's multiliteracy practices and expression of self and identities, we adopt a "visual grammar" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) approach. This approach is rooted in Halliday's (1978) work "*Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*" and allows for the analysis of images in terms of three layers of meaning: "representational/ideational," "interactive/interpersonal," and "compositional/textual." We explore how signs simultaneously communicate concepts, establish relationships, and cohere into texts with other signs (Unsworth, 2001).

## Theoretical Framework

The ecological perspective developed by van Lier (2004) provides the theoretical lens for our study. This perspective presents the language learner as an active member in an environment full of processes, meanings, and opportunities for learning and interaction. From the ecological perspective, the "conceptual self" encompasses "everything we believe about ourselves" (van Lier, 2004, p. 118), including our status, social roles, ethnicity, and funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992). "The self is always in a process of self-interpretation," in which the person in the present moment interprets the past to provide direction for the future (Wiley, 1994, as cited in van Lier, 2004, p. 126). Identity is understood as "both a project and a projection of the self," containing elements from within and without and situated in the social environment (van Lier, 2004, p. 125). According to Norton Pierce (2000), when language learners interact, they are constantly "organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world" (p. 11). A person may have multiple identities, which can be created and changed by the individual and by people around him or her. In second language (L2) learning, conceptual self and identity often clash as learners struggle with an ascribed identity in the new context and are forced to engage in self-reconstruction and identity renegotiation.

## Methodology

This study is part of a larger qualitative multiple case study in which we investigated adolescent ELs' collaborative writing practices in the face-to-face context of the classroom and online (Vorobel & Kim, 2017). In this article, we focus

on one of these cases and explore one adolescent EL's expression of self and identity through her multiliteracy practices. Our case was bounded by time and place—the data collection took place in 2012, and, for this study, we follow one participant and investigate her expression of self and identity through multiliteracy practices while she was working on one project that lasted half of the school semester in one elective class in a high school (Creswell & Poth, 2017; van Lier, 2004). The ecological perspective allowed us to investigate our participant's expression of self and identity holistically, considering various relevant processes, both cognitive and social, that unfolded over time in the classroom (van Lier, 2004).

### Context and participant

We conducted the study in a high school in the southeastern US. The participant was a student in an Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) elective class. AVID classes aim to help students develop critical thinking and study skills, complete rigorous academic requirements, and prepare for college. Most students in AVID classes are from single-parent, lower socio-economic status households and aim to become first generation college graduates (“What is AVID Secondary?” n.d.). In this paper we focus on Anni, a fourteen-year-old adolescent EL, because her expression of self and identity was particularly compelling. She was born in Haiti and speaks Creole as her first language (L1). She was proficient in reading and writing English, as determined by the Comprehensive English Language Learning Assessment administered by the school.

### Data collection and analysis

We collected data from April to December 2012. The data sources included interviews, observations, researcher's e-journals, and artifacts (Creswell & Poth, 2017). We conducted two semi-structured one-hour interviews with her in the middle and at the end of the semester (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). We also observed AVID classes for two hours each week (28 observations in total, and about 14 of those were of the AVID class working on the Mandala project) and took detailed field notes about the context, our participant, and our own interpretations. During observations, we did not participate in any activities so as not to disrupt the natural flow of the class. However, the principal investigator was present in the classroom, and the students were aware of the topic and objectives of the study. We recorded our reflections in the researcher's e-journal in penzu.com, a free Web 2.0 tool for e-journal writing.

The written artifacts included Anni's Mandala drawing, three drafts of the Mandala writing assignment, and two peer-editing checklists. All these artifacts reflect stages of Anni's two months of work on the multiliteracy project called Mandala. The Mandala multiliteracy activity was a multi-step, longitudinal project, planned by the teacher, that involved students going through a journey of thinking about the most important people or things in their lives and

sharing this with others by creating “a visual representation” of themselves through drawing five symbols on a Mandala (i.e., “an ancient design in the form of a circle”) on a poster board, discussions, and multi-draft writings (Observation notes from September 19, 2012). We further describe the Mandala project in the Findings section.

Data analysis for this study ran concurrently with data collection. The first author organized the data based on type and chronological order. She transcribed audio recordings of interviews with Transcriptions and Dictation, free software for Mac. Then we engaged in two data analysis steps. First, we reviewed Anni's Mandala project using a “visual grammar” analysis adopted from Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and Unsworth's (2001) analytical framework. Second, we reviewed all qualitative data (e.g., transcriptions and written artifacts).

When analyzing visuals, we employed a “visual grammar” approach (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Unsworth, 2001). First, we looked at the representational meaning of each symbol (e.g., a flag or a guitar); second, we analyzed the relational meaning and social evaluations relevant to Anni (e.g., her homeland and violence); third, we examined how the various symbols in her Mandala project were connected to each other, creating a textual whole with emergent meaning (e.g., hope for the future). We then analyzed all qualitative data inductively (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We coded her interviews and written artifacts, looking for emerging themes and connecting these to our analysis of the Mandala project (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Finally, we discussed some puzzling pieces of data and collaboratively finalized the codes and themes.

### Findings

Our major goal for this study was to investigate an adolescent EL's expression of self and identity in multiliteracy practices from the ecological perspective. In this section, we first describe our participant and then report our central findings.

#### Anni

Anni was a 14-year-old girl born in Haiti. Her family (two parents and two siblings) moved to the United States in 2003. In the Fall of 2012, her mother worked as a chef in an elementary school kitchen, and her father was a shuttle driver for a hospital. Anni's family spoke Creole at home. Anni reported that her parents could not speak English fluently. She also described how difficult it was for her to go to school in the United States early on because she knew little English. She described how ESOL classes and reading for school assignments and for fun helped her learn English. According to Anni, writing was never difficult for her, but she still needed to improve the organization and development of her ideas, grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Anni confessed that though she did not particularly enjoy writing, she loved drawing—another form of literacy. She kept a diary with her drawings, mostly done in an anime (Japanese animation) style. According to her teachers, Anni was a



Figure 1. Anni's Mandala visual.

hard-working and quiet student who was always on task and attentive to others.

### ***Anni's expression of self and identity through multiliteracy practices***

As we mentioned in the Data Collection and Analysis section, students in the AVID class worked on the Mandala assignment during the first half of Fall 2012. For this project, the teacher asked the students to (a) brainstorm about the most important people or things in their lives and take notes about their symbols and interpretations in a table in their notebooks, (b) draw these five symbols in a Mandala circle divided into 5 sections, (c) draft the first two paragraphs of their Mandala essay, (d) peer-review their work in pairs, (e) revise and edit the first two paragraphs, (f) complete the first draft of the essays, (f) peer-review the

complete draft, and (g) revise, edit, and submit their essays along with their Mandala drawings. It is noteworthy that the participants actively discussed the symbols they chose with each other while drawing and collaborated with each other when peer-reviewing drafts of their multiliteracy essay (Observation notes from 2012).

The Mandala project allowed our participant to express her self. In the introduction of her Mandala essay, Anni wrote, "Mandala is a circular drawing made to represent the harmony and wholeness of life or the wholeness of a person. Mandalas are made of symbols that represent who I am and what is important to me." This project was multimodal, consisting of words, images, and the texts she wrote about her Mandala. We examined Anni's multiliteracy practices using Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) and Unsworth's (2001) analytical framework to explore the meanings her work communicated. Anni's visuals conveyed three layers of meaning. The first layer was the "*representational meaning of material*

reality” in the objects Anni drew. As can be seen in Figure 1, there was a Haitian flag waving, a guitar, a flying dove with an olive branch and a peace sign, an African-American princess named Tiana, and a heart with “Love” written on it. Each item symbolized a relatively straightforward conceptual meaning, which she considered central to her life.

The second layer of meaning in Anni’s multimodal Mandala texts involved “*interactive/interpersonal reality*”—relational, evaluative messages conveyed by these signs. Here we focused on the social and evaluative stances she conveyed. The first object in the drawing, the Haitian flag with a sense of movement, represented her homeland and culture, which might indicate her loyalty and connection to them. When describing the flag in writing, Anni wrote,

About ten years ago, my family and I moved from Haiti to the United States. That was one of the biggest milestones for me and my family; starting life in a new environment with different languages, food and customs. Even though America is a wonderful country filled with many opportunities, I still feel homesick every once in a while. I miss the music, the food, the beaches, the parties and most of all my family back in Haiti. The Haitian flag represents all of that, it shows that I am proud of being Haitian and I have nothing to be ashamed of. (Anni’s Mandala essay)

In the excerpt above, Anni expressed a positive view of the United States, but she also noted that she proudly identified as Haitian. The statement “I have nothing to be ashamed of” should be understood in the context of others’ views of ELs through the lens of “difference-as-deficit,” not “difference-as-resource” (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 13).

While overall the school focused on the appreciation of diversity, we observed incidents in which mainstream students laughed at ELs due to their awkward speech or lack of understanding. While we did not observe this happen with Anni herself, our observations of other ELs during classes, recordings of peer review sessions, and interviews with the teacher reveal a “difference-as-deficit” view of ELs in the high school (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 13). For example, when we observed the AVID class on October 5, 2012, we witnessed how one EL was called to the ESOL class, and another student (a native speaker [NS] of English) made fun of him, saying aloud that this was due to the EL’s low proficiency in English. Another female EL with Spanish as her L1 defended that EL and replied that the NS could not speak Spanish, implying that there was no shame in being an EL.

In another example, when working on peer review of the Mandala, a female student with English as her L1 decided to share her impressions about the ESOL class:

I went to the ESOL room (laughing). Never again! ... there was kid there that did not know any English, but Spanish. And there was kid that knew only Arabic, and some of them knew some Korean language, Creole, or whatever. I was laughing because they were crazy. They actually think they are calm, but they are crazy. (Peer review 1, October 1, 2012)

This student’s words show her lack of understanding and lack of respect for students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. During an interview, Ms. Smith, the AVID teacher, also described such behavior and emphasized that in her class she never differentiated between ELs and

native speakers of English. The special rapport Ms. Smith built with and among her students was obvious during every observation, and she worked hard to create a safe space for ELs’ expression of self and identity through assignments like the Mandala.

The next object in Anni’s Mandala, the guitar, symbolized her love for and emotional connection to music. In her essay, she wrote, “I love the sound it makes and expressing myself through it by making my own tunes and lyrics.” Anni explained her love for music by saying that it provided relief from stress, and it “takes me away from the world.” These words resonate with Anni’s statement from earlier when she wrote, “Sometimes I just lie down and think of all the terrible things people do in this world.” Music helped her escape from these realities.

The drawings of a flying dove with an olive branch and the peace sign in the Mandala communicated a fear of violence, a condemning of it, and her positive feelings toward peace. In the second paragraph of her essay, Anni explained that she drew those to show “how BEAUTIFUL this world would be if there wasn’t so much evil.” For Anni, the dove represented peace and simultaneously symbolized her religious beliefs—“many things in the bible, like baptism and communion.”

Anni’s fourth drawing in Mandala was her favorite princess—Princess Tiana, an African-American character from *The Princess and the Frog* by Clements and Musker (2009). This character reflected her desire for positive transformation and celebrated her identity. She wrote,

She represents the child that is still and forever will be inside me. The person who still believes dreams do come true and people never really truly “grow up.” On my Mandala Princess Tiana is transforming from frog to a human. She realized who she was and what she wanted in her life and made them a reality, that’s what made her change. I hope that one day I’ll go through the same transformation. The day that I fully understand who I am and what I want to make of myself will be the day I will become a whole new person. (Anni’s Mandala essay)

In this excerpt, we can trace Anni’s awareness of the changes she was going through in adolescence. She wanted to preserve that part of herself that was a naïve, kind, and innocent child. Anni specifically wanted to show and describe the moment of transformation of Princess Tiana from a frog into a human, and she was explicit that she was herself in a similar process of change in self and identity.

The love symbol and the word “LOVE” in Anni’s Mandala echoed one of Anni’s earlier projects and her talent at drawing. In the last paragraph of her Mandala essay, Anni explained that she chose it because she had received positive feedback from other people about this drawing and her drawing skills. She wrote,

That drawing made me realize that I really love drawing and the effect they have on other people when they see it. Drawing is another way I express my feelings. When I’m sad I draw something sad, when I’m happy I draw something happy.

Anni claimed that drawing could be a powerful means of expressing herself. Interactionally, Anni’s Mandala communicated about her positioning in the social world and her

aspirations to build on strengths and position herself in a socially valued way. She communicated a sense of hope and solidarity, connecting herself to her viewers.

Our third layer of analysis investigates the juxtaposition of signs in a text or a whole that communicates something more than the sum of its parts. We examined both the complementary meanings of the signs and the order in which she described them in her essay. Despite her teacher's instruction to divide a circle into five equal segments, with a small circle in the center, Anni chose to draw her symbols overlapping. She did not see them as separate from each other, but as interrelated. The order of the symbols in her Mandala was also deliberate—Anni portrayed her two passions for drawing and music right above the flag of her home country, with Princess Tiana at the top, at the moment of her transformation while receiving an olive branch from a dove. The Haitian flag, representing Anni's home country and her cultural and linguistic background, forms the foundation for her self, surrounded with her two passions—music and drawing—with Anni's inner child and her connection to peace and religion at the top.

Anni's circle describes a movement from her past through her current situation toward the future. The flow of the Mandala circle goes upward, from her background as the foundation to her moment of transformation as an adolescent, hoping for peace in the world. It is noteworthy that she drew two symbols for peace—a dove with an olive branch and a peace symbol—in the center of her Mandala, which shows how much value she puts into this commitment. This reflects hope and optimism about herself and life in general, as long as she maintains and is surrounded by harmonious relationships. When writing about her Mandala symbols, Anni followed the same ascending order—upward. She ended the essay by stating that the five symbols she drew and described for her Mandala assignment represented harmony and “the wholeness of me,” expressing how her heritage from Haiti was represented in her music and drawing, leading to a person who could hope for a better, peaceful future.

## Discussion and conclusion

Our analysis describes Anni expressing her self and her identity through multiliteracy practices when working on a longitudinal project. Others have described these processes as implicit in ELs' online literacy practices (e.g., Chen, 2013), but the expression of self and identity were particularly explicit in Anni's Mandala project. Anni's expression of self and identity through multiliteracy practices was explicit, dialogic, and reflective, marking the transformations she was experiencing as an adolescent. Our study adds to the research on adolescent ELs' identity through multiliteracy practices done by Harklau (2000). Unlike in Harklau's study, however, the representation of ELs in high school in our site was not homogeneously positive. While the teacher had a positive view of ELs in her classes, she commented that this was different in other courses. During our observations, we also witnessed negative perceptions of ELs during classes. This contributed to Anni's inner conflict between her

identifying with and missing her homeland and family, the feeling of losing her Haitian roots, and the pull toward acculturation as well as the influence of the American culture and her resistance to the negative representation of ELs in the high school. This finding adds to research on the role of contexts in the adolescent ELs' expression of self and identity through multiliteracy practices (Norton, 2013).

Our focus on an adolescent EL's expression of self and identity through multiliteracy practices on paper complements research on ELs' multiliteracies, self, and identity in digital contexts. One central finding of many studies conducted online is their participants' seeking an affiliation with and receiving support from specific communities translocally and transnationally (Kim & Omerbašić, 2017; Lam, 2004). Adolescent ELs often take advantage of and benefit from the rich affordances of social media, create multiple identities, and share them with others through multiliteracy practices online (Black, 2005). In our study, in which Anni worked on her Mandala assignment on paper, the findings highlight an adolescent EL's step-by-step, dialogic, and reflective process of expressing her self and her identity. Only after the long process of working on the Mandala by herself and carefully choosing every sign, did she have an opportunity to share her work with others. The individualized first step of the Mandala project allowed her to focus on the topic, spend more time on reflecting about her heritage and rich background, thus activating her funds of knowledge (González et al., 2006) and allowing her to think about her transformation as an adolescent, and focus on the future. This adds to prior research on similar topics in digital contexts, where the nature of Web 2.0 tools allows immediacy of information transfer and various affordances for communication.

The findings of our study align with those that emphasize the importance of adolescent ELs' multiliteracy practices. The Mandala assignment, a carefully planned longitudinal multi-step multimodal activity, allowed our participant to articulate and share her rich background with other agents (Durst, 2012). It also afforded her to engage in an inner dialogue while expressing her self and her identity as an adolescent and a Haitian, working toward “the wholeness of me,” as she put it. This shows that assignments like the Mandala facilitate ELs' expression of self and identities as well as other students' appreciation of diversity. Anni's multiliteracy practices in the Mandala assignment also engaged her in meaning-making processes (Ajayi, 2009) and contributed to her academic progress (Flottesmesch, 2013). Finally, it is important to note the intertextuality of Anni's multiliteracy practices when she made a reference to *The Princess and the Frog* by Clements and Musker (2009). This supports Danzak's (2011) emphasis on the importance of a self-narrative for adolescent ELs' defining their identities through multiliteracy practices in a Graphic Journeys project.

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