Zines as Anticolonial Ethnography: Engaging Students through Personal Narratives in Community-Based Adult ESL Classrooms

Alexei Batishchev | alexeibatishchev@gmail.com
University of Massachusetts Boston

Introduction

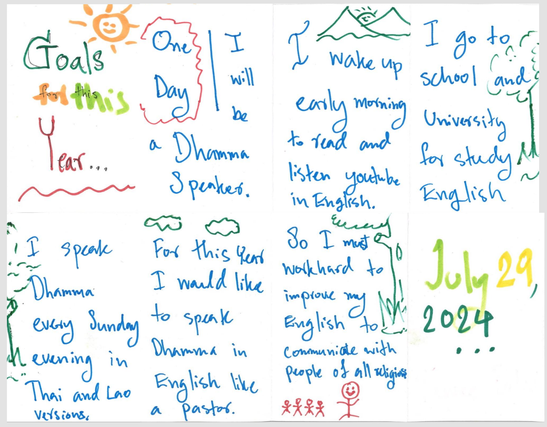
Adult ESL classes serving immigrant and refugee communities are highly multilingual but often enforce a monolingual ideology, suppressing learners' full linguistic repertoires. This project leverages the zine activity as a sociolinguistic elicitation tool designed to capture and analyze the multilingual variation that emerges when learner agency is prioritized.

The problem: Traditional second-language instruction in such settings often enforces a monolingual ideology, while suppressing the learners' full multilingual repertoires.
Research Gap: We lack systematic analysis of self-directed, written, transmodal variation in this population.

Research Questions

- How do students' **translingual practices** (e.g., code-meshing, orthographic choices, L1 lexical use) function structurally and rhetorically within the zine's multimodal space?
- How do students **index or signal their multilingual identity and agency** through conscious and unconscious linguistic and visual variation in their zines?
- How does the functional **variation** in language choice in spoken communication **vary based on task and interlocutor** during the zine creation process?

Zine from Student A[1]



[1]Zine pages have been reorganized for ease of viewing on the poster. Scan the QR code to access the appendix with zines along with the ongoing references list.

Theoretical framework

Pedagogical translanguaging views the repertoire of a multilingual speaker as a whole, therefore validates speakers integrating all of the resources available (Garcia & Li, 2014; Cenoz & Gorter, 2021). This divergence from monolingual norms constitutes multilingual variation.

Anticolonial Ethnography aims to directly address language hierarchy enforced by assimilationist ESL practices, such as dismissing non-standard forms of errors (Rosa, 2019). Translingual forms are resources for constructing and indexing identity in discourse (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). This approach prioritizes students' full agency over content, language, and modality of the project, to elicit authentic variation.

Methodology

This project's methodology combines critical ethnography with an analysis of multilingual variation. The analysis is grounded in *Indexicality Theory* (Ochs, 1992), which investigates how specific linguistic and visual cues are mobilized by speakers to signal and construct their identity or group belonging.

Elicitation: Zines – handmade, self-published booklets – are low-stakes, multimodal, high-agency artifacts. The zine activity is a 2.5-3 week transmodal activity where students create a simple 8-page booklet on a topic of their choice with some topics suggested by the teacher. The explicit instruction is to use any resources (L1, L2, visual elements) to narrate personal stories. The participants will complete the zine activity in stages.

Field: Community-based intermediate adult ESL class.
Data: ethnographic observation of the planning and making stages with audio recordings; semi-structured interviews, final zine artifacts.

Analysis:
Structural analysis of the physical zine artifacts will be conducted at the lexical, phrasal, orthographical, and visual levels, with focus on lexical borrowing and code-meshing.

Functional analysis of the spoken discourse via the Interactional Sociolinguistics approach will focus on coding language choice shifts contextualization cues, and pragmatic functions, such as scaffolding (cognitive clarity); solidarity (in-group identity); boundary-setting (addressing the instructor) (Gumperz, 1982).

Anticipated Results

Early data and informal observations show that the high-agency zine activity elicits strategic and complex variation.

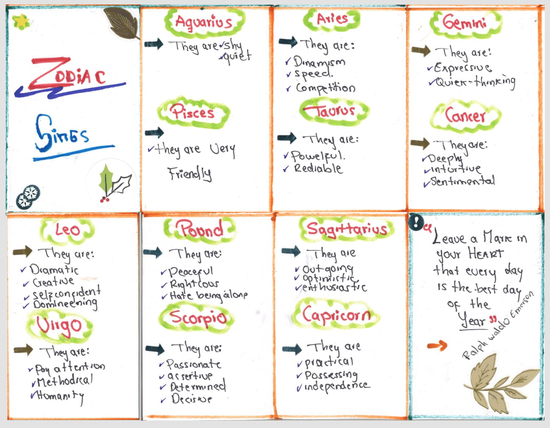
Intra-Speaker Variation based on Genre
Students exhibit different repertoires depending on formality.
Example: Student B's formal digital zine advertising tourism in Colombia uses standardized L2, while their less formal handwritten zine on zodiac signs uses L1/L2 code-meshing.

Stylistic Variation and Affective Labor
In the written medium, students use informal or non-standard orthography not usually observed in regular ESL classroom writing.
Example: Student D used excessive exclamation points and varied font sizes to index affective labor and emphasis.

Mobilization of L1 for Indexical Meaning
When the topics of discussion have higher personal significance (e.g. religion or home), students use L1 lexical items and phrases to provide precise indexical meaning and rhetorical force.
Example: Student A used "Dhamma" to index his Buddhist identity; however, he switched to a common L2 item "pastor" when the goal was to discuss communication with wider audiences, demonstrating strategic indexical switching.

Limits of Code-Switching
It is anticipated that speakers refrain from using their L1 fully or in the same capacity as L2, as adult learners have already been exposed to the monolingual ideology in the classroom. From data observed, I anticipate an asymmetrical mobilization of L1 for lexical and phrasal insertion or affective emphasis.

Zine from Student B



Future Directions

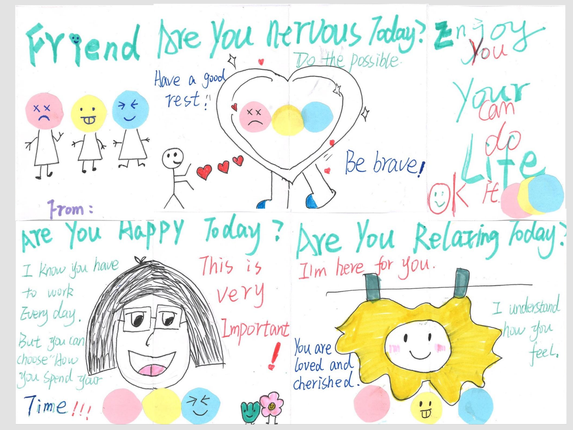
Comparative Discourse Analysis: Systematically compare the frequency and type of variation found in the zines vs. in formal, teacher-centered written assignments.

Observation and Transcription: The zine activity will be repeated with a new cohort; the planning and creating stages will be observed, recorded, and transcribed.

Discussion

The implementation of the zine activity provides a unique corpus of data on written, transmodal variation, validating and reframing "non-native" forms as dynamic sociolinguistic resources.
Systemically documenting such variation rather than classifying it through the native-speaker deficit model expands the scope of sociolinguistic variation analysis to include ESL populations, beyond the conversation on second-language acquisition.

Zine from Student D



Acknowledgements

I want to thank Dr. Jennifer Sclafani who has been an amazing advisor and instructor; overall the faculty of the Applied Linguistics Department at UMass Boston; Apostolos Koutropoulos; Alaska Literacy Program; and all participants in this research so far.