





“Absence makes the heart grow fonder”: Linguistic and Social Experiences of Immigrant Students in Brazil

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2025-02-26	<p>This study explores the impact of plurilingualism on the academic and social experiences of immigrant students in Curitiba, Brazil, utilizing Critically Engaged Language and Literacy Workshops (CELLWs). This research employed arts-based methodologies within CELLWs to probe into the experiences and identities of sixteen immigrant students enrolled in a Brazilian Portuguese as an Additional Language class. CELLWs are designed to foster not only language development but also cultural integration, using critical literacies to challenge and expand the participants' understanding of their new social environments. Drawing on data from CELLWs activities, initial findings reveal that these workshops fostered opportunities for immigrant students to connect their linguistic repertoires with personal and collective identities, enhancing their sense of belonging and agency. The findings provide insights into how educational settings can better support immigrant students, highlighting the role of critical literacies and arts-based research in enhancing educational inclusivity and effectiveness.</p> <p>Keywords: Plurilingualism, critical literacies, immigrant education, critically engaged language and literacy workshops.</p>
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Introduction

Gousth left the Republic of Congo in early 2024 with the dream of studying law in Brazil and being published as a poet. Coming from a French-speaking country, he faced the dual challenge of becoming proficient in Brazilian Portuguese, a completely new language for him, and understanding the complex academic content taught in this language. For this reason, he joined a class within Brazilian Portuguese as an Additional Language program offered by the university where he intends to study, an academic requirement instituted by the Brazilian government for immigrants who wish to enter higher education in the public system.

In addition to Gousth, the class included fifteen other students from different nationalities, all preparing to take the CELPE-BRAS exam, a standardized test that assesses proficiency in Brazilian Portuguese and determines the eligibility of immigrants to join the country's public universities. The program is coordinated by professors from the undergraduate course in Modern Languages, specializing in Brazilian Portuguese Language Teaching. What Gousth and his colleagues have undertaken reflects a growing trend in the history of Brazil, a country



shaped by successive waves of immigration. Current transnational movements, which include a significant number of refugees and immigrants, emphasize the continuity of this legacy as more people seek a new beginning on Brazilian ground.

The inclusion of immigrant students in educational systems that are traditionally monolingual demands studies and reflections on pedagogical and emotional strategies that favor the learning of a second language while offering cultural support. The justification for the current study, therefore, lies in the relevance of developing inclusive and effective educational practices that not only reflect academic skills but also promote a welcoming environment for all students.

Considering this scenario, the study aimed to explore plurilingual education and its impact on immigrant participation in the Brazilian educational system. Since linguistic diversity is on the increase and has an impact on this reality, it is necessary to understand the unique challenges arising from a demographic that often lacks adequate support in a variety of areas. Therefore, as an answer to the pressing need to understand and support these students, Critically Engaged Language and Literacy Workshops (CELLWs) offer a novel approach through a series of arts-based activities.

Serving as both a methodological tool and theoretical framework, CELLWs delve into the discourses and experiences of students in plurilingual and multicultural contexts. They explore the intersection of identities—such as place, race, and nationality—and provide a platform for students to share their voices and experiences. Through arts-based activities, such as narrative writing and collaborative art projects, CELLWs challenge prevailing power structures and ideologies, facilitating a richer understanding of the immigrant experience. This approach not only supports language acquisition but also fosters deeper cultural and social investigation. As such, this study is situated at the critical intersection of immigration, language, identity, and plurilingual education. The increasing complexity of educational landscapes across the world urges in-depth reflections on pedagogical approaches that can best address the diverse needs of plurilingual students while defining the multifaceted experiences migrant students go through.

The researchers used the following question to guide their investigation: *“How do academic and social experiences of immigrant students in Brazil impact their plurilingualism development, as explored through Critically Engaged Language and Literacy Workshops (CELLWs)?”* The study employed qualitative research methodologies, specifically the use of CELLWs, to analyze the personal and academic experiences that occur within the complex interplay of language, culture, and identity. These workshops helped to provide a unique lens to view how these experiences shaped the students' abilities to navigate the plurilingual fabric of Brazilian society.

Literature Review

In contemporary discussions of plurilingual education, CELLWs (Zaidi et al., 2025) emerge as a powerful framework to support immigrant students' academic and social integration. CELLWs draw on principles of critical literacies (Freire, 1996; Pack, 2022; Çelebi, 2022) and arts-based methodologies (Borgdoff, 2013; Lee, 2023), aiming to create spaces where participants' linguistic repertoires are valued and expanded.

Transnational Movements and Critical Literacies

Transnationalism is the process through which immigrants maintain social, economic, and cultural ties across national borders while adapting to new environments (Zhou & Lee, 2013; Windle & O'Brien, 2019). It is not a uniform experience: it affects individuals differently within families or community members (Zhou & Lee, 2013). In linguistic terms, its effects are felt in how language binds with the economy (Windle & O'Brien, 2019) when making decisions about a new destination, as language often intersects with economic factors in decisions about migration. Students who go to a new country become language learners and, consequently, victims of "fraudulent hierarchies" (Windle & O'Brien, 2019, p. 3) to which languages are submitted. Despite sharing community or familial ties, individuals engaged in transnational movements often experience their new environments differently affected by personal traits, flexibility, and social connections, which also have consequences for learning a new language. Adaptation to diverse contexts is thus a fundamental aspect of transnationalism, as individuals strive for their survival (Windle & O'Brien, 2019).

Within this landscape, plurilingualism emerges as a crucial asset. Plurilingualism, as the authors propose in this study, refers to the dynamic and interconnected use of multiple languages, where they coexist and interact within a single communicative repertoire (Cummings & Early, 2011; Dressler, 2014). It understands that language use move fluidly across them depending on context and need. Plurilingualism, therefore, becomes an important asset that enables transnational individuals to surmount language barriers and engage effectively within various communities. In addition to linguistic interactions, transnationalism involves other forms of communication, including cultural exchanges, information sharing and posting, and participation in social networks (Zhou & Lee, 2013).

In essence, there is a unique connection between the country that is welcoming its immigrants and the spoken language (Burdett, 2023), which demands new knowledge and new literacies for effective communication. More than that, these literacies need to be critical in order to meet the demands of life and coexistence in a new society. Furthermore, Weng (2021, p. 198) underscores critical literacies as having “a pivotal role in contemporary language and literacy education and research.” Within this context, they can cause discomfort for both teachers and students, especially by placing students at the center of the debate about the social issues they face (Çelebi, 2022; Weng, 2021). Consequently, the comprehension and creation of texts across various modes and media are essential for active engagement within a new community.

This necessity arises as emerging realities shape and define the parameters of this stage in an immigrant's life (Burdett, 2023).

As Çelebi (2022) and Pack (2022) emphasize, critical literacies enable students to reflect on power dynamics and develop an understanding of their identities within new social contexts. Such literacies are not merely academic tools but are essential for the effective integration and empowerment of immigrant students in plurilingual settings. The criticality of these literacies lies in the nuanced perception of language (and the learning process) as being sociocultural (Çelebi, 2022; Weng, 2021). This comprehension of critical literacies is fundamentally crucial for language educators and reinforces the notion that in a world characterized by transnational and plurilingual movements, balancing what students will encounter in their new society with the identities they bring is crucial for transformative and meaningful education (Freire, 1996). Therefore, reflecting on identity should be a priority in studies such as the one being addressed here.

Identity, Multiculturalism, and Language Learning

As recent research emphasizes the impact of transnational movements on educational practices through critical literacies, it becomes essential to delve deeper into how these literacies intersect with the personal identities of immigrant students. The concept of identity employed here refers to the different aspects that make up the self, ranging from the first and last name to the belief system and lifestyle of each person (Siebenhütter, 2023; Storto, 2022). Identity, inherently linked to language use and acquisition, plays a pivotal role in how individuals experience and respond to new educational environments (Zaidi et al., 2025). Identities are produced in the most diverse spaces, and a person can have multiple identities, which vary according to the context (Storto, 2022), a crucial aspect for plurilingual people.

There are numerous reasons to consider the issues surrounding plurilingual learners' identities, particularly due to their linguistic nature and their direct impact on the relationship between teachers and additional language learners (Dressler, 2014). As Siebenhütter (2023) points out:

Described in more detail, language may be an identity-forming medium in two ways: (1) language is an important means of interaction between the individual and its self, of reflection and thus part of self-understanding, (2) language is a prerequisite for verbal interaction with others and language may be used by others to identify a person (p.3)

However, the development of a plurilingual identity is not something that occurs automatically. Fisher et al. (2018) suggest that there are recurring misconceptions about the development of a plurilingual identity that emerges without structured support. Thus, this is not a process that happens without guidance from teachers and critical reflection from students, and it is here that critical literacies play an important role in the whole process. In essence, if educators do not acknowledge that the languages students already possess are integral to their identities (Dressler, 2014), it may lead to a classroom environment that

oppresses and undermines students' sense of well-being. This oversight can reduce students to mere learners, overlooking their pre-existing knowledge and experiences and disregarding their identity development.

In plurilingual, multicultural classrooms, teachers and students have the opportunity to explore linguistic identities (Cummings & Early, 2011; Dressler, 2014). Insights gained from this exploration ought to help both sides understand how identities are influenced and formed by multiple factors, including their personal journey with language learning, which creates a plurilingual identity unique to their contexts (Siebenhütter, 2023; Storto, 2022). Within the context of plurilingual identity, languages may hold equal value or confer a "higher self-identificatory value than others" (Siebenhütter, 2023, p. 1). Ultimately, the process of language acquisition in plurilingual environments should consider the interaction between various languages and cultural contexts and thereby promote and foster societies that embrace and nurture such diversity (Çelebi, 2022; Siebenhütter, 2023).

Arts-based Research

Exemplified by the complexity of plurilingual identities within the diverse sociocultural tapestry of cities like Curitiba, arts-based research (ABR) methodologies offer a unique lens to delve deeper into these experiences. By utilizing these creative methodologies, researchers and educators can capture the intricate expressions of identity that traditional language learning might overlook (Ehret & Leander, 2019; Shafizad et al., 2020; Zaidi et al., 2024a, 2024b, 2025). In fact, arts-based approaches complement the critical literacies framework and enrich the understanding of how immigrant students navigate and negotiate their identities in new linguistic landscapes. They also offer unique avenues for exploring and expressing the nuanced experiences of immigrant students, as noted by Ehret & Leander (2019) and Loveless (2019). In essence, these methodologies facilitate deeper engagement with students' personal narratives, enabling educators to harness creative expression as a means of fostering understanding and empathy within the classroom.

Additionally, as Lee (2023, p. 183) reiterates, besides academic writing, the value of personal narratives can be perceived as a process that can emerge from other multimodal means that are often used in the classroom. Currently, language teaching is still perceived and evaluated as “a bounded entity that can be measured, leveled, increased, and seen as lacking in some.” This view, rooted in European colonialism, ignores the sociocultural relevance of language learning, often restricting the use of counter-storytelling (Lee & Lee, 2021) – telling stories from the point of view of those who are often cast aside – from being used. ABR refines this perspective by examining different issues and challenges that are expressed through drawings, songs, and painting rather than giving a permanent answer (Bourgault et al., 2021). The process allows participants to share their insights in different ways, valuing their languages and identities, as well as their connections to the arts. Participants and researchers translate knowledge using representations and meanings while disrupting traditional qualitative research (Moris & Paris, 2021; Shafizad et al., 2020). As a methodology, it is

participatory, and those involved with arts-based studies can connect visual literacy to embodied experiences and traditional research practices (Moris & Paris, 2021).

ABR offers scholars new ways to access aspects of participants’ daily lives that could otherwise be kept hidden or difficult to express (Shafizad et al., 2020). As they are always embedded in context, there is not a single art practice that is saturated with these stories, as they will always be unique and particular to those who are telling them (Borgdoff, 2013). For plurilingual students, ABR can explore and go beyond the limitations of a single language and provides students with the opportunity to engage in a creative process that allows them to generate and communicate knowledge (Bourgault et al., 2021).

Within arts-based approaches, workshops have emerged as powerful methodological tools that go beyond data collection. When intentionally designed, workshops offer structured yet flexible spaces where participants can co-construct meaning through collaborative, creative, and multimodal engagement (Gauntlett, 2007; Ørngreen & Levinsen, 2017). In these settings, the process of making an artifact, whether through drawing, storytelling, or symbolic expression, serves both as inquiry and as reflection (Leavy, 2017). This aligns with participatory and critical pedagogies by positioning students as active contributors rather than passive subjects, allowing for personal narratives and identities to surface in nonlinear and embodied ways (Moris & Paris, 2021). In the context of immigrants, workshops can become sites of identity negotiation, affording participants the agency to explore their multilingual realities while challenging narratives in learning environments.

Critically Engaged Language and Literacy Workshops

From a plurilingual perspective, projects that involve critical literacies incorporate various hands-on protocols, such as community involvement in the teaching and learning process or the use of reflection journals in the languages that the student knows, thereby promoting more significant development. Rahman (2022) argues that “teachers can leverage the culture and experiences of their students as a catalyst” for learning from these practices. This means that the classroom should be welcoming and foster plurilingual experiences, even if the teacher does not know all the students’ languages (Rahman et al., 2022; Windle & O’Brien, 2019). Developed from critical pedagogy and the proposal to help students learn what they really need to be active citizens in society (Freire, 1996, 2014), critical literacies have been prevalent for some time but have become even more so within migratory movements. As a framework, they allow us to reflect on the practices that are still used in schools and to question policies and ideologies that shape the learning context and the school space (Çelebi, 2022; Jordão & Fogaça, 2007).

Anchored in critical literacies (Çelebi, 2022; Jordão & Fogaça, 2007), the CELLWs were developed in Canada to respond to the pedagogical needs of immigrant students (Zaidi et al., 2024a, 2024b, 2025). These workshops aim to probe the narratives and discourses embedded in K-12 education, facilitating a reexamination of social justice, inequality, and the ideologies intertwined in schooling contexts. Considering the complexities of plurilingual development

in educational contexts, studies such as those by García (2009) and Baker (2011) highlight the importance of approaches that value linguistic and cultural diversity. Inspired by these principles, CELLWs sessions have the potential to engage students in creating visual narratives that reflect their personal journeys and interactions with themes of justice and identity. This approach not only fosters a culture of critical reflection but also encourages dynamic dialogue among participants, effectively incorporating their diverse cultural backgrounds and linguistic skills into the learning process.

This adaptation of the CELLWs to the Brazilian educational landscape marks the framework's first application outside Canada (Zaidi et al., 2025). It presented a unique opportunity to evaluate how educational strategies tailored to diverse immigration backgrounds in Canada could be recalibrated and implemented in Brazil to support immigrant students confronting similar adversities. This approach aimed at fostering a deeper understanding of how pedagogical techniques could be globally adapted to enhance educational inclusivity and effectiveness in diverse, multicultural settings.

Methodology

Curitiba, the city where this research was conducted, is recognized not only for its planned infrastructure and sustainability initiatives but also for its prominent role in integrating immigrants within the Brazilian context, especially in the South Region. According to the 2024 OBMigra Annual Report (Brasil, 2024), Brazil has experienced a significant rise in migratory activity, particularly in the Southeast region, which recorded 60,200 residence registrations in 2023. Curitiba stands out for the absorption of immigrants into the formal labor market, reflecting an economy that supports cultural and linguistic diversity. These characteristics make Curitiba an ideal setting to investigate how educational practices can facilitate inclusion and the development of plurilingual skills in multicultural environments.

In Curitiba, like in Canada, the challenge of effectively capturing the experiences of students from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds demands innovative approaches. This led the researchers to opt for exploring CELLWs as the primary methodology in this study. CELLWs represent an arts-based approach that accommodates the linguistic diversity of the students while exploring their cultural narratives, providing a more comprehensive understanding of their educational journeys.

Designed as a series of collaborative sessions titled “Resilience and Art: Talking to Students,” the workshops were conducted over three weeks, between September and October 2024. Sixteen students enrolled in a Brazilian Portuguese as an Additional Language class participated in the study. The workshops were held once a week on Fridays, with each session lasting approximately five hours. To respect participant confidentiality and promote a safe research environment, individuals were given the option to choose pseudonyms. The demographic details, as self-reported by the participants, are summarized in Table 1 below, which includes age, country of origin, and duration of stay in Brazil.

Table 1. Demographics of participants from this study

Participant	Age group	Country	Arrived
Eduardo	18 – 24	Honduras	Less than a year
Gloria	18 – 24	Kenya	Less than a year
Valerie	18 – 24	Nigeria	Six months or less
Paola	18 – 24	Panama	Less than a year
Frederick	18 – 24	Ghana	Less than a year
Mileu	18 - 24	Kenya	Less than a year
CJ	18 - 24	Kenya	Less than a year
Printemps	18 – 24	Congo	Six months or less
Neftali	18 – 24	Equatorial Guinea	Six months or less
Sultan	18 – 24	Congo	Less than a year
Joseph	18 – 24	Congo	Less than a year
Gousth	18 – 24	Congo	Less than a year
OhJoe	25 – 34	Ghana	Less than a year
Chacha	25 – 34	Congo	Six months or less
Fiona	18 – 24	Gabon	Less than a year
Mimy	18 – 24	Benin	Six months or less

Additional demographic data collected underscores the relevance of the CELLWs approach for this study. Notably, 14 of the 16 students identified as black and two as mixed race, highlighting the racial diversity within the group. All participants were immigrants, reflecting the transnational dynamics central to this research. The gender distribution within the group was evenly split between males and females, providing a balanced perspective on the experiences explored through the workshops.

The data was collected through a series of five workshops. Each workshop followed a structured sequence involving collective discussion, individual or group arts-based production (including drawing, painting, and storytelling), moments of reflection and sharing, and a break. Throughout these sessions, participants' insights were captured through naturally occurring group discussions and reflective sharing activities, rather than through formal post-workshop interviews or focus groups. This format was designed to foster both linguistic expression and critical engagement with participants' lived experiences. Activities were developed to support the exploration of language, identity, and belonging, with adaptations made based on participant feedback to ensure cultural responsiveness. The

proposed activities, based on previous CELLWs initiatives (Zaidi et al., 2024a, 2024b, 2025), were:

1. *Mapping*: Students reflected on shared journeys, connecting places in the world and Brazil to their language learning experience, in any language in which they felt comfortable. It encouraged students to spatially and visually connect their transnational journeys and linguistic trajectories (Ehret & Leander, 2019).
2. *Rock painting*: Students used rocks, paint, and other tools to express symbols or representations of their countries, cultures, and identities. This activity is a low-threshold artistic medium to represent personal and cultural identities symbolically while supporting non-verbal modes (Bourgault et al., 2021).
3. *Postcard writing*: Students wrote postcards to friends and family back home, recounting parts of their journey toward learning Brazilian Portuguese in a language of their choice. It was introduced in response to early observations that some activities did not foster sufficient critical reflection on language. (Lee & Lee, 2021).
4. *Fingerprint poem*: Students wrote poems in a fingerprint template, expressing their wishes, dreams, and concerns about their identities in any language they wanted. It leveraged the symbolism of fingerprints to support students' voices and encourage self-reflection (Moris & Paris, 2021).
5. *Comic strip creation*: In pairs and trios, students discussed their feelings about moving to Brazil and learning Brazilian Portuguese, and later represented these feelings in comic strips using digital software. It allowed students to experience collaborative multimodal storytelling, peer interaction, and negotiation of meaning across linguistic and cultural modes (Garcia, 2019; Apperley & Walsh, 2012).

These workshops were grounded in principles of ABR methodologies (Borgdoff, 2013; Lee, 2023; Shafizad et al., 2020). The proposed activities were chosen for their proven capacity to foster critical reflection, multimodal expression, and the construction of narrative identities in plurilingual students.

During the workshops, participants received support from three classroom teachers and two guest facilitators who are experienced artists and art educators in Brazil. These facilitators played a crucial role in guiding the students through the artistic activities and assisting with language tasks, particularly in contexts requiring the use of Portuguese. This support structure was designed to ensure that all participants could engage fully in the creative and linguistic aspects of the workshops, thereby enhancing the educational value and inclusivity of the sessions.

To comply with ethical standards, all data collected during the workshops was anonymized and securely stored on a dedicated drive, accessible only to the research team. Prior to the workshops, all participants, facilitators, and researchers signed a consent form. This form detailed the processes of how workshop artifacts would be handled, specifying that students would waive ownership of any creations for the purpose of research while ensuring their right

to privacy and confidentiality. These measures were put in place to respect the participants' privacy and to comply with ethical research practices, ensuring that all generated content could be used for academic purposes without compromising individual identities.

The study combined thematic analyses and social semiotics to analyze the complex layers of language, identity, and culture reflected in the participants' creations during the workshops. This approach helped undertake the systematic identification, analysis, and reporting of themes that would be uncovered within the data and provided a detailed examination of how participants had expressed their multicultural and plurilingual experiences through artistic mediums.

Since CELLWs comprise different artistic ways of expression with writing, social semiotics explored how students represent and negotiate their identities and experiences in the context of their immigration and adaptation to a new linguistic and cultural environment. NVivo software served as a complementary analytical tool, focusing on the meaning-making processes through the various semiotic resources such as the images, colors, and other visual arrangements used by the students.

This combination of thematic analysis and social semiotics, supported by NVivo, enabled a comprehensive exploration of both the overt and subtle ways in which the workshop participants communicated their thoughts and feelings. This dual approach ensured that both the content and the form of their expressions were thoroughly analyzed, providing a rich, multidimensional understanding of the data that aligns with the complex realities of living and learning in a plurilingual context.

Findings & Discussion

This section presents the findings emerging from the workshops. Drawing from the students' artistic artifacts and discussions, the analysis is organized around key themes that illustrate the participants' experiences of transnational movements, language learning, identity negotiation, and plurilingual development. Each theme is anchored in the voices and creative expressions of the students, highlighting how their narratives reflect broader sociocultural dynamics and the role of critical literacies in shaping their journeys.

Valerie, from Nigeria, writes a poem about a dark-skinned queen, and her colleague, Frederick, writes about “the ebony woman,” a mother who works under the intense sun of the African continent. Eduardo is from Central America and speaks Spanish, but he feels that he communicates better in English than in Spanish. Paola, also Latina, says that she prefers Portuguese.

These accounts summarize the conversations and artistic artifacts the students participating in this workshop produced. The themes that emerged from the activities and conversations showcased various aspects of the student participants' relationship with issues of transnational movements, identity, language learning, and plurilingualism.

“Saudade” is a celebration

The term "saudade," unique to Portuguese, conveys a profound sense of nostalgia—more poignant than a mere "I miss you" and encapsulates a longing for the absent and cherished aspects of something from the past, such as a person, a place, or a situation. This theme resonated deeply during the workshops as students grappled with their feelings of missing home and their decisions to relocate to Brazil.

During a comic strip workshop, students created narratives in pairs or trios, capturing shared experiences of migration and journeys. One comic strip illustrated their ambivalence, portraying dialogues that intertwined homesickness with doubts about their decisions. This is depicted in Figure 1, where characters express their fears and longing for their homeland, reflecting the emotional weight of their journey.



Create your own at Storyboard That

Figure 1. Comic strip that reflects the questions about moving to Brazil, using the word “saudade.” The translation of the comic strip is “Hi, how are you?” / “I’m fine” / “I am afraid of talking to girls... What are you afraid of?” / “I am missing my country” / “I see...”

Valerie's reflections during the workshop underscored her ongoing adjustment challenges and her complex emotions tied to "saudade." In the analysis, she explains how the comic strip represents not only her feelings of missing home but also her struggle with the unfamiliar social environment in Brazil. This narrative aligns with Freire's (1996) discussion on the critical role of dialogue in shaping one's identity and understanding in new cultural contexts. The sense of being "in-between" is central to understanding immigrant experiences and is vividly illustrated through the arts-based activities in the CELLWs.

Mileu and Paola's comic strip also delved into the nuances of frustration and regret linked to migrating to Brazil. Utilizing a blend of semiotic resources—such as thought bubbles and evolving facial expressions—this strip captures intensifying emotions as the character progresses through their day, culminating in a poignant reflection upon arrival in Brazil. Figure 2 illustrates this journey, marking the transition from anticipation to doubt and, finally, a resolve to confront the challenges ahead.

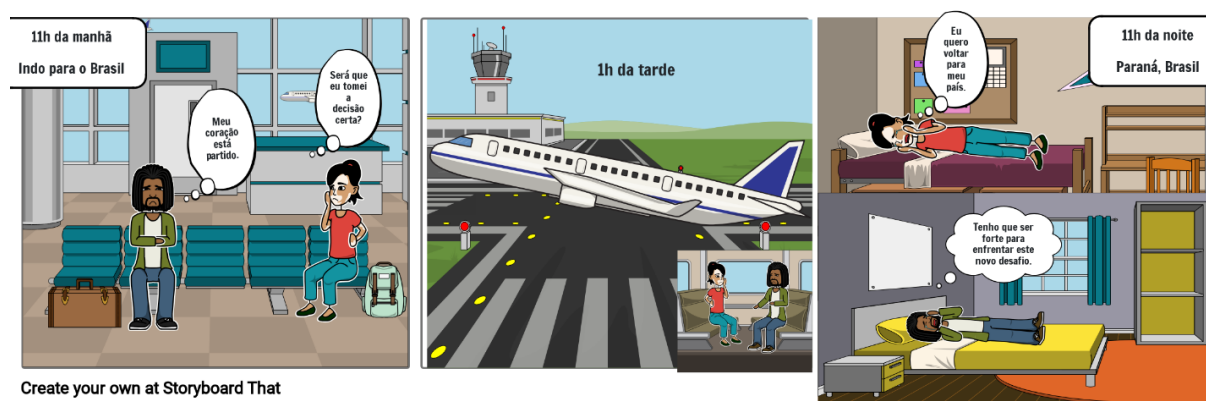


Figure 2. Feelings of uncertainty and regret expressed through comic strips. The translation of the comic strip is “11 AM, going to Brazil” / “My heart is broken” / “Did I make the right decision?” / “1 PM” / “11 PM, Paraná, Brazil” / “I want to go back to my country” / “I have to be strong to face this challenge.”

Mileu shared similar sentiments with Valerie, voicing feelings of homesickness and uncertainty. The narrative crafted by him and Paola reflects a common feeling among immigrants—the emotional and psychological mixed feelings of adjusting to a new life while longing for the familiar. Their use of visual and textual elements in the comic strip served to communicate these complex feelings, which were further explored through the CELLWs with a strong focus on critical literacies and identity negotiation.

These narratives align with Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) social semiotic theory, which suggests that meaning in visual texts is dynamically constructed through the interaction of visual elements. The use of color, spatial organization, and facial expressions in the comics not only conveys individual emotions but also represents a collective narrative of cultural adaptation and emotional resilience.

The final frames of the comic strip reflect the participants’ decision to express their feelings. Rather than representing singular emotions felt by two different people, they highlighted the “mixed feelings” experienced simultaneously, a phenomenon Paola described as “different feelings at the same time for the same situation.”

By embedding these experiences within the framework of CELLWs and critical literacies, as suggested by Çelebi (2022) and Weng (2021), the workshop provided a space for students to critically engage with their narratives. The approach aided in their linguistic and cultural adaptation but also fostered a deeper understanding of their personal and collective identities. Additionally, the integration of arts-based methodologies encouraged a more nuanced exploration of these themes, allowing for a richer depiction of the immigrant experience in educational settings.

These ideas that revolve around missing home and the feelings that arise from moving to a new country were not singularly present in the comic strips. During the fingerprint poem writing workshop, students also explored the underlying feelings of moving to Brazil and starting a new life. Figure 3 below includes Fiona’s fingerprint poem, which she decided to write as a collection of words and expressions to map her emotional and cultural journey.

A second point that reflects aspects of her identity is the choice of switching between different languages (French, Brazilian Portuguese, and Fang) to represent these feelings. As Fiona commented during the interview, the choice of incorporating these languages into her poem accurately reflected her preference for one language over another, depending on the situation. Fiona also utilized a range of semiotic resources, including drawings and colors, to articulate a complex system of personal and cultural identities. Her plurilingual expression aligns with the concept of plurilingual identity, where multiple languages coexist within an individual. Affiliated with Cummins' and Early's (2011) assertion that identity is fluid and negotiated continuously through language interactions, the exercise allowed participants to draw on various linguistic resources depending on the context or emotional need.

While participants expressed longing and homesickness constantly throughout the activities, another equally important theme emerged: the students' pride in their cultural background and how they celebrate and reaffirm their heritage through creativity. This theme is heavily based on their engagement with rock paintings and fingerprint poems.

My culture is (y)our culture

To overcome barriers and feelings like *saudade*, many participants relied on cultural representations that reinforced or reminded them of their origins. During the workshops, participants were encouraged to use their preferred language and, even in non-verbal artistic activities such as rock painting, to seek other semiotic means to express their identities. This often led them to continually return to symbols and other cultural representations that highlighted their identity as immigrants.

As an example, Fiona used her fingerprint poem to discuss her anxieties, preferences, and doubts. Through the combination of colors and drawings with written words, she emphasized the longing for her family and the questions that crossed her mind during discussions and activities. Her artistic expression illustrates the complex interplay of cultural memory and current experiences, a concept that resonates with the ideas of memory and identity in transnational contexts explored by authors such as Baker (2011) and García (2009).

Other student participants felt compelled to transform culture into representations of feelings and identity as immigrants, such as the fingerprint poems and rock painting. Figure 4 below showcases the fingerprint poem written by Gousth, who chose to write about the African woman as a figure of motherhood, labor, and generosity.



Figure 4. Gousth's fingerprint poem, titled "Femme Africaine"

Written in French, Gousth's poem reflects on the ebony-skinned woman, whose "sweat is synonymous with hard work." He typically enjoys writing poetry and believes it is the form that best expresses his identity, thoughts, and understanding of the world he lives in. Gousth's representation as an immigrant from Africa was therefore manifested through this poem.

This focus on the utilization of native languages and cultural symbols aligns with critical literacies, as outlined by Çelebi (2022) and Jordão & Fogaça (2007), which advocate for educational practices that empower students to explore and articulate their social identities and lived experiences. Critical literacies encourage and equip students with tools to examine power dynamics and cultural narratives that shape learning environments. When students can rely on their backgrounds in the classroom, they shape a more inclusive educational setting.

Arts-based methodologies, as discussed by Ehret & Leander (2019) and Loveless (2019), provide powerful tools for these explorations. They allow for the expression of complex identities and emotions that might be constrained in more traditional linguistic frameworks. By incorporating these methods, CELLWs facilitate a deeper engagement with the students' cultural backgrounds (Zaidi, 2024a, 2025), enhancing their ability to navigate and integrate their transnational experiences into their new sociocultural landscapes.

A good example of how CELLWs support this engagement is the rock painting workshop. For this activity, the students were given the following prompt: “When considering your past experiences, what events or circumstances stand out as significant in shaping who you are today? What parts of your experience and culture are meaningful to you?” Each participant received a garden rock, which they were asked to use to express their responses to the prompts.

For this activity, the artist facilitator, a Brazilian art teacher, encouraged students to think about how art and culture can be the same. She reminded them that art is a form of cultural representation, while culture is manifested more through art. This helped students to think about how these two ideas connect to their identities. Figure 5 includes three rocks painted by different students during this activity.



Figure 5. Rock paintings with cultural symbols and representations.

These three rocks came to represent the students' identity through cultural symbols. On the first one, Eduardo chose to paint the Honduran flag along with a cup of coffee, the coffee berries on a bush, and the sentence “Amor ao café” (love for coffee). Coming from Central America, Eduardo highlighted that coffee was a great way to connect to people in Brazil, as it is one thing that all Latin American countries have in common. However, when choosing a language, he indicated that he would rather communicate in English, having written his fingerprint poem in this language instead of Portuguese.

CJ chose to paint the green tuk-tuk (the main means of transportation in Kenya) on the second rock, along with colorful flowers, a common sight in the coastal city of Mombasa in Kenya. The flowers were painted as an important symbol of the country: “It’s a huge part of

our culture. [...] On Valentine’s Day and things like that, you always find flowers, you can find them on the side of the road...”

Connecting the flowers and the tuk-tuk to her life and identity, CJ highlighted that she had considerable time on the coast of Kenya, visiting family and enjoying herself. Here, she emphasized that “every time I see a flower, I think of home,” the flower being a common gift among friends and family members.

The last rock, painted by Neftali, was representative of the beautiful forests of his country, Equatorial Guinea. He chose a very specific tree, the bombax (a cotton tree):

My country is a country with a lot of forests a lot of green wealth. So... Companies in the wood sector are allowed [...] But there is a ban on cutting down this tree. I don’t know what it’s called in Portuguese [...] It represents a national identity for the country. It is on the country’s coat [of arms]. That is where the country was separated [became independent] from Spain, under this tree.

The semiotic approach to these artworks allowed for an analysis of how symbols and color choices communicate complex narratives and cultural values. As noted by scholars such as Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), every color and image employed by the students can be seen as a deliberate choice that conveys specific cultural messages and personal sentiments. This aligns with the principles of critical literacies, which encourage the interrogation of these signs and symbols to understand their roles in shaping personal and collective identities (Zaidi et al., 2025).

Alongside cultural affirmations, students also reflected critically on the challenges they have faced in navigating Brazilian Portuguese as a new linguistic environment. Their creative works captured emotional journeys and linguistic struggles, which are explored through their portrayal of Portuguese as a monster to be conquered and defeated.

Brazilian Portuguese is a monster

The initial workshop during the data collection involved a mapping activity during which students were asked to reflect on connections between language, identity, and activities they do in these places. For instance, students used the mapping activity to think about other languages and dialects they speak or understand besides English, French, or Spanish.

As the students worked with their maps, they reflected upon their journeys to Brazil and how languages had so much to reveal about their identities. During this time, researchers were walking around and talking to students about it. Three students who spoke Swahili commented that their language was highlighted as part of popular culture – referring to its use during the 1994 Disney film production of *The Lion King*. They felt the linguistic moments in the film, such as the use of the expression “hakuna matata,” were very representative of their culture and language.

In addition to reflecting on language and its uses in different spaces, students were asked to reflect on their reasons for learning Portuguese. Out of the 16 students, the majority (10)

mentioned learning the language to be able to communicate within a new society. The perspectives of the remaining participants were evenly divided between pursuing higher education (3) and engaging in professional activities (3).

Since CELLWs support reflections on language and literacies, the written activities, like the fingerprint poem, allowed students to put Brazilian Portuguese into practice when they felt comfortable. However, in activities such as postcards, comic strips, and mapping, students were invited to think critically about language (Zaidi et al., 2025). Beyond written practice, these activities were centered on the students’ journey of language learning.

During the postcard activity, participants were asked to write as if they were sending it to someone back home. They were given the following prompt: “Tell someone you like about your experience learning Brazilian Portuguese in Curitiba.” Students were free to write it in the language they felt most comfortable in. Breaking with a common understanding that Spanish speakers tend to find it easier to learn Portuguese, Paola’s postcard to her sister’s friend highlights that the learning process had been difficult, as shown in Figure 6.

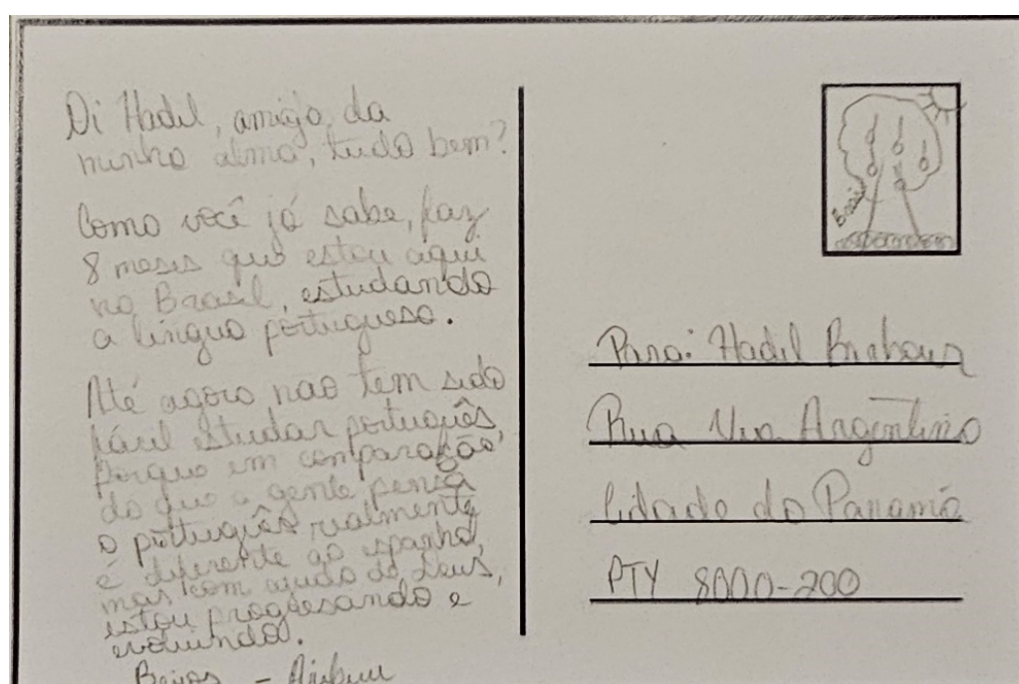


Figure 6. Paola’s postcard, commenting on the difficulty of learning Portuguese. The postcard reads “Hi Hadil, my sister’s friend, how are you? As you know, it has been eight months [since] I’m here in Brazil, studying Portuguese. So far, it has not been easy because, compared to what we think, Portuguese is really different from Spanish. But with help from God, I am progressing and evolving. Kisses.”

Paola, like many newcomer students, reflected on her struggles with learning Portuguese and the particular challenge of being a Spanish speaker learning a different Latin language. She admitted that, when talking with her mother, she often struggled with mixing words in both languages: “[My mother] says, no, you have to remember Spanish! [...] Some people believe

that if you speak Spanish, you will speak Portuguese. When you speak Spanish, we struggle a bit because we think we know Portuguese, but we know just a little bit."

Arriving in Brazil, although she was able to navigate her way through the airport, she had to rely on her familiarity with the English language to get around elsewhere in the country. Eight months later, she declared that she was "living in a girls-only student dorm that helped me become confident in communicating in Portuguese."

The CELLWs methodology facilitated a deeper exploration of these experiences through creative and critical lenses (Zaidi et al., 2025). The fingerprint poems, postcards, and comic strips were not simply assignments but rather reflected critical pedagogical tools that allowed the student participants to articulate and navigate their linguistic journeys. For example, Paola's postcard vividly illustrates the common misconception that Spanish speakers will find Portuguese easy to learn, challenging this narrative and highlighting her personal struggles and achievements.

All the students in this class, including Paola, were preparing to take the Certificate of Proficiency in Brazilian Portuguese (CELPE-BRAS) by November, less than a month after the workshops had taken place. During the last workshop, the day that students were working with the comic strips and the postcards, students were encouraged to include this upcoming exam in their productions. Although Paola emphasized the difficulties in learning the language while being a Spanish speaker, other students decided to reflect on how ready they felt to face the test.

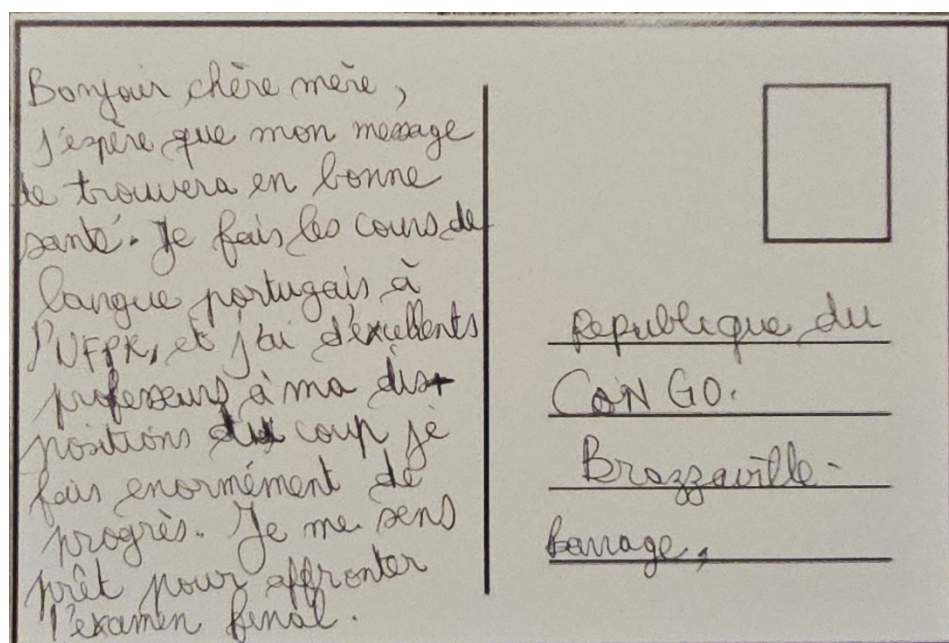


Figure 7. Gousth's postcard, reflecting his level of preparedness to take the exam. The postcard reads "Hi dear mom, I hope my message finds you in good health. I am taking the Portuguese course at [the university] and I have excellent teachers at my disposal. As a result, I am making enormous progress. I feel ready to face the final exam."

During the comic strip activity, the researchers asked participants to reflect on their language-learning journey, discussing it with a partner, and agreeing to solely use Portuguese as the primary language. Gousth, along with other students, chose to reflect on this journey in terms of being ready to take the exam and then later offered insights as to how they used the language during a reflection activity.

As mentioned earlier, some students used comic strips to express feelings of solitude and “saudade,” utilizing the language and other semiotic resources to represent their connection to Portuguese and their experience of moving to Brazil. Other students, however, decided to incorporate the comic strips as a means to discuss their feelings concerning the language.



Create your own at Storyboard That



Create your own at Storyboard That

Figure 8. Comic strips that represent Portuguese as a monster to be defeated.

These two comic strips can be portrayed as examples of how students used semiotic resources other than language to represent their fear and uncertainty of learning Brazilian Portuguese to take the standard exam. In the first example, learning Portuguese was represented by a big, fuzzy, blue monster that grew smaller as time passed, and students realized they were no longer struggling.

The choice of words at the end of the comic strip was telling: “We have defeated our fear of Portuguese,” was also emphasized by the characters’ facial expressions and the speech balloon. The monster seemed disappointed to see that he was no longer feared but rather was conquered.

The second example also positioned the Portuguese as a strong monster with horns. The choice of colors, green and yellow, referred to the Brazilian flag and attributed value to the process of learning Portuguese. In this case, although the monster became somewhat smaller, it was the expression of frustration, with smoke escaping from his head and him on his knees, that indicated his defeat.

These two comic strips are prime examples of how students articulated different semiotic resources beyond language to represent their ideas and concerns about learning Brazilian Portuguese. In social semiotics, these resources are seen as integral to constructing meaning, especially because every element is part of the meaning-making process (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

The integration of Critically Engaged Language and Literacy Workshops (CELLWs) and arts-based research (ABR) methodologies provided a platform for students to critically and creatively engage with their linguistic challenges and cultural identities (Moris & Paris, 2021; Shafizad et al., 2020). Because of the difficult and often delicate nature of these challenges, art became a valuable asset in helping students express themselves through other modes.

These approaches also fostered personal reflection and expression among the students. Activities such as the comic strips, in which students used language to reflect on language, empowered them to navigate and negotiate the complexities of learning Brazilian Portuguese in a multicultural setting (Çelebi, 2022; Jordão & Fogaça, 2007).

Together, these narratives offer a view into the complexity of immigrant students' experiences of transnationalism, language learning, and identity negotiation. Through CELLWs and supported by ABR, students were empowered and encouraged to articulate the multifaceted realities in nuanced, multimodal ways, reaffirming the value of such pedagogical approaches in multilingual education contexts.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The narratives shared in this study, such as Gousth's experience, are not isolated instances. In a global context increasingly influenced by transnational movements driven by conflicts, environmental crises, and other societal challenges, the experiences shared by participants are a pattern that highlights the need to reconsider and redesign educational strategies for plurilingual, multicultural students.

This research elucidated the potential of Critically Engaged Language and Literacy Workshops to foster reflection among students on language, identity, and culture while supporting them in language learning and literacy practices. Arts-based methodologies, such as drawing and painting, have proven effective in enabling students to express complex, abstract emotions and thoughts that would be difficult verbally. These activities helped them articulate personal narratives while bridging cultural and linguistic barriers, enhancing learners' participation in new sociocultural settings.

This was the first time that CELLWs were implemented outside Canada, as mentioned before, making it significant to understand how they work in different settings. This study was critical to showcase how teachers, researchers, and other members of the school community can adapt them to new contexts, moving away from the original setting of high schools in rural Alberta to developing cities in the Global South. This adaptation demonstrates the flexibility of CELLWs and underscores their potential as a powerful tool for addressing the challenges that arise from transnational migrations.

Critical literacies form the cornerstone of CELLWs, particularly in their role of promoting reflection on language learning intertwined with identity, sense of home(sickness), and interpersonal relationships, among other aspects. These workshops leverage critical literacies to provide a dynamic and supportive framework that enhances language learning and deeply engages with the sociocultural factors that shape language use. Therefore, CELLWs empower students to explore how their linguistic experiences are influenced by their cultural identities and personal histories. This approach supports students in developing a richer, more nuanced understanding of language as a tool for personal expression and social interaction, fostering a learning environment that values and cultivates diverse linguistic perspectives.

Future research should aim to customize these workshops to align with the unique cultural and educational backgrounds of learners in different environments, ensuring that these interventions are as inclusive and effective as possible. Continued investigation into the scalability and impact of CELLWs will contribute significantly to our understanding of how best to support the educational trajectories of plurilingual and multicultural students in an increasingly globalized world.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Statement

This research has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Board at the University of Calgary (REB24-0239).

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