

MY LITERACY AUTOBIOGRAPHY: MY INSIGHT INTO LITERACY, CONTEXT, AND IDENTITY

By Rajwan Alshareefy

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

My first encounter with qualitative research and literacy narratives as one path to researching literacy is quite recent. It started with my first semester in the MA TESOL (Master of Arts in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) program in the U.S. in 2011. My exposure to the literature during my course work was limited to the class readings, in addition to the reading I did for my MA thesis. Throughout the two years that I was in the program, I had experiences, feelings, reactions, and perceptions that are unique as anyone else's. By writing this literacy autobiography, I present my personal struggle to become literate in a second language, and I show how my literacy evolved and my identity was (re-)shaped as I advanced in my education. I believe that a literacy autobiography is a powerful tool that enables me to deeply investigate this struggle and the process of becoming literate. It is an effective method for helping me to reflect on my language education and literacy journey. This autobiography also helps me to explore the deeply rooted practices and perceptions of what it means to be a learner, a teacher, and a teacher-educator in multiple contexts.

Through narrating my literacy incidents, I present to the literature on identity and literacy one example of a lived experience of an L2 (second language) learner, scholar, and teacher-educator coming from an under-researched conflict zone and a war-torn country (Iraq); an experience of how war, occupation, sectarian violence, terrorism, corruption, and poverty might influence and intersect with literacy, language learning, and teaching. For this purpose, I employed the *currere* method as a way to reflect on my literacy experiences and identity (re)construction. In the following section, I define the *currere* method and explain how I employed it to serve the purpose of this paper.

METHODOLOGY

This work seeks insight into the question of how my L1 (first language) is regarded and/or disregarded as a linguistic resource that I capitalized on in different settings, how my identity as a bilingual scholar was (re)constructed in relation to context and language, and how reflection on past and present could help teachers, researchers, and learners to develop new insights and initiate change in the way they approach teaching. In order to systematically reflect on and report my literacy and second language narrative, I used the *currere* method devised by William Pinar in 1975. The first step in Pinar's method is "regressive," in which the writer travels back in time and records the educational incidences as they occurred in relation to context and people without any interpretation. The second step is "progressive," in which the writer envisions the future. The third step is "analytic," in which the writer thoughtfully considers her present moment and raises questions to break into parts her holistic present experiences. The fourth and last step is "synthetical," in which the writer makes use of her reflection (on past, present, and imagined future) and the knowledge she gained during the first three steps (Pinar, 1994).

Since "the regressive-progressive-analytic-synthetic does not occur in discrete temporal or conceptual units, but simultaneously" (Pinar, 2004, p. 131), my presentation of these steps in my literacy autobiography is not linear. My literacy

incidents and identity construction does not occur in the same order explained above. Rather, my autobiography is presented in the form of situations and incidents that may or may not have a chronological order but follow the *currere* method.

Reflecting on my experiences as a learner and a teacher enables me to better understand the social, political, and cultural realities influencing my literacy(es) in the academic community. Pinar (2004) stated that, “in calling for autobiography in education, I have been asking teachers and students to reconstruct themselves through academic knowledge, knowledge self-reflexively studied and dialogically encountered” (p. 21). In the next sections, I present some literacy incidents that, along with my academic knowledge, contributed to and continue to influence and (re)shape how I perceive my identity as a language learner, teacher, and scholar.

REFLECTIONS ON LITERACY, IDENTITY(S), AND CONTEXT

Before I start my narrative, in this section, I share my reflections and some key incidents in which my identity, race, and language intersect as a way to exemplify my linguistic, social, and cultural struggle in different settings. I also refer to Gee’s (1989a) term, “Discourse,” and the plural, “Discourses,” which he defines as “ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes” (p. 6). Discourses are naturally acquired over extended periods of time through interaction and “scaffolding;” they cannot be simply learned.

I always get in situations where language and identity play themselves out—situations in everyday life and in academia. Bearing in mind two language systems (Arabic and English) and having lived in two distinct and profoundly different cultural and social settings (Iraq and the United States), I wonder several times every day about what language (and what form/variety of that language) to use, with whom I should/ can use it, and in what social and cultural situations. I sometimes choose to twist my tongue a bit to sound “smarter” or more American, to show membership or intellectual closeness to a community, to accommodate a certain social or linguistic situation, to sound more friendly or familiar, or simply choose to be silent—a silence that can, in turn, be interpreted in a variety of ways. Sometimes, I lower my voice as I talk to my wife in Arabic in a public place, thinking that the way my first language sounds might be perceived as a “threat” to some people or mark me with some attributes or as belonging to a certain group, race, or ethnicity.

Before making my commitment to learn English fifteen years ago and throughout all this time, I did not know that there is more to language than mastering its grammar and vocabulary. My initial understanding of language was that it is a discrete entity—a set of expressions and words that we use to communicate meaning. I believe this understanding originated from the theoretical orientation that informed language education policies in Iraq at that time—an orientation that draws on (among other theories) the “autonomous literacy” model, which offers a view of literacy as independent and universal, rather than cultural and social (Street, 2003). As a student in that educational context (an English Department in Iraq), I learned that there is only one way English should sound, and this way is prescribed in the Oxford Bilingual Dictionary—a dictionary that I travelled over 70 miles (from my home city to the capital city) to buy for 10 dollars, which is an amount of money that took my father five days to make in 2002.

I did not know that, after eight years of studying and teaching English in my hometown, my language would fail me at some point in the future. It happened in

Philadelphia International Airport, my very first contact with native speakers of English in the U.S. After I picked up my luggage at 9:00 pm, having no plans for transportation or accommodation except for the name of the hotel—Marriott, I started asking people, who all seemed to be in a hurry and not willing to negotiate their accents, dialects, or languages to fit my ears. When they responded to my questions, I did not want to ask for clarification or use the question, “What’s that?” so as not to reveal my foreign identity. Two hours later, I was able to figure out my way to the hotel.

Reflecting on that incident in Philadelphia, I realized that I was trying to get into a discourse community without being fully equipped. My eight years of studying and teaching were not enough to qualify me to understand and be a member of the “airport” discourse, whose members (passengers, employees, etc.) are capable of using and understanding (spoken/written) languages and enacting certain identities. Gee (1989a) indicated that merely knowing the language (and its grammar) cannot stand as the most important aspect in communication. Rather, “saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations” are what he termed “Discourses” (capital D) (p. 6). As an English language learner, I focused on language (structure, vocabulary, etc.) without being aware of Discourses and the complex combinations that create and shape these Discourses.

MY L1 AND L2 LITERACIES

I grew up in a mid-sized city. My family and my entire society speak Arabic with an Iraqi dialect. In school, we studied standard, formal Arabic, which is the variety we hear on the news and read in books and newspapers. We continue to study Arabic from day one in school until we start college. In addition to this, a number of regional sub-dialects are spoken. When I come in contact with people from rural areas, I tend to switch to the country-side accent to sound closer to the social class of my interlocutor and to eliminate any perceived inferiority (of the other) associated with country-side accents. So, I can say that I am tri-dialectical. Moreover, being exposed to dialects of the neighboring Arab countries through media, I recognize and understand most of the dialects spoken across the Arab homeland. As for my second language (English), it has developed in three main settings, which I present in the following sections.

ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL

In public schools (the only place to learn a foreign language at that time), I studied English as one of 8-10 school subjects starting in 5th grade (typically age 11). At this stage, I learned the alphabet, some words, and simple grammar rules, along with cursive writing. Growing up, I learned more vocabulary and a bit more complex syntax. I never thought of using English outside school, nor did I need to use it elsewhere. I learned it to survive school tests so as to pass to the next grade. Unlike my classmates who faced tremendous difficulties with English, I had the privilege of having a mother who has a degree in French with a minor in English. She assisted me from the time of my first English lesson in 5th grade. The major incentive for me to succeed in English (only as a school subject and not as a language) was the fact that failing in a grade was not an option, because my family could not financially afford two years in the same grade. The entire country was under UN-led economic siege and sanctions following the gulf war, so for many, bread was much more important than education and learning a foreign language. The question people always asked when it comes to learning English was: What would you do with a foreign language?

The classes we had in elementary and secondary school followed the audio-

lingual method. We memorized dialogues and practiced grammar through substitution drills. I could not do much reading in the classroom because of the large number of students (an average of 50 students in a classroom) and the limited basic materials and resources. As for writing, we used a guided composition technique to write about different topics, but since this was hard for us to accomplish, our teachers provided the class with short texts (topics drawn from the text-book), which we memorized and wrote in the exam (transcribing more than writing). Al-Jamhoor (2005) indicated that most writing teachers in the Arab world give direct instructions and outlines for a topic, and students have to copy and memorize everything. Composition in Arabic was not different. When my Arabic teacher asked for a composition about a certain topic (e.g. friendship, home, etc.), I rushed to my father and asked him to write me one. The teacher knew that the writing was not my own but still accepted it and expected me to memorize it and write it in the exam. We had no formal writing instruction from Arabic teachers. This was the way writing (in Arabic and English) was taught from the very first day of school until we graduated from college.

LITERACY EXPERIENCES IN COLLEGE

A significant stage in my literacy journey started in the college of education, where I majored in English. In college, we had classes in English literature (novel, drama, poetry, and short story), grammar, conversation, and writing. With the persistence of the audio-lingual method again, the focus was mainly on learning and memorizing new vocabulary and complex grammar to be practiced through a workbook. I did not have the capacity to handle 10 classes in one semester. I could not keep up with the reading, and there was no reading class that would help me learn reading strategies. Similarly, there was no explicit teaching of writing, although I took many composition classes during the four years of college. In these composition classes, I memorized definitions of terms, types of writing, and features of “good” and “bad” writing (as prescribed in the required text-books) without actually practicing writing.

The only chance I had to practice writing was in the examination where I had to pour onto the answer sheet what I memorized in my classes under the pressure of time and the stress of being in a test. I had no feedback on my writing following these exams. When I received my answer sheet, I would see that the teacher, with a red pen, had underlined some of my sentences with no comments. It was an extreme kind of product-oriented writing. With the lack of direct writing instruction and feedback and my realization of the importance of delivering clear and coherent text in the examination, I struggled to develop my own understanding of composition and what comprises a good text. With a dominant cognitivist orientation in my educational context, my simple understanding of good writing was that it consisted of strings of words joined by correct grammar to develop a main idea presented in a topic sentence. During that time in college, I felt there was always a huge barrier between me and reading and writing, on the one hand, and between me and the teacher, whom I thought held the key to literacy, on the other. I did not know whether I was following the right path or not. At that stage of my education, I perceived literacy in English as the ability to speak the language fluently and to know more vocabulary and grammar. I have always had a future image of myself speaking English fluently, and this seemed to be a satisfactory, ultimate goal.

More than writing, reading was the problem I faced during my study and after my graduation in 2005. For me, gaining literacy starts with reading. It is through reading

that I learned new vocabulary, improved my writing, and developed my knowledge in the field. Yet, reading was one of the least stressed skills to be acquired/taught during my L1 and L2 education in Iraq.

It is worth mentioning here that the “native speaker norm” was the prevailing ideology in my social and educational contexts with the idea that “native speakerhood is the target against which a learner’s proficiency is measured” (Canagarajah, 2015, p. 417). Being immersed in the Iraqi educational community as a novice second language learner, I was incapable of identifying the language teaching theories and research orientations that directed teaching and learning practices in my context. Fairclough (1995) stated that this incapability is due to the naturalization of an ideology, rendering it common sense, which makes the novice participant perceive this ideology as a set of skills or techniques to be mastered. The fact that I was part of this educational community shaped my understanding of the learner as a passive receiver of knowledge, without questioning the authority of the teacher or/and the institution. The built-in, opaque ideology I acquired, of which I was not aware, directed my practices as a high school teacher. Throughout my teaching years in high schools, I taught English as I learned it in a teacher-centered classroom. I gave little opportunity for my students to participate or negotiate ways of learning. As I taught, I unintentionally reproduced and maintained the school norm—teachers and curricula are meant to be followed and blindly trusted.

LITERACY EXPERIENCES IN GRADUATE SCHOOL

A few years after my graduation from college, I was accepted into a master’s program in the United States through the Fulbright Foreign Student Scholarship. Given my literacy background and the way I studied and taught English, the transition to the new learning environment was by no means easy. In one of the most significant moments of my literacy and identity construction, I was challenged to unlearn, deconstruct, and reconstruct my beliefs, perceptions, and ideologies of language learning and teaching. At that time, the answer to the question of who I am had never been so urgent in my life. The educational context was entirely different. Intensive reading and writing tasks, writing as process, participating in learner-centered classrooms, discussing, critical thinking, analyzing, synthesizing, and critiquing are some of the new skills that I needed to acquire to achieve success. The most challenging task was reading and, specifically, reading to comprehend, critique, apply, and respond to theory. In Gee’s (1989b) terms and his description of Discourses, I had physically moved away from my primary Discourses (in my home country) to join a new context (a U.S. university) with a totally new and different set of Discourses, with which I had no prior experience or knowledge.

Gaining access into the new academic community was not easy. With every assignment, I struggled to hold back my mother-tongue-intervention, to think of my audience, to include my voice, and to comply with the accepted academic conventions and expectations. I struggled to create sentences that carried my intentions and ideas to the reader without using expressions and syntax that looked similar to Arabic (e.g. saying “laugh on” instead of “laugh at” because the former phrase carries more similarity to the Arabic form or saying “student smart” instead of “smart student” because in Arabic the adjective follows the noun). I struggled to build paragraphs and eventually an entire text in a form that satisfied my readers (professors) and that contributed to my field of study. I believe this was a survival strategy, since I could only succeed in academia through acquiring (without negotiation) the academic

conventions of my institution.

My struggle was not limited to academic life. When I tried to socialize with people by attending university events, I would think of my political situation as a student whose country was invaded by the U.S. This thought prevented me from openly participating in conversations or discussions that might touch upon this sensitive issue. Having these thoughts in mind kept me silent in countless occasions, and this silence did not help in developing literacy and negotiating access into a community. Meeting people for the first time and saying, “I am from Iraq,” would frequently be met with the response, “WOW Really!!!” with raised eyebrows and surprised looks. Such marginalizing reactions influenced how I perceived my identity. The fact that I left my wife in Iraq 50 days after our marriage dictates how disempowered I was in the face of the Anglo-American hegemony. I sometimes resist some of the social and academic practices to preserve my identity. One act of resistance was when one of my professors invited me to be a participant in a study he was conducting on students’ literacy experiences; my answer was “I can’t” because I did not want to reveal any of this struggle. My experience of studying and living in the U.S. has urged me to change, adapt, and accommodate. I had to give up some of my old teaching and learning practices and adopt different ways of understanding knowledge and reality. I came to understand that, as I advanced in my study/career, I would need to take new roles and identities such as an Iraqi student, a teacher educator, a foreigner, a researcher, just to name a few. The way that I am perceived by others and the attributes assigned to me by others merely because of my accent and the way I look and behave may add to the list of identities and roles that are imposed on me.

Writing my MA thesis research was the most intense learning experience I had. With a very limited prior experience in academic writing, my first step was to write a literature review for my thesis research on collaborative writing (which I wrote in less than 6 weeks). The massive amount of reading I did for my literature review did not result in clearer ideas and, more often, just led to even more reading. The few lines I wrote at the end of every day came as a result of a complicated process of thinking about the text coherence and subject matter, avoiding plagiarism, using correct grammar and word choice, and departing from mother-tongue-intervention. Thinking about who my audience (professors of English) was or might be was intimidating. Comparing my writing (as a multilingual writer) to the authors’ works I read was frustrating. When I doubted my word choice and collocations, I consulted the online Corpus of Contemporary American English, which slowed me way down but created an accurate and clear text. I used chunking carefully to avoid plagiarizing. Coming from an academic culture that highly appreciates the rigorous scientific method and objectivity in research writing, I was reluctant to use the first person pronoun, to use verbs of senses, or to clearly express my own voice.

FINAL THOUGHTS

When I first decided to write my literacy autobiography, I did not have a clear purpose as to why I wanted to do this. As I started to think of my past experiences and reflect on my educational incidents, I started to become more aware of what had happened and how I should have responded. By reflecting on my own experiences and narrating my literacy and identity story, I started to understand more clearly the dynamic relationship between language, context, and identity. Using the *currere* method, I have presented literacy incidents from the past and the present, and I created an image of how one L2 learner, teacher, and scholar struggled through multiple

literacies and identities in a variety of discourses and contexts.

I want to use this reflection to inform my future teaching in Iraq. I want to help my students understand that literacy is not merely the accumulation of vocabulary and grammar rules. I want to focus on developing their reading skill, since reading is one key to developing writing, vocabulary, and knowledge in any field. I want to show them that it is not a mistake to capitalize on their mother-tongue and use it as a linguistic and social resource throughout their literacy journeys. Sasaki (2001), for instance, is a well-established author and applied linguistics professor. She stated that, "I think in Japanese, take notes in Japanese, and write the first rough drafts in Japanese because I can't think thoroughly about any complicated matters in English" (p. 111). A similar meaning was indicated by Kubota (2001) who stated that "I believe that the L1 literacy I developed at home and in school served as a foundation for my acquisition of L2 literacy" (p. 97).

I want to show my students that writing is important. I want to revive the teaching of writing in my educational context. Two years ago, on the first day of teaching my writing course in Iraq, I asked my 50 student class of junior college students, "Why is writing important for you?" Not surprisingly, I received no answer. I want to teach my students to write and not to be afraid of being criticized, to write and get feedback from a teacher or a peer. I want them to reflect on their practices as learners and future teachers and to think critically about who they are and who they will become in the future as they continue to be part of an ideologized and politicized language education. I want them to question themselves (as teachers) and to question any educational authority that has the power to impose perspectives and ideologies and direct students' lives.

References

- Al-Jamhoor, M. M. (2005). Connecting Arabs and Americans online to promote peace and to increase cultural awareness: A descriptive study about Arab EFL learners' perceptions, practices, behaviours and attitudes towards computer-supported collaborative writing strategies and technologies. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2005). ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Database, (UMI No.305375160).
- Canagarajah, S. (2015). Clarifying the relationship between translingual practice and L2 writing: Addressing learner identities. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 6(4), 415-440.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. New York, NY: Longman Publishing.
- Gee, G. P. (1989a). Literacy, discourse, and linguistics: Introduction. *Journal of Education*, 171(1), 5-25.
- Gee, G. P. (1989b). What's literacy? *Journal of Education*, 171(1), 18-25.
- Kubota, R. (2001). My experience of learning to read and write in Japanese as L1 and English as L2. In D. Belcher & U. Connor (Eds.), *Reflections on multiliterate lives* (pp. 96-109). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Pinar, W. F. (1994). *Autobiography, politics, and sexuality: Essays in curriculum theory 1972-1992*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Pinar, W. F. (2004). *What is curriculum theory?* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Sasaki, M. (2001). An introspective account of L2 writing acquisition. In D. Belcher & U. Connor (Eds.), *Reflections on multiliterate lives* (pp. 110-120). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Street, B. (2003). What's 'new' in New Literacy Studies? Critical approaches to literacy in theory and practice. *Current Issues in Comparative Education*, 5(2), 77 – 91.