



## Digital Autobiographical Identity Texts in the EAP Classroom

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### Introduction – Language as a dynamic, meaning-making tool

What role have languages played during your students' life journeys? Which communities do they feel a part of (or not)? As educators, we may not always reflect upon the central role of language(s) in our construction and negotiation of self. However, when we do — and more importantly, when we provide space for our multilingual students to do so — we create the conditions for students to develop meaningful, authentic language use alongside critical reflection in our EAP classrooms. Pedagogies that facilitate a combination of language use and critical reflection, I argue, can lead to important improvements in students' academic agency. Students are able not only to adapt academic language use to meet the expectations of particular communities but they are also able to critically reflect upon how and why they are adopting or challenging such communication norms (Benesch 2009; Lea & Street 2006).

In this article, I describe an activity that engenders the concurrent development of academic literacies alongside critical thinking skills by stimulating student reflection on the intersections between their language use<sup>1</sup> and their evolving personal / academic identities. Aimed at post-secondary EAP instructors, this article includes an overview and description of how to tap into a wide range of literacy knowledge while engaging with notions of identity and investment in language learning through production of a digital “text.” I conclude the article with some discussion of the potential of such an activity as a pedagogical tool when working with multilingual students in post-secondary EAP classrooms.

### Autobiographical Identity Texts – What are they and why adopt such pedagogy?

As someone who is relatively new to incorporating (in any substantive way) digital tools into my teaching, I have slowly come to view activities that tap into multilingual students' digital literacies as invaluable. Over the past two years in my EAP classroom, I have substituted one of my major assignments (e.g. argumentative essay paper) with an Autobiographical Identity Text (AIT). An AIT is a multimodal, digital “text” constructed using various audio and video technologies (e.g., Screencast-o-matic; Prezi) allowing for a narrative description of students' language practices over time. This narrative, digital text allows students to represent their multiple, hybrid, evolving identities as language learners / university students in a

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<sup>1</sup> This should include L1 and L2 use.

comprehensive manner that provides a platform for the production and development of authentic academic language use. This digital text includes a student's description of their changing language practices over the course of their life, how that language(s) use changes within different communities, and how different factors (e.g., regionality/nationality, ethnicity, language, gender, class) impact how they view/position themselves as members of real/imagined communities. Ultimately, this activity allows students to positively reflect their hybrid, multiple, evolving identities as multilingual, multicompetent users of English while building their awareness of language as a socially-situated, dynamic, meaning-making tool. This activity is ideal for use with students at all levels of proficiency, including those engaged in the process of acquiring academic literacies in post-secondary English for academic purposes (EAP)<sup>2</sup>.

In allowing students the opportunity to draw upon their digital and traditional literacies, this activity aims to promote both extensive target language use as well as critical thinking skills. Students are asked to create an approximately 10-minute digital text in a presentation format that mimics that of an in-person individual presentation (see Appendix A). In their presentation, students are encouraged to discuss their fluid, evolving language practices (both English and L1) over the course of their lives. Engaging in this production enables development of presentation skills (academic speaking) and promotes critical reflection on how they construct and negotiate their personal / academic identities (e.g., university student; international student; English language user, etc.). Using this kind of activity, instructors can draw students' attention to effective academic communication practices and compare/contrast these practices with other forms of academic production. By sharing, watching and considering these AITs with the class, students (and instructors for that matter) develop a deeper understanding and appreciation for their peers' life experiences, leading to a stronger, tighter-knit classroom community. The key objectives for incorporating this assignment (or an adapted version) into your EAP classroom include:

- Develop strong classroom community
- Access / develop students' digital and traditional literacies
- Promote authentic target language use
- Promote effective academic oral presentation skills
- Promote awareness
- Promote positive reflection of students' cultural and linguistic identities
- Promote critical thinking skills

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<sup>2</sup> I have also found this activity to be effective when used with in-service and pre-service TESL teacher candidates as it allows them to reflect upon the journeys taken by their culturally and linguistically diverse students (see also Kumarividevelu, 2012).

### Steps – How to facilitate AIT production<sup>3</sup>

There are several important strategies for engendering optimum language learning outcomes when facilitating Autobiographical Identity Text production. The first step is to go through the process of producing an AIT yourself. By doing so, you will become more familiar with the various digital technology tools at students' disposal when producing their text. You will also have the opportunity to reflect on the role of language in your own identity construction / negotiation. During the creation of your AIT keep track of your production process and record it through written description — this document can be used to supplement the assignment rubric and act as a guide for students' own processes. Once you have produced your own AIT, it is advisable to make it available to students as an exemplar (once you have used this assignment with one class you will likely be able to make several student exemplars available as well). Next, be sure to dedicate class time to production of the text, including: investigating potential digital technologies, note-making, reviewing effective presentation strategies (e.g., creating effective PPT or Prezi slides). Also, as should be the case with all assignments, it is a good idea to clearly elucidate the language learning objectives alongside an evaluation rubric (see Appendix B). Once students have posted their AITs to share with the class, instructors can engage the whole group in collaborative critical reflection on each other's assignments, including how students effectively used academic language (spoken and written) in their presentations. This is an excellent opportunity to draw students' attention to codes and conventions of academic speaking and writing. This reflection may also include a discussion of how students highlighted their multilingual practices throughout their lifespans, focusing on their evolving competence as multilingual users of (academic) English. For those instructors who are interested in including a traditional textual component to the assignment, I have often assigned a follow up task where students write a one-page reflection on why they made the choices they did in constructing their digital AIT (see Appendix C). This step stimulates deeper reflection while opening up space for greater discussion of particular sub-genres of academic production that may have been covered over the span of your course (e.g. reflective piece vs. argumentative essay). Feedback should be delivered in a manner that contributes to students' growing academic English knowledge and critical thinking skills while acknowledging their impressive multicompetence. Overall, there are several key steps in facilitating successful production of this type of assignment:

- Model a version of an autobiographical identity text (teacher version)
- Allow class time for investigation of audio/visual production tools
- Provide class time for students to produce notes to guide their narration

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<sup>3</sup> Before including this assignment in your syllabus, be sure to provide a platform for sharing these digital texts (if not institutionally-supported platform, texts can be shared via youtube.com). Increasingly, course management systems have such spaces embedded.

- Provide students with a clear evaluation rubric and assignment objectives (these elements should be aligned – e.g., equal points for critical thinking, creativity, and effective academic presentation)
- Allow for (and model) description of text production process (another opportunity for step by step description: First, I...Second, I...Next, I...Finally, I...) (See Appendix D)
- Allow for follow-up text (critical reflection) describing why particular choices were made to represent hybrid, evolving identities
- Provide feedback at several levels (critical thinking, clarity, coherence, structure, grammar, vocabulary)

### Discussion – Potential and limitations

Providing students with opportunities for critical reflection on how they construct and negotiate their particular personal / professional identities can be a powerful pedagogical tool (Cummins 2014; Morgan 2009). I strongly suggest that this exercise can provide the conditions for authentic, meaningful language use in the EAP classroom while stimulating critical reflection on how we socially create (weave) our personal / academic / professional identities. For our multilingual students — who have all too often explicitly or implicitly been positioned as deficient users of English — this provides an opportunity to explore / integrate digital technologies and positively reflect their hybrid cultural / linguistic identities while producing a “text”. The limitations of this activity generally come in the form of time constraints and “buy in” from instructors. Many of us struggle to incorporate all the material we desire into limited classroom time with our EAP students. This is a reasonable concern; however, it is my experience that this activity acts as a catalyst for authentic language use and investigation of academic communication norms that make the time commitment worthwhile. Finally, although some EAP instructors have confided in me their fear of engaging with advanced digital technologies, I can tell you from firsthand experience that the investment is beneficial both in terms of students’ optimum learning outcomes as well as instructors’ professional development. Many of these technologies are not only free but also user-friendly for even those with limited technological expertise. Get started today in making your EAP more effective and engaging by allowing students to discuss their evolving personal / academic identities!

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**References**

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Lea, Mary R., and Street, Brian V. "The "academic literacies" model: Theory and applications." *Theory into practice*, vol. 45.4, 2006, pp. 368-377.

Morgan, Brian. "Fostering transformative practitioners for critical EAP: Possibilities and challenges." *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, vol. 8.2, 2009, pp. 86-99.

**Appendix A: Digital AIT Examples<sup>4</sup>**

<https://youtu.be/p2rRmfUhACY>

<https://youtu.be/8SvYR-SJn0o>

**Appendix B: Digital AIT Evaluation Rubric**

Assignment Grade %	A – to A+	B – to B+	C or below
<b>Thoroughness (40%)</b>	Demonstrated evidence of comprehensive reflection on the central role of language in personal identity construction / negotiation via digital text.	Demonstrated evidence of reflection on the central role of language in personal identity construction / negotiation via digital text.	Demonstrated little evidence of the central role of language in personal identity construction / negotiation via digital text.
<b>Clarity (40%)</b>	Demonstrated clear representation of personal identity via digital text.	Demonstrated somewhat clear representation of personal identity via digital text.	Demonstrated unclear representation of personal identity via digital text.
<b>Creativity &amp; Engagement (20%)</b>	Demonstrated excellent creativity (via use of digital technologies) in production and presentation of digital text.  Demonstrated excellent engagement with the assignment through comprehensive reflection on experience of producing the digital text.	Demonstrated decent creativity (via use of digital technologies) in production and presentation of digital text.  Demonstrated decent engagement with the assignment through reflection on experience of producing the digital text.	Demonstrated lack of creativity (via use of digital technologies) in production and presentation of digital text.  Demonstrated poor engagement with the assignment through incomplete or absent reflection on experience of producing the digital text.

**Appendix C: AIT, Part II: Sample Critical Reflection Paper**

*In my previous autobiographical identity text I have demonstrated the reflection on the influence of countries, cultures, family and languages on the construction of identity. The big step in my*

<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank the students who bravely agreed to share their work with the world outside our classroom. As their texts demonstrate, this assignment has provided an invaluable opportunity for critical reflection on the central role of language(s) in identity construction / negotiation.

*life, which I think had the most impact on me and my language, was when I moved to Canada. It had changed the way I talk to people, the way I approach and see things, and it gave me an additional perspective on certain matters that I would never notice if I didn't have that experience of living in a different country, among different people. Like I have mentioned in the video I started learning English back in Russia, however I never felt like a part of the community, it was just a second language we had to learn in school. I couldn't imagine myself fluently speaking to English native speakers and be on the same "wave" with them. Since I moved to Canada three years ago, my views changed about that. Now I can say with confidence that I feel comfortable using English in conversations with other people. There is no barrier between me and a person, who lived in English environment for the whole life.*

*I am currently a university student, whose major language of use is English. Since I got on this path of my life I have had some difficulties. Before leaving the town in Manitoba I thought that I won't have problems because of the level of English language I have. I was mistaken. This environment is completely different from what I got used to for the last couple years in the community. I have faced barriers again. I realised how much still needs to be learned and understood about English. I now have an opportunity to go deep into the language compared to just "surface learning" of it. The way people use words and structure their sentences is something completely new to me, which takes time to adapt to and start to embed into my own speech.*

*Since half of the semester is gone I can analyse what I have learned and how it helped me to come closer to the "language goals" I have set up for myself. I definitely see progress, however I know there is going to be more and more learning involved before I will be able to feel myself in the "same plate" with others.*

*On the discussion forums we talked about different social aspects that have played role in constructing our identity such as gender, discourse communities, formal or informal way of writing and so on. I think they play big roles establishing our identities as well and if I had a chance to talk about what kind of "note" they have put into my identity it would be a much broader explanation and reflection on how we get influenced every day and don't even notice it. Language is such a complex social tool we use, that will never be fully understood. That is what makes us humans. We get to choose what word to put in a certain conversation, what topic to talk about and how to approach a person or a problem using appropriate language structure and content.*

*Writing this autobiographical identity text has helped me critically analyse how language and its amounting constructs the way we communicate, perceive and understand the world we live in, which I am pretty sure will change over time as I grow and learn more because this process is endless and follows you throughout the entire life.*

**Appendix D: Sample Description of AIT production process (to be included with original AIT submission)*****Procedures to producing Autobiographical Identity Text***

*The first thing I have done was writing down the thoughts and points I was going to talk about in my video. I was satisfied with the results and my next step was to record the video itself. I thought about using my GoPro camera for that, however I ended up filming on my phone because it has a better microphone, which I considered really important since the purpose of the video is telling about yourself.*

*When I uploaded the video in my editor, it did not want to read the format so I had to download another video editor, finding a good one wasn't the easiest thing I would say. It took me couple days to make it nice and interesting, the way I wanted it to be. I was going to do a little bit of acting in my video, however my actor's skills were not as great as I expected and I left that idea. I really tried to make it look more or less professional with a bit of my own style. Hopefully it worked out good.*

**Potential AIT Production Resources**

<https://voicethread.com/>

<https://screencast-o-matic.com/home>

<http://www.apple.com/ca/mac/imovie/>

<https://prezi.com/explore/staff-picks/>

<https://office.live.com/start/PowerPoint.aspx>



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