

IN ALTRE PAROLE AND FROM OTHER PERSPECTIVES: LITERATURE AND LINGUISTIC AUTOBIOGRAPHIES IN THE ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

IN ALTRE PAROLE E DE OUTRAS PERSPECTIVAS: LITERATURA E AUTOBIOGRAFIAS LINGUÍSTICAS NA SALA DE AULA DE LÍNGUAS ADICIONAIS

Adriana Mendes Porcellato*
Malila Prado**

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the pedagogical experience of using Lahiri's autobiographical book *In altre parole (In other words)* (LAHIRI, 2015) in a course for Italian majors in a Brazilian university. This literary work was chosen as the main material for the course with the intention of promoting students' reflection on their language learning process and their linguistic identities while offering a model that challenges an essentialist view of languages and cultures (ISHIHARA; PORCELLATO, 2022; ISHIHARA; PORCELLATO; PRADO, 2023). In her first book written in Italian, Lahiri recounts the tortuous but rewarding process of learning an additional language as an adult, delving into the role each of the languages she speaks played in forging her identity at the personal as well as the professional level. Throughout the course, students read and discussed seven chapters from Lahiri's book while working on their own linguistic autobiographies (PAVLENKO, 2003), which, along with another written assignment, provided the data for this study. The results revealed that the way learners think of their linguistic identity and their learning process seem to reflect canonical models that conceive languages as compartmentalized systems with idealized norms. This outcome uncovers the importance to encourage language majors to critically reflect on linguistic values and epistemologies since the early stages of their academic paths.

Keywords: literature in the additional language classroom; linguistic autobiographies; *In altre parole*; translingual identity; language learning investment.

RESUMO

Este artigo relata a experiência pedagógica de utilizar o livro autobiográfico de Lahiri, *In altre parole* (LAHIRI, 2015), em uma disciplina para estudantes de italiano em uma universidade brasileira. Essa obra literária foi escolhida como material principal do curso com a intenção de promover a reflexão dos alunos sobre o processo de aprendizagem das línguas e sobre suas identidades linguísticas e, ao mesmo tempo, oferecer um modelo que desafia uma visão essencialista de língua e cultura (ISHIHARA; PORCELLATO, 2022; ISHIHARA; PORCELLATO; PRADO, 2023). No seu primeiro livro escrito em italiano, Lahiri narra o tortuoso, porém gratificante, processo de aprendizado de uma língua adicional como adulta, examinando o papel que cada uma das línguas que ela fala desempenhou na formação de sua identidade tanto pessoal como profissional. Ao longo do curso, os estudantes leram e discutiram sete capítulos do livro de Lahiri, enquanto trabalhavam em suas próprias autobiografias linguísticas (PAVLENKO, 2003), que, juntamente com outra tarefa escrita, forneceram os dados para este estudo. Os resultados revelaram que a maneira como os aprendizes pensam em sua identidade linguística e seu processo de aprendizado parece refletir modelos canônicos que concebem as línguas como sistemas compartimentalizados com normas idealizadas. Esse resultado revela a importância de incentivar os estudantes de línguas a refletir criticamente sobre valores e epistemologias linguísticas desde os estágios iniciais de sua trajetória acadêmica.

Palavras-chave: literatura na sala de aula de línguas adicionais; autobiografias linguísticas; *In altre parole*; identidade translingue; investimento na aprendizagem de línguas.

INTRODUCTION

Born in the UK from Bengali parents and raised in the United States, Jhumpa Lahiri is an acclaimed writer who was awarded the Pulitzer Prize at the start of her fruitful career in 1999. In her successful trajectory, she has written mostly in English about characters who, being torn between cultures, embark on journeys of self-discovery in search of their ever-eluding cultural identities. Like many of her characters, Lahiri, too, has lived her life torn

* PhD in Letters and Assistant Professor, University of São Paulo, USP, São Paulo, SP, Brasil. adriana.porcellato@usp.br
Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6644-6038>

** PhD in Letters from the University of São Paulo. Assistant Professor, BNU-HKBU United International College, China. malilaprado@alumni.usp.br
Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6281-6759>

between the Indian and American cultures, and, in order to escape the conflict between Bengali (her mother tongue) and English (her “step-mother tongue”), she decided to start learning a third language: Italian. This eventually led her to living in Rome with her family for two years from 2012 to 2014, a sojourn that resulted in her first book written in Italian: *In altre parole (In other words)*. Initially published in the weekly magazine *Internazionale*, this autobiographical work presents us with Lahiri’s deep reflections on her multilingual and translingual self and on her relationship with the main languages that have shaped her personal as well as her professional identities. In the book, Lahiri describes the struggles and frustrations but also her strong commitment and personal investment in learning Italian, a language in which she chose to enact her identity as a writer (NORTON, 2013).

It was partly due to these autobiographical reflections on language learning that *In altre parole* was selected as one of the main pedagogical materials to be used in an Italian language course held in 2022 for Year 2 students of an Italian Language and Literature Program in the Modern Languages Department in a state university located in São Paulo, Brazil. Since one of the purposes of the course was to foster students’ awareness of their learning of Italian, one of the assignments they needed to work on was a written linguistic autobiography (BRUTT-GRIFFLER; SAMIMY, 1999; PAVLENKO, 2003). In choosing Lahiri’s work as one of the main course materials, the teacher’s objective was to provide students with inspiration and assistance to perform the task.

Using a literary work as the main pedagogical material in an additional language classroom has proved beneficial for different reasons, including the fact that it provides authentic material for analyzing language in context and promotes learners’ cultural knowledge and intercultural competence (KRAMSCH; KRAMSCH, 2000; SANTORO, 2007; LANDULFO; MATOS, 2020; CORBETT, 2022). In this particular case, the selection of a book written in Italian by a non-native speaker of the language served a second objective, namely challenging native-speakerism (HOLLIDAY, 2003) and an essentializing view of language and culture (ISHIHARA; PORCELLATO, 2021). Proposing *In altre parole*, a book some Italian critics do not consider true Italian literature, as one of the main sources of language input in the course was a way to question a monolithic perspective and to promote a view of Italian culture that does not come from canonical works. Having learned Italian as an adult, Lahiri can offer a perspective on Italian language and culture students are likely to relate to, which makes her book particularly fitting in an additional language classroom. Moreover, by describing her multilingual identity and portraying her experience of patiently and actively negotiating her place in Italian society through learning and using the language, Lahiri’s work can potentially help students to acknowledge and better appreciate their own linguistic identity as well as their efforts to learn Italian.

The paper aims to identify learners’ reflections on their investment in language learning (NORTON, 2013), their linguistic identity and their language learning process through the analysis of their own autobiographies. In addition, we intend to verify if and to what extent Lahiri’s book helped learners interrogate their own view of language learning.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Literature as a pedagogical tool

Research shows that literature has served various objectives in language teaching throughout the 20th century. According to Kramsch and Kramsch (2000), in the first half of the century, literary works played an important role in the language classroom as a representation of a nation’s high Culture. At the time, culture was viewed as monolithic and essentializing, and the literary canon dictated the language model against which everyone was measured. In this scenario, in most university language courses, canonical literature was the main focus, with lessons revolving around an unattainable language model learners had to admire and venerate but with which they would never truly interact (SANTORO, 2007). A few years later, the spread of the audiolingual method marked a first clear detachment between language learning and literature. This distance increased with the emergence of communicative language teaching methods and an emphasis on skills and authenticity. Literary texts were now treated as mere examples of authentic language that could give learners the opportunity to acquire new vocabulary, develop reading strategies, and access the target culture (CARTER, 2007). However, as literary texts were still considered difficult to access and understand, they were only introduced at higher proficiency levels (SANTORO, 2007; ALVES, 2022). According to the Common European Framework of Reference for

Languages (COUNCIL OF EUROPE, 2020), the ability to read and comprehend literary texts is only acquired at more advanced levels (C1 or C2 levels), the logic being that what is easy and trivial (i.e., language) should come before what is difficult and uncommon or fictional (i.e., literature) (SANTORO, 2007).

While literature has almost always accompanied the study of language, its relevance has changed over time and its “symbolic prestige, artistic and cultural meaning, entertainment, and educational value” (KRAMSCH; KRAMSCH, 2000, p. 553) have been gradually resignified.

Today, choosing literary works to enhance, complement, or support additional language teaching implies matters of power (as language policy and literary canon), which can be either perpetuated or resisted. Adopting a view that challenges the literary canon and the epistemological model based on an essentialist view of literature and culture helps teachers promote a more inclusive and holistic pedagogy that embraces different languages, varieties, cultures, styles, and viewpoints (LANDULFO, 2019). In defense of a cultural and linguistic plurality perspective on the Italian language, Landulfo argues that adopting a centric view of Italian neglects a wealthy repertoire of Italian varieties and registers. She thus investigated pedagogical materials that support the teaching of Italian as an additional language in search of elements that would help learners envisage the plurality of Italian. With few exceptions, she found that the majority of textbooks display a rather homogeneous image that corresponds to and perpetuates existing stereotypes. The appropriate response would be to design contextualized, localized materials that deconstruct such stereotypes.

Literature can be a source of pedagogical material that aims to implement such an endeavor. Although it has frequently been held up as a normative response to linguistic and cultural diversity, its use nowadays “may primarily be to illustrate the implicit or explicit value system of different cultures and how those values are communicated with a view to developing critical cultural awareness” (CORBETT, 2022, p. 213). To introduce analytical approaches in the classroom, teachers should provide students with texts from different contexts and for different purposes that will mediate the contact between students and language/culture. To this end, teachers should guide students through the themes of the texts while drawing attention to style and rhetoric not as *the* model to be followed but *a* suggested model (MACDONALD, 2000).

Focusing on the context of the Italian language in Brazilian universities, recent research (LANDULFO, 2019; LANDULFO; MATOS, 2020) pointed out that the curriculum tends to be still very much focused on Italy as what could be called the “inner circle” of the Italian language, with complete disregard for speakers, authors, and literary works from what could be defined as the “outer circle,” i.e. countries such as Switzerland, Croatia, Slovenia as well as former Italian colonies such as Eritrea, Libya, and Ethiopia. Yet this scenario appears to be changing, and judging by recent publications, non-canonical literature is now being included in Italian classes taught in different contexts. The study by Landulfo and Matos (2020) concludes by proposing to include in the syllabus of Italian courses literary works by four female writers from former Italian colonies in Africa to promote discussions on racism, gender violence, intersectionality, and African identities in the Italian classroom. In another study, Ghisi and Bunn (2022) recount the experience of teaching Italian as an additional language extension course for the elderly through literature. For the course, the teacher chose to work with *La mia casa è dove sono*, a novel by African-Italian writer Igiaba Scego, along with poems by Brazilian writer Conceição Evaristo and Cameroonian poet Ndjock Ngana, in order to address the themes of memory and migration in both Brazilian and Italian past and recent histories. By reading and discussing the literary works, the elderly learners reflected on the target language and culture as well as on their own, thinking critically and gaining awareness of their political and cultural role in society.

As this issue of *Trabalhos em Linguística Aplicada* shows, literature remains relevant in the contemporary additional language classroom. However, unlike in the past, its relevance is not as a language model but rather as “*um potente instrumento para a formação de leitores críticos e capazes de questionar e repensar o sistema-mundo*” as well as reflect on their own identities and practices (LANDULFO; MATOS, 2020, p. 126).

1.2 Translingual practices and translingual subjects

As we pointed out above, the concept of a standard variety of a language being the norm for language learning or the literary canon is problematic. Standard varieties are exclusive and restrictive in that they impose benchmarks based on idealized speakers, neglecting users of any other variety and thus promoting discrimination

and stereotyping (ROSA; FLORES, 2017). Additionally, this concept is rooted in ideologies that assume language(s) to be separate entities (MAKONI; PENNYCOOK, 2007), thus adhering to “the double (or multiple) monolingualism norm” (JORGENSEN et al., 2011, p. 33). This conventional view of multilingualism considers languages as a series of entities that do not—or should not—intersect.

Translingual practices (CANAGARAJAH, 2013), on the other hand, involve individuals moving between languages to draw upon different communities’ resources and effectively communicate in contact zones through strategic communication methods. Canagarajah’s approach focuses on socially constructed practices that rely on the contextual affordances encountered in social interactions, highlighting the development of competence in practice-based, ecological, and social terms. Individuals then negotiate and navigate partial competence in multiple languages while engaging with various cultures and communities. This now widely accepted perspective on multilingual communication also challenges the notion of separating, compartmentalizing, or comparing the languages of the multi-monolingual speaker (MEIER, 2017). Instead, languages are perceived as interdependent and interconnected in our minds.

From the perspective of such practices, “the translingual subject can be defined as an identity position situated in the liminal spaces between nation-states, develops a ‘meta’ awareness of negotiating languages and cultures, and treats identity construction as an ongoing process of emergence” (CANAGARAJAH, 2020, p. 50). In this view, speakers shape their identity in a hybrid, complex, fluid lived experience in the congruity of languages. One example of such lived experience, along with its successes and frustrations, is Lahiri, who, in her book, reflects on the role the different languages she speaks (i.e. Bengali, English, and Italian) play in her life. First, she resists and refuses to recognize her translingual identity (CANAGARAJAH, 2014; 2020). Rather, she sees her younger teenage self as torn between Bengali and English in what seems to be a compartmentalized system:

Restavo sospesa, combattuta tra queste due lingue. L’andirivieni linguistico mi scompigliava; mi sembrava una contraddizione che non potevo risolvere.
Non andavano d’accordo, queste due mie lingue. Mi sembravano avversarie incompatibili, l’una insofferente all’altra. Pensavo che non avessero nulla in comune tranne me, per cui mi sentivo una contraddizione in termini anch’io.
Per la mia famiglia l’inglese rappresentava una cultura straniera alla quale non voleva arrendersi.
Il bengalese rappresentava la parte di me che apparteneva ai miei genitori, che non apparteneva all’America. (LAHIRI, 2015, p. 46)

Although Lahiri appears to feel that Bengali and English were completely separate, in the extract above, she admits that these languages had nothing in common “*but her*,” which means that she embodied a convergence point between the two languages, or, to put it another way, she was the vessel through which these languages could be in contact with one another. Her translingual identity becomes all the clearer when Italian came into play:

L’arrivo dell’italiano, il terzo punto sul mio percorso linguistico, crea un triangolo. Crea una forma anziché una linea retta. Un triangolo è una struttura complessa, una figura dinamica. [...] Se lo disegnassi userei una penna per rendere il lato inglese, una matita per gli altri due. L’inglese rimane la base, il lato più stabile, fisso. Il bengalese e l’italiano sono entrambi più deboli, indistinti. L’uno ereditato, l’altro adottato, voluto. Il bengalese è il mio passato, l’italiano, magari, una nuova stradina nel futuro. La mia prima lingua è la mia origine, l’ultima, il traguardo. (p. 47-48)

For Lahiri, introducing Italian into her life meant transforming this rivalry between Bengali and English into something else with the dynamic structure of a triangle, where each line (i.e., language) is connected to the other two. Her linguistic identity and language use thus take place in the space within the imaginary linguistic lines of this structure. With this portrayal, Lahiri is embracing her translingual identity by recognizing that her three languages are interconnected and interdependent, one helping in the acquisition of the others (see CANAGARAJAH, 2013; 2020; ISHIHARA; PORCELLATO; PRADO, 2023; JAIN, 2014).

If, as we have seen above, we include literature in the additional language classroom to challenge essentialist models of language learning, Lahiri’s book is a sensible choice because it portrays how a translingual speaker traced her own path, to which learners may partly relate.

1.3 Language investment and “progetto di sé”

Learning a language, especially in a country where that language is not spoken, requires effort and patience, to which learners are prepared to commit only if they have the motivation to do so. In Titone’s (1977) holodynamic model, proposed within the humanistic approach to language teaching, this motivation corresponds to the will to

invest in what he referred to as a “*progetto di sé*” (“project of self”) as well as the will to ultimately accomplish this project. Partly based on Titone’s studies, Chiarini (2006) points out that Brazilian learners choose to study Italian because this learning experience is meaningful to them at the personal level. In other words, learning Italian is an investment in themselves, in the person they envision to be in the future, which could range from being a specialist in the Renaissance period to reconnecting with family roots or feeling part of the wider European community.

Like Titone and Chiarini, Norton (2013) too sees learning a language as an investment and thus argues that choosing what language to learn may not simply be a personal or intimate decision. Most of the time, this decision will depend on the relationship the learners have built, historically and socially, with the language they are learning and on the symbolic value and status the language holds. Thus, when learners invest in learning a language, they do so aiming to “increase the value of their cultural capital and social power” in the communities they are part of or those they wish to be accepted into (p. 105). This perspective is akin to – although not the same as – Titone’s (1977) concept of *progetto di sé* since it claims that learners invest in a language as a symbolic resource that will provide them with the cultural capital they need to achieve specific life goals or join imagined communities. However, Norton (2013) warns us that learners’ identities are complex and keep changing across time and space as they learn to navigate the language, the culture, and a different cultural capital system. This means that as they become multilingual, learners may develop a conflicting relationship with the languages they are learning, which in turn may lead them to reassess their *progetto di sé*. Thus, the importance of languages as symbolic resources cannot be ignored in the language classroom or in pedagogical practice.

In her autobiographical work, Lahiri reveals that her investment in learning Italian was a romantic one. It all started when she was a tourist in Florence, and hearing the language, she felt “*qualcosa di fisico, di inspiegabile [...] Una tensione squisita*”. She goes on to describe this mysterious attraction as “*un colpo di fulmine*” (p. 9), love at first sight, that continued after she returned to America, where she missed the language so much that she decided to learn it.

Yet was Lahiri’s investment based purely on love? As we saw above, her first contact with Italian was in Florence, where she spent a week visiting artistic sites and monuments that have long influenced English writers’ work. As a result, she decided to write her Ph.D. thesis on the influence of Italian architecture on these writers, which added one more reason for her investment in the language. However, it is only when she started writing her diary in Italian that Lahiri came to the realization that the language may be the means for her to accomplish her goals as a writer - in other words, her *progetto di sé* (cf. Chiarini, 2018):

A Roma, però, scrivere in italiano sembra l’unico modo di sentirmi presente qui - magari di avere una connessione, soprattutto come scrittrice, con l’Italia. Il nuovo diario, per quanto imperfetto, per quanto crivellato di errori, rispecchia chiaramente il mio disorientamento. Riflette una transizione radicale, uno stato di smarrimento totale.

Nei mesi prima di venire in Italia, cercavo un’altra direzione per la mia scrittura. Volevo un nuovo approccio. Non sapevo che la lingua che avevo studiato pian piano per parecchi anni in America mi avrebbe dato, alla fine, l’indicazione. (p. 9)

Before going to Italy, she was looking for a new direction for her writing and found in the Italian language the resources that would help her become who she wished to be. From her work, we know that for her, learning the language involved reading important Italian writers who ended up becoming an inspiration: Dante, Verga, Pavese, Tabucchi, Starnone, among others. Although she may not have started to invest in Italian with the intention of enacting her identity as a writer in that language, it is likely that, following Norton (2013), in the contact with the target language, her view of it as cultural capital underwent changes, which may in turn have led her to reassess her *progetto di sé* and to find renewed motivation for investing in the language she had chosen to learn.

As her language learning journey started from a place of love and turned out to be very successful, one may think that Lahiri did not face the pitfalls most language learners need to overcome in order to remain motivated. On the contrary, in her book, she admits to many of the difficulties she had to grapple with along the way, from choosing the best way to learn (In a class? As an autonomous learner? With a private tutor?) to the inability to fully understand books by her favorite authors; from learning the difference between *imperfetto* and *passato prossimo* to facing her way of writing, which she sees as “primitive and without style”. Similarly, she shares with readers many of the strategies that helped her overcome these obstacles: a helpful and beloved dictionary she would carry everywhere, her vocabulary notebook, even relying on her other languages for help: English for vocabulary and Bengali for pronunciation. Although she was not immune to frustration, Lahiri managed to make the most out

of the hurdles she faced, reminding herself that learning to communicate “*in un'altra lingua implica uno stato perpetuo di crescita, di possibilità. So che il mio lavoro, da apprendista, non finirà mai*” (LAHIRI, 2015, p. 17).

As we hope to have demonstrated thus far, by choosing to work with *In altre parole*, we supported Lahiri as an Italian writer and promoted the use of literature not as the model to follow but as one of many possibilities (native and non-native alike) in the spirit of non-essentialist pedagogy (ISHIHARA; PORCELLATO, 2022). In addition, reading Lahiri's reflections on her linguistic identity and learning, we wished to inspire learners to become more aware of their own translingual identities as well as of the role of different languages in their “*progetto di sé*.” However, as the teacher herself had recently undergone a deep guided reflection on her translingual self, this was also an attempt to implement her “teacher translingual identity-as-pedagogy” (ISHIHARA; PORCELLATO; PRADO, 2023), a dimension that falls beyond the scope of this work. Instead, the rest of the paper will be dedicated to answering the following questions:

- a. What are the learners' perceptions of their multilingual identities?
- b. What are learners' investments in their language learning?
- c. How do learners view their language learning process?
- d. To what extent did reading Lahiri's book influence learners' reflections and help them interrogate their own view of language learning?

2. METHOD

2.1 Participants and settings

This study was conducted as part of an Italian language course for Year 2 students in the department of modern languages at a state university located in southeastern Brazil. The course lasted for 15 weeks, each class being 100 minutes long and taking place twice weekly. The class was composed of 35 students of mixed levels: while some had been studying Italian only for one semester (A2 level in the CEFR), others had had longer contact with the language and had therefore intermediate to upper-intermediate proficiency (B1 to B2) at the start of the course.

The syllabus determined by the department stated as the main objective of the course that it should “*oferecer condições para que o aluno reflita sobre o próprio percurso de aquisição na língua italiana e que desenvolva, de forma mais aprofundada, a capacidade de interpretar o funcionamento discursivo da língua italiana*.” In addition, the syllabus required that students be exposed to authentic texts in the target language and that language structures be analyzed in context. Among the structures that needed to be covered in the course, special emphasis was given to relationships between verb tenses in the indicative mode.

Based on the course syllabus, seven chapters of *In altre parole* were selected for students to read.¹ Each chapter was accompanied by a worksheet with activities that tackled both content and structures present in the text. Students were expected to work individually on the tasks at home and use part of class time to discuss their questions first in small groups, then with the whole class, with special focus on the use of verb tenses in Lahiri's chapters, the reasons behind these choices, and the effects they had on the reader (cf. SANTORO, 2007).

Parallel to the reading of Lahiri's chapters, students worked throughout the semester on their own linguistic autobiographies. Taking into account the structures that needed to be covered in the course, the writing of autobiographies was divided into three parts: the present, in which learners shared their current experiences with language learning, the past, in which they reflected on past experiences, and the future, in which they were asked to share their objectives. Although the students were not asked to explicitly relate their own experience to Lahiri's, they were expected to be at least partly influenced by the author's autobiographical chapters. Reference to Lahiri's work was also included in the final test, in which students needed to answer a question on whether their learning narrative had any similarities with Lahiri's experience.² In this paper, we present the analyses of the written productions resulting from these two activities (the autobiography and the answers to the final test).

1 The chapters selected for the course were: *La traversata*, *Il dizionario*, *L'esilio*, *Il diario*, *Il triangolo*, *L'impalcatura*, and *Leggere con il dizionario*.

2 The question students needed to answer was: “*Noti alcuni punti di identificazione tra la tua biografia linguistica e quella della scrittrice? O ti sembrano esperienze completamente differenti? Giustifica la tua risposta*”.

2.2 Linguistic autobiographies as a data collection method

Our data analysis is mostly based on learners' linguistic autobiographies, which has become a widespread research tool following the discursive turn in the humanities (BRUTT-GRIFFLER; SAMIMY, 1999; PAVLENKO, 2003; 2007). Autobiographies are "life histories that focus on the languages of the speaker and discuss how and why these languages were acquired, used, or abandoned" (PAVLENKO, 2007, p. 165). In second language acquisition (SLA) research, learners' autobiographical narratives have allowed important advances, among them recognition of learners' complex and mutating identities, as pointed out by Norton (2013).

Autobiographical narratives are valued as a powerful tool that provides an emic perspective on the acquisition of an additional language, i.e. a perspective of the learning process that comes from the learners themselves. This offers a view of learning that is guided by the informants, granting them agency and therefore causing a shift in the power relationship between researchers (or teachers) and participants (or students) (PAVLENKO, 2007; PAIVA, 2008).

In this study, from a teaching viewpoint, autobiographies helped us implement a student-centered pedagogy and encouraged learners to reflect upon their learning experiences and to become more aware of their learning process. From a research perspective, our work can be considered a narrative study focused on content rather than form (cf. PAVLENKO, 2007; PAIVA, 2008).

It is important to point out that studies that are primarily concerned with content may be dangerously neglectful of the fact that autobiographies are not a reflection of reality and that informants are not necessarily (or ever?) "telling the truth" (PAIVA, 2008). Since narratives are a product of the place and time in which they are written, it is fundamental to take into account the context in which they are produced at both the macro and micro levels (PAVLENKO, 2007). The macro context considers historical, political, social, and economic circumstances that influence learners' perspectives of themselves and of their place in the world. In our study, the macro-context resonates with the cultural capital and symbolic status ascribed to different languages, which, as discussed in Section 1.3, may motivate learners' investment (NORTON, 2013). As for the micro-context, beside considering the setting of the study (Section 2.1), we should not be oblivious to the fact that the autobiographies were produced as assignments and written for the teacher/researcher. According to Pavlenko (2007), another fundamental point to consider in narrative research is that "the stories we tell are never fully our own" (p. 180) since narratives are co-constructed together with our interlocutors. As a result, researchers are also interlocutors, who do not come up with their interpretations in a socio-historical vacuum but will be affected by the macro and micro contexts as much as the informants themselves.

However, being aware of the pitfalls of narrative research does not make it any less valid; instead, it makes us aware of our responsibilities. This is why, following Pavlenko's (2007) recommendations, we set out to conduct the analysis of learners' autobiographies based on the concepts of translingual subject (CANAGARAJAH, 2020); learning investment (NORTON, 2013), and translingual practices (CANAGARAJAH, 2013) described in Section 2. In addition, this coauthored work benefits from our different but complementary analytical points of view, which to a certain degree minimize a single, potentially arbitrary interpretation of the data.

2.3 Data analysis

Once the research objectives and theoretical framework were agreed on, a thematic analysis of the data was conducted. We requested and received written consent from 15 students, corresponding to 42% of a cohort of 35. The corpus amounted to 15 two-page-long autobiographical narratives, along with 12 essays responding to a final exam question that specifically addressed the students' identification with Lahiri's experience. Using *ATLAS.ti*, a qualitative analysis software, both authors coded students' narratives according to specific themes, which were then grouped into four macro categories that emerged from the autobiographies: languages, language investment, linguistic identity, and the language learning process. In the coding phase, the analysts also identified any explicit or implicit reference to Lahiri's work. Table 1 shows the categories that emerged from the students' narratives:

Table 1. Macro-categories and themes identified in the thematic analysis

Macro-Categories	Themes
Languages	English, Spanish, French, Latin, Korean, Indonesian, etc.
Language Investment	Socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to target language, <i>progetto di sé</i> , imagined identity, resistance, affiliation, etc.
Linguistic Identity	Language learner, competent user, multilingual, translingual, etc.
Language Learning Process	Learning process, learning methods, learning strategies, learning difficulties, etc.

During the coding process, we recursively discussed our interpretations of the autobiographies, reassessing our perspectives and updating our theoretical references accordingly.

3. RESULTS

An initial analysis of the data revealed that the students' language repertoire is surprisingly rich, comprising 13 different languages, among them English, Spanish, and French but also Korean, Chinese, and Latin. This shows that with a few exceptions, most students are bi- or even multilingual as they know or have studied at least one or two additional languages (usually English or Spanish) before learning Italian, which is not very different from Lahiri's language repertoire (Bengali, English, and Italian). However, unlike Lahiri, who describes her multilingual and translingual self as a triangle where all her languages are in contact with one another, students seem to have difficulties identifying with her in this respect. When asked about similarities between Lahiri's and her own autobiography, despite having English, Korean, and Indonesian in her repertoire, Ingrid³ answered that she did not see any similarities because she "has only lived in Portuguese." Meanwhile, Vinicius, a translator fluent in English, Spanish, and Italian, did not identify with Lahiri because he was "not raised with a linguistic duality as she was."

Non credo che la mia biografia linguistica assomiglia a quella della scrittrice, prevalentemente. Mi sembrano differenti perchè ho vissuto solo una lingua nella mia vita quotidiana. Nel mio caso, ho vissuto solo portoghese.⁴ (Ingrid)

Victor: Credo che da un punto di vista più ampio, le nostre biografie linguistiche non sono molto simili. La mia famiglia non è trasferita in un altro paese e non sono cresciuto con una "dualità linguista" come lei. (Vinicius)

Only two students explicitly identified with Lahiri in this respect. Valentina recognizes that both she and Lahiri speak three languages. Tamires, an English teacher who has also studied Spanish, Italian, German, and Korean, recognized her varied linguistic background, also identifying with Lahiri in the more agentic way in which she deploys her language repertoire, namely by enacting her identity as a writer, albeit not at professional level, in a language that is not her mother tongue:

[io e Lahiri] parliamo tre lingue, parlo il portoghese, l'inglese e l'italiano e la scrittrice parla il bengalese, l'italiano e l'inglese. (Valentina)

Io e Jhumpa abbiamo molte affinità. L'inglese non è la mia lingua madre anche, ma come Jhumpa, sono indipendente in inglese. Ho anche altre lingue oltre all'inglese e all'italiano nella mia biografia linguistica. Come Jhumpa, la mia lingua madre non è la mia lingua di cultura. Le piace a scrivere in italiano, mi piace scrivere in inglese, nessuno di noi due scrive nella sua lingua madre. (Tamires)

Yet identification with Lahiri's lived experience was not always positive. For example, Bela mentioned that although she and Lahiri learned English with different objectives in mind, they have something in common: the language was imposed on them.

Sì, noto alcuni punti di identificazione tra la nostra biografia linguistica, ma, in generale, sono differenti in troppi aspetti. Questa cosa della necessità è qualcosa che è successo anche con noi, ma in un altro modo, come lei ha imparato l'inglese da piccola per sopravvivere in quel nuovo luogo e io ho imparato l'inglese per una necessità diversa, per avere la base per qualsiasi lavoro oggi, ma nessuna di noi ha scelto questo. (Bela)

³ Pseudonyms were used to protect learners' identities.

⁴ Excerpts from students' assignments were transcribed without making changes or corrections, which means there might be language uses that do not reflect native-like norms but are valid representations of the learners' language variety.

Bela's feelings were shared by other students, who frequently brought up the fact that English is a compulsory subject in school and that it is useful in the job market or in an academic career (see Valentina's and Amanda's extracts below). However, despite having had a forced encounter with the language, some students reported appreciating its cultural capital - including access to music, TV shows, writers, etc. - through the contact with the language or with the communities that speak or study it (see Helena's extract below). This resignification of their investment allowed them to find the motivation to keep studying the language and obtain satisfactory results.

Prima l'inglese perché è una lingua universale che facilita la comunicazione con la maggior parte delle persone e l'italiano perché la mia discendenza è italiana e ho pensato che sarebbe stato interessante parlare la lingua dei miei antenati. (Valentina)

Voglio dire che avrei dovuto studiare meglio l'inglese, perché questa è una lingua molto più utile per seguire una carriera accademica e per il mio lavoro attuale. Ed è per questo che, nonostante non mi piaccia molto l'inglese, ancora studio questa lingua. (Amanda)

Inizierò con la lingua inglese. Ho iniziato il mio processo di apprendimento a scuola. [...] Quando sono cresciuta, sono entrata in contatto con la cultura degli Stati Uniti. Durante l'adolescenza, ho consumato molti contenuti pop e mi sono piaciuti molto artisti come Selena Gomez, Demi Lovato... [...] Oltre all'universo musicale, c'era il contatto con l'ambito cinematografico. Mi sono piaciuti e ho guardato molti film con i sottotitoli per capire la lingua. Oggi, leggo bene in inglese, ma ho un po' di problemi a parlarlo. (Helena)

This is in line with ongoing, deeply rooted concepts that English is an asset in a globalized world. For example, learning English is necessary for anyone willing to undertake international endeavors as English has gained the status of *lingua franca* in a diversity of areas, such as technology, health, and particularly relevant to this study, academia. Nevertheless, this over-promotion of English underplays the importance of all other languages. In fact, even the Spanish language, which is also mandatory in Brazilian schools and appears to confer similar advantages to English, is not seen as having the same appeal that English has. An example is Bruna's comment, which shows her inability to see any reasons to invest in a language which was taught in an ineffective and boring way:

ho studiato l'inglese e un po' di spagnolo a scuola, ma nessuna delle due lingue mi piaceva, il modo di insegnare non era molto efficace, era più una memorizzazione di parole e strutture che un apprendimento della lingua, per questo motivo, mi annoiava molto, perché non era dinamico. (Bruna)

With regard to Italian, students elaborated on a variety of purposes for learning the language, among them literature, which, considering the micro context in which these biographies were collected (an Italian Language and Literature major program) (cf. PAVLENKO, 2007), should not be surprising. Indeed, students revealed being attracted to Italian literature (Catarina) or capitalizing on their interest in literature to keep motivated in their studies (Amanda):

Dunque, studio la lingua perché mi è molto cara, mi piace come suonano le parole e vorrei approfondire le mie conoscenze sulla letteratura del Rinascimento. (Catarina)

Anche leggere è per me uno strumento utile per imparare la lingua, dunque ora sto provando a leggere un libro di Alberto Moravia molto semplice che si chiama *Storie della preistoria*. (Amanda)

Another influence of the context at both the micro level (i.e., a university in southeastern Brazil) and the macro level (historical migrations from Italy to Brazil in the 19th and 20th centuries) is the fact that a number of students chose to study Italian to reconnect with their Italian roots, as we can see in Valentina's case, in which the motivation to rescue her familiar roots is intertwined with her love for the language. The affective dimension was one of the strongest points of identification between the students and Lahiri, as Miriam revealed in her statement, in which she compared her relationship with English, an imposed language, and Italian, a chosen passion.

Inoltre è importante imparare e studiare l'italiano molto bene, perché so che conoscerò l'Italia, il paese di cui sono appassionata e che è dei miei antenati, e studierò in un'università italiana in futuro. (Valentina)

credo che abbiamo alcuni punti in comune, perché anche per me l'inglese è stato come una lingua "obbligatoria" e l'italiano è stato come una "passione scelta". (Miriam)

As Norton (2013) points out, through contact with the language and exposure to its set of cultural values, it is common for learners to reassess or renew their initial investment by adding more interests, which in turn boosts motivation. In Lahiri's learning trajectory, the Italian language took on different roles, culminating in the point when it gave her the means to materialize her *progetto di sé*. Miriam too is aware of her changing relationship with the language "she has learned to love." She knows that in a few months she will be thinking of Italian not just as

the language she learned in university but also as the language that enables her to access specific literary works, a newfound reason to invest in it. Similarly, Bela is also aware of the transformational potential of learning Italian. Before she started studying it, her objective was working with books, but now, like Lahiri, she is reassessing her *progetto di sé*, envisioning different possibilities for her future, from translation to teaching.

Credo che in alcuni mesi, io penserò all'italiano in un modo molto diverso. Per ora, è una lingua straniera molto dipendente dalla mia vita all'università, nel senso che non la ho usata spesso quando sono uscita dalle mie lezioni, ma ho molti progetti per i prossimi mesi! [...] A me, "Una Donna", [il libro che ho deciso di leggere] sembra così come un "rito di passaggio" o ancora un "rito di iniziazione" dei miei prossimi giorni con questa lingua che io ho imparato a amare. (Miriam)
Il mio obiettivo è sempre stato quello di lavorare con i libri, che amo così tanto, ma dopo ho scelto l'italiano e ho conosciuto tante cose, ora penso che posso anche lavorare con le traduzioni, con il mondo accademico in italiano, come professoressa, per esempio, ma principalmente qualsiasi cosa che sia nell'universo letterario. (Bela)

Thus far, we have seen learners identifying with Lahiri more or less explicitly. However, the highest point of identification is in terms of the language learning process, both in terms of strategies used to learn a language and of the feelings connected to this process. As we saw above, the strategies students share with Lahiri are reading literature but also using the dictionary and taking notes, as mentioned by Júlia (below). Lahiri's study companion was a printed dictionary whereas most of today's students are inseparable from their smartphones, which uncovers a generational gap. In their autobiographies, our learners mention strategies Lahiri probably never tried herself, including apps such as Duolingo (mentioned by Bruna), online dictionaries such as Reverso, watching Japanese *anime* or Korean *dorama* dubbed in Italian on streaming platforms, listening to podcasts, or joining forums on social networks, among many others.

Sì, noto alcuni punti di identificazione riguardo all'apprendimento di una lingua straniera, ad esempio: l'insicurezza nell'affrontare la lingua (letta nel racconto "La traversata"), gli errori commessi (letti nel racconto "L'impalcatura") e l'uso costante del dizionario insieme all'abitudine di prendere appunti (letto in "Leggere con il dizionario"). (Júlia)
Mi piacciono molto anche le cose che mi sembrano giochi, per questo motivo uso un'app chiamata Duolingo, è un'app di apprendimento di lingua ma che ha un formato di gioco online, è abbastanza rilassato e informale ma è veramente utile, tutti i giorni faccio almeno un'attività in questa app, per non dimenticare le cose che imparo nelle lezioni e anche affinché diventi una routine di studio. (Bruna)

A point that did not seem to be affected by a generational gap consists of feelings related to learning a language. Students shared with Lahiri positive outlooks on the learning process, such as the sense of accomplishment and the motivation to keep going in spite of difficulties (e.g., Maria). However, like Lahiri, learners were aware of the obstacles they faced, such as fear of exposure, frustration at making mistakes, the inability to communicate articulately, and the vexation caused by expressing themselves in primitive forms and without style, as Valentina confesses:

la cosa principale nell'apprendimento di una nuova lingua è la volontà di provare [...]. Se abbiamo la volontà tutte le difficoltà possono essere superate, perché è un cammino difficile, frustrante e lungo, ma io credo che sia un cammino bello e che se un giorno arriviamo alla fine ne sarà valsa la pena. (Maria)
La mia biografia linguistica ha punti di identificazione con quella della Jhumpa Lahiri e ha esperienze uguali. [...] Nel testo "Il diario" di Jhumpa, parla che scrive "senza stile, in modo primitivo" come penso che scrivo in italiano. Mi sento insicura di parlare e scrivere in italiano in un certo senso come la scrittrice si sente, perché dice che scrive "come una semianalfabeta". (Valentina)

While reflecting on their personal learning paths, recognizing both the difficulties and the rewards, some students explicitly stated that reading about Lahiri's experience was valuable to help them to make sense of their own learning "journey". If nothing else, this shows that the author's work had some degree of influence on their autobiographies:

penso che sia importante conoscere altre persone che vivono qualcosa di simile con me, principalmente la sua giornata con l'italiano. (Bela)
Voglio dire che leggere tutto che Jhumpa Lahiri ha scritto sulla sua esperienza ha aiutato anche me. Lei è una brava scrittrice e sapere delle sue difficoltà mi ha fatto vedere che questo "viaggio" di apprendimento non è una via dritta e bisogna dedizione e volontà. (Miriam)

In addition, a degree of resistance towards some language learning contexts were also noted, as in Vinicius's extract below:

La mia insegnante [di spagnolo] era molto rigida e non aveva una buona relazione con la mia classe. Anche se mi piaceva lo spagnolo, le lezioni non erano piacevoli. Perciò, l'ho imparato quasi da solo, cioè, la "base", l'ho imparata a scuola, ma mi approfondivo nello studio quando ero solo, a casa col mio computer, guardando serie e film e ascoltando musica. (Vinicius)

Here, Vinicius separates the formal learning he should acquire at school from the learn-by-doing that categorizes his hobbies accomplished through the Spanish language, as if they were two different systems. The word *base* (which Vinicius used between quotation marks) reinforces this concept, which underscores a lay idea of language also found in other students' writings: that language is made up of systematic rules. Linguistic areas such as grammar, vocabulary, or even pronunciation are perceived as either limits to their proficiency enhancement or, as Valentina puts it, so easy and similar to Portuguese (her mother tongue) that...

questo fatto mi fa sentire insicura per parlare. Ma è più facile leggere e capire ciò che si dice a causa di questa stessa somiglianza con la lingua portoghese. (Valentina)

This is also similar to Lahiri's strategy of capitalizing on both English and Bengali to further her learning of Italian. Like Valentina and Lahiri, Tamires too deploys her knowledge of one language – Portuguese – to learn Italian:

i suoni dell'italiano sono la parte facile, perché hanno somiglianze con il portoghese, dunque capisco le informazioni principali nella conversazione. L'italiano e il portoghese hanno anche molte somiglianze nella scrittura, quindi capisco le informazioni principali dei testi (Tamires)

As Tamires was also one of the students who seemed more aware of her translingual identity, it was no surprise to see her deploying translingual practices in her learning. Nonetheless, the idea of separating linguistic competences into skills (such as speaking and writing) rather than based on context, genre, or even register relies on systemic, standardized, often decontextualized studies that continue to perpetuate essentialist views of language teaching (BRUTT-GRIFFLER; SAMIMY, 1999; JAIN, 2014), as we will see more in depth in the next section.

4. DISCUSSION

Before we move on to the discussion, we need to emphasize that the students who wrote their linguistic autobiographies are studying in an Italian language and literature program, which means that they may become Italian language or literature professionals. However, they may also be qualified to teach and work with other languages, as commonly happens with language majors in Brazil (ourselves included). This alone justifies the importance of enacting a translingual identity (CANAGARAJAH, 2020). However, our data reveal that our students did not see themselves as translingual, even when they know more than one language. A possible explanation for this apparent anomaly is that these students may rely on their own perception of their proficiency level, which is rooted in concepts of language and language learning expressed in their writings as fluency, level, grammar, and mistakes. Although there was an indication that students may be attentive to contextual clues such as level of formality, they continue to bank on canonical models or stereotypes as targets for investment in the language. This can also be seen in their accounts of learning an imposed language, or learning grammar and vocabulary, which Vinicius called *base*. Even learning about the target culture through songs and TV series is generally not enough to legitimize the language as part of their identity, their *progetto di sé*, or even as part of their linguistic repertoire. This divide between what we do with language and how well (we think) we do it may hinder a broader perspective of their own translingual identities and practices. However, had students been exposed to this concept earlier, the findings may well be different, especially when we consider their background as language majors. Perhaps in a future endeavor, we should consider endorsing reflections on language ideologies and theories that support our actions in addition to reflections on one's own learning journey (CANAGARAJAH, 2020).

There was little explicit evidence in our data of how reading Lahiri's book influenced the students' reflections on their language learning experiences and identities, probably because they do not recognize themselves as sharing the same multicultural background as Lahiri's. However, when students reported on their own language learning process, particularly regarding the challenges they faced, they implicitly connected with Lahiri's trajectory, demonstrating that it may be in "conflict, alienation, pain, and/or disorientation" (CANAGARAJAH, 2020, p. 50) that linguistic identities are shaped and constructed. Such identities may also be protected under the umbrella of the mother tongue, a resource students commonly leaned on in their bibliographies, for example when

they compared linguistic systems across languages. Particularly when students separated formal from informal learning, as if what one learns in a classroom was different from what one learns in real life, they seemed to have relied on systemic knowledge more than on their own (multi)linguistic competence (COOK, 1999). Similarly, when they discussed strategies they developed while learning other languages such as using apps for vocabulary memorization or listening to music to practice pronunciation, they often focused on the system rather than on competence. This is problematic because this separation may not only indicate that students compartmentalize language but also demonstrate that they hold on to idealized norms within those languages. Yet such norms are a construct based on idealized (native) speakers, one of the motives for the adoption of *In altre parole* other than a textbook designed for language learning purposes.

In discussing their relations with the languages they learned, students tended to ascribe their investment in Italian to positive feelings towards the language, their desire to connect to their roots, or their interest in Italian culture (CHIARINI, 2006). The English language was another frequent reference in the students' autobiographies, but the type of investment was different since it is a language that most students did not *choose* to study. However, in both cases, it is clear that the contact learners had with the language and the people who speak, study or teach it is also what drives students' investment in learning. As the experiences with the language provide them with new reasons to study it, learners gradually resignify the meaning and position of this language in their *progetto di sé*.

The autobiographies we analyzed show that students and Lahiri have had similar experiences learning a language (more specifically, Italian), both in terms of the initial investment, which changes as a deeper connection with the language is established and novel aspects of its cultural capital are discerned, and in terms of the obstacles and rewards of the learning process. However, reading Lahiri's chapters and doing the activities was not enough to prompt learners to budge from their deep-rooted idea of the "multiple monolingual identity" (JORGENSEN et al., 2011) in favor of a more interconnected and translingual view of multilingualism (CANAGARAJAH, 2013). A possible explanation for that is that students may not have been sufficiently conversant with these concepts to elaborate on them in their autobiographies.

5. LIMITATIONS

Given the personal nature of autobiographies, less than half the students gave us their consent to use them in our analysis. While the few narratives we worked with favored a more qualitative approach, it would be interesting to see if the findings were specific to the group of students we investigated or if they could be generalized.

In addition, our students' lack of identification as translingual subjects may be due to the fact that these are Year 2 students who have not yet had the time to interrogate concepts they inherited and brought with them. A diachronic investigation with the same students upon completion of their course would ideally verify whether our assumptions were true. An alternative to this approach would be to conduct follow-up interviews, which would help clarify some of the concepts shared by the students. Lastly, as there was no pre-test, it was not always possible to identify in the autobiographical narratives the influence of reading Lahiri's work on the process of reflecting and making sense of one's learning and linguistic identity.

CONCLUSIONS

Addressing literature as language input in lower-proficiency classes fosters pedagogical work in that it combines different models of contextualized language and helps to focus on both linguistic and sociocultural competence. In our specific case, working with *In altre parole* served also other purposes, among which promoting Lahiri's work as a legitimate literary model for the Italian language and providing context for the linguistic autobiographies assignment.

Employing linguistic autobiographies in the classroom was positive because this practice helped promote work that deviates from mechanical exercises that claim to enhance fluency offering a space where students can build on their own linguistic repertoire, with all the complexity this entails, including rhetorical aspects, which may be dealt with during revision (CANAGARAJAH, 2006). Furthermore, looking into their own language

acquisition process can assist students in uncovering learning awareness techniques that may help them capitalize on their linguistic resources (PAVLENKO, 2003).

This study also foresees the need to interrogate the English language as an imposed commodity. While we acknowledge the importance of English in a globalized world, we believe that it should not be assumed to be the only possibility in primary and secondary education, particularly when we not only aim to encourage multilingual competence among our students but also intend to empower them to enact their translingual identities.

Placing the Italian language at the heart of this study has enabled us to revisit abundant studies of English language teaching while decentralizing language teaching from English. Although it is our knowledge of English that allows us to review the literature, it is our responsibility to raise awareness of the existence of translingual practices that value all languages equally. Our analysis of learners' autobiographies has revealed the necessity to undertake and promote translingual practices, particularly in the educational setting this paper investigated, namely language major students. Along with developing their language proficiency, students should also be encouraged to learn how to critically reflect on values and epistemologies, so as to avoid the perpetuation of an essentialist paradigm and foster language views that treasure multilingualism.

EQUAL CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Both authors have contributed equally to this paper.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study were used under licence for the current study and so are not publicly available. The data are, however, available from the authors upon reasonable request.

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