

A Critical Analysis of Language Identity Issues in Young Adult Literature

“It is language, more than land and history, that provides the essential form of belonging.”

—*Blood and Belonging* (Ignatieff, 1993, p. 5)

Following Erikson’s stages of development (1968), the major task for adolescents is to develop a stable and positive sense of identity and to discover who they are as individuals, separate from family and community. While identity construction is challenging for all adolescents, it is particularly so for English learners as they “. . . are faced with an additional range of identity choices and pressures deriving from the linguistic, cultural, and often religious differences between their home environments and the social practices of the school and wider community” (Cummins & Davison, 2007, p. 616).

Learning by its very nature brings identity changes that positively transform and, at times, negatively position students (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). For instance, “Mexican American students’ language and culture are daily invalidated by English-only politics and sentiments in school and without” (Saldaña, 2010, p. 103). Do English learners feel silenced or marginalized or do they feel empowered by their language identity? What language roles do adolescent English learners feel they must play in their families, at school, and in the larger community? Which novels help English learners explore and monolingual English speakers try on different language identities? An examination of young adult literature (YAL) can highlight books that reflect language diversity and

help students, both English learners and monolingual English speakers, explore issues related to language identity. The focus of this study was to conduct a content analysis of selected YAL and critically analyze those works for issues related to language identity and English learners.

Adolescence, Identity, and English Learners: A Conceptual Framework

How English learners see themselves in relation to learning a new language and culture is captured in the notion of ethnic identity (Harklau, 2007). According to Anzaldúa, “ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity” (1987, p. 59). The conceptual framework for this study is shaped by current research and the belief that language identity is a dynamic and complex process shaped by psychosocial, contextual, and interactional factors (Harklau, 2007) leading to three different styles of adaptation—ethnic flight, adversarial identity, and transcultural identity, as proposed by Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001). Ethnic flight reflects assimilation into English and identification with mainstream American culture. In contrast, adversarial identity involves rejecting standard English and American culture, most often as a result of having been rejected by the culture. Finally, the development

of a transcultural identity involves creatively fusing aspects of both cultures.

Caution is needed in considering these adaptations, however. McKay and Wong (1996) argue that the idea of immigrants committing to only one identity and one language is xenophobic, and Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) maintain that individuals may fit into different categories at different times in their adaptation process. Nevertheless, adolescent English learners may experience acculturation and identity formation as a one-way process and feel that they must choose between their home and their new language and culture (Olson, 1997).

Ethnic flight and language loss result from powerful internal forces operating within the adolescent, namely “the desire for social inclusion, conformity, and the need to communicate with others” (Wong-Fillmore, 2000, p. 208). In the midst of assimilation, adolescents may not consider the long-term costs. For instance, what happens when children grow up speaking a language different from their parents?

Hijuelos describes such a case in his introduction to *Cool Salsa: Bilingual Poems on Growing Up Latino in the United States* (Carlson, 1994). As a child, he contracted a kidney disease, and after two years in the hospital, spoke English rather than Spanish. Returning home, his parents still spoke to him in Spanish, but he responded in English. “There I was, speaking English in a working-class immigrant household . . . and there was always the growing reticence—maybe a resentment—on my part about that language, Spanish, which surrounded me but was no longer a direct part of me” (p. xvii). Such language boundaries influence communication since “one obvious reason for learning the language spoken by one’s parents . . . is to connect more strongly to the family and its history” (Ogulnick, 2000, p. 57). Venkateswaran (2000) confesses that it was only years later that she realized the cost of her privileged education in India: “I was out of touch with my own country’s emotions and ideas . . . , and out of touch with my mother, whose education and personal growth was located in Tamil language . . .” (p. 63).

Powerful external forces also encourage language loss, “socio-political ones operating in the society against outsiders, against differences, and against diversity” (Wong-Fillmore, 2000, p. 208). As a result, English learners are “often positioned within a deficit

framework that limits the kinds of identities and communities that can be imagined by and for these learners” (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007, p. 676). Such discrimination can lead to the formation of an adversarial identity.

Transcultural identities acknowledge the importance of multiple languages and cultures. One recent trend in literature that underscores the importance of transcultural identity is the use of interlingual text, books in English interspersed with words from other languages. These books may merely allude to code switching, or they may include interlingual words along with a glossary (Broz, 2010). There is also “mestizaje,” such as “parquear el carro,” a type of linguistic hybridization so Mexican Americans can show “their ties to both parent languages, countries, and heritages, but . . . separate themselves by speaking a language considerably different from both tongues of origin, thus fashioning a separate and distinct identity” (Saldaña, 2010, p. 100).

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Selecting Young Adult Literature for Critical Analysis

Many excellent examples of YAL depict the socio-cultural transitions of immigrants and linguistically diverse families, but language may not be specifically mentioned as part of the adaptation process. For this study, the authors selected only books with explicit mention of language as an identifiable issue, but not necessarily the major one. Some of the books selected have only a few references to language, but they illustrate key factors in language identity formation. In addition, the authors chose to analyze stories with settings from the 1950s to present times. McGlinn’s study showed that literature depicting European immigration to the US in the 19th and early 20th century generally presented a nostalgic view leaning toward assimilation, while recent works portrayed a more complex assessment of immigration and, therefore, language identity issues (2007). Additionally, not all books selected describe stories of first-generation im-

migrants; some depict second-generation immigrants or later, residents whose stories demonstrate how lan-

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guage identity factors play out over time. Further, while there were language references in short story and poetry collections, the authors limited their analysis to novels and the two fictionalized memoirs by Jiménez (2002, 2008). All books were selected through an extensive search of YAL databases and lists of recommended or award-winning books. Table 1 lists the 20 books analyzed. Those receiving at least one award or cited on a suggested reading list are noted by an asterisk in the references. The selected books also reflect the language diversity in the US and provide a broad perspective on identity issues.

An Evaluation of Young Adult Literature for Language Identity Factors

As noted earlier in the discussion of the conceptual framework, language identity is shaped by various factors. Based on a review of the research on adolescent language identity, the authors selected Harklau's (2007) three interrelated emphases in ethnic identity formation among English language learners: psychosocial, contextual, and interactional. These became the criteria, shown in Table 2, used to analyze the selected books.

Relevant quotes and incidents were collected during a close reading of each book. That data was entered into a spreadsheet and coded with the three factors. The examples were analyzed as either positive or negative influences on the process of language identity formation. Selected examples found in the critical analysis of the literature are discussed in this section. The final section of this article offers an interpretation of how some of the examples may reflect

Table 1. Languages represented in young adult literature selected for analysis

Title	Author	Year	Home Language	Suggested Reading Level
<i>Any Small Goodness</i>	Tony Johnston	2001	Spanish	Grades 6–9
<i>Ask Me No Questions</i>	Marina Budhos	2006	Bengali	Grades 7–10
<i>Betti on the High Wire</i>	Lisa Railsback	2010	Unnamed	Grades 5–9
<i>Bitter Melon</i>	Cara Chow	2010	Chinese	Grades 8–12
<i>Breaking Through</i>	Francisco Jiménez	2002	Spanish	Grades 7–12
<i>Call Me Maria</i>	Judith Ortiz Cofer	2006	Spanish	Grades 5–8
<i>Day of the Pelican</i>	Katherine Paterson	2009	Albanian	Grades 6–9
<i>Flight to Freedom</i>	Ana Veciana-Suárez	2001	Spanish	Grades 7–10
<i>Good Enough</i>	Paula Yoo	2008	Korean	Grades 7–10
<i>The Great Wall of Lucy Wu</i>	Wendy Wan-Long Shang	2011	Chinese	Grades 6–9
<i>Home of the Brave</i>	Katherine Applegate	2007	Sudanese	Grades 6–9
<i>Inside Out & Back Again</i>	Thanhha Lai	2011	Vietnamese	Grades 5–9
<i>Life, After</i>	Sarah Darer Littman	2010	Spanish	Grades 8–12
<i>Reaching Out</i>	Francisco Jiménez	2008	Spanish	Grades 7–12
<i>Return to Sender</i>	Julia Alvarez	2009	Spanish	Grades 6–9
<i>Roots and Wings</i>	Many Ly	2008	Cambodian	Grades 7–12
<i>Shine Coconut Moon</i>	Neesha Meminger	2010	Punjabi	Grades 9–12
<i>Something about America</i>	Maria Testa	2007	Unnamed, from Kosovo	Grades 7–10
<i>A Step from Heaven</i>	An Na	2001	Korean	Grades 8–12
<i>Tangled Threads: A Hmong Girl's Story</i>	Pegi Deitz Shea	2003	Hmong	Grades 6–9

Table 2. Factors used to evaluate language identity themes in young adult literature

<p>Premise: Language identity is shaped by psychosocial, contextual, and interactional factors (Harklau, 2007) leading to different styles of adaptation: ethnic flight, transcultural identity, and adversarial identity (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).</p>
<p>Psychosocial Factors: Factors influencing how English learners see themselves in relation to their new language and culture</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-esteem • Ethnic and social affiliations • Transition to new culture/language • Familial/intergenerational dynamics
<p>Contextual Factors: Factors influencing how specific contexts and institutions marginalize or integrate English learners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community institutions (e.g., social and religious) • Educational institutions • Political/governmental/legal institutions
<p>Interactional Factors: Factors influencing how language identity is processed and negotiated in social interactions and reflects power relations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family interactions • Teacher–student interactions • Peer interactions • Community interactions

eventual adaptation styles of ethnic flight, adversarial identity, and transcultural identity.

Psychosocial Factors

Psychosocial factors include psychological and social influences on how English learners see themselves in relation to their target language and culture. In adolescence, relationships with peers become the most significant ones as the desire for social inclusion grows.

Adolescents may struggle with self-confidence versus self-doubt and become preoccupied by how they appear to others. For English learners, this struggle might lead to self-labeling of their ethnicity and language. In *Any Small Goodness* (Johnston, 2001), Arturo moves to a new school and his name is “gringo-ized” by his teacher. “Probably to make things easier on herself. Without asking. Ya estuvo. Like a used-up word on the chalkboard, Arturo’s erased” (p. 9). Later, Arturo realizes that to give up his name is to give up his identity, so he and his friends, whose names have also been gringo-ized, reclaim their names and their identity. In a similar example from *Betti on the High Wire* (Railsback, 2010), Babo is adopted by an American couple who rename her Betti, because they feel it would be easier for her to have an American name. To Babo, however, “It doesn’t sound right at all. It sounds weird” (pp. 44–45).

Another event that can lead to a loss of self-

esteem is bullying, such as that experienced by Há in *Inside Out & Back Again* (Lai, 2011). “Someone called me Ching Chong./ Is that good?/ Didn’t sound good./ Then he tripped me . . . ” (p. 152). In addition, Ha is frustrated by her inability to communicate her knowledge in English, and that feeling is compounded by her teacher’s patronizing behavior. “I’m furious, unable to explain I already learned fractions and how to purify river water. So this is what dumb feels like. I hate, hate, hate it” (pp. 156–157).

The preceding examples deal with offenses from the outside (teachers and peers). However, pressures and criticism from within the language group also occur, as in *Bitter Melon* (Chow, 2010) when Frances’s mother criticizes her, comparing a bank teller’s perfect Cantonese sounds to her “gwai lo accent”—an insulting reference to her American (or devil) accent (p. 5). Even benign actions can lead to self-esteem issues. In *Good Enough* (Yoo, 2008), Patti does not speak fluent Korean because her parents were concerned that she might speak English with an accent. Consequently, Patti laments, “. . . I have the vocabulary of a four-year-old when it comes to speaking Korean, stuff like ‘I’m hungry’ and ‘I have to pee’” (p. 21). Finally, Francisco Jiménez is fluent in English and Spanish by the time he goes to college in *Reaching Out* (2008), but he quickly realizes that academic language demands are different. “I was not doing well in English

or Spanish, my own native language! I got a D on my English paper. I was too embarrassed to tell what grade I got on my Spanish composition” (p. 45).

Adolescence intensifies the basic social need to communicate as young people seek to belong, to form affiliations. For English learners, those bonds can be forged within and outside of their own ethnic/language group. Broz (2010) cautions that English learners

come into classrooms “representing a full range of personal and family closeness or distance” from their cultural roots (p. 85). The strength of these bonds can be influenced by the internal and external regard for the home culture/language and the ability to participate, through

language, friendships, and social organizations, both within and outside the ethnic/language community.

The two sisters in *Ask Me No Questions* (Budhos, 2006) are an interesting comparison. The older sister, Aisha, distances herself from her Bangladeshi peers, immersing herself in American culture and striving to be the perfect student. “She began to study the other kids—especially the American ones. She figured out how they walked, what slang they used. Sometimes she’d stand in front of the mirror practicing phrases like ‘my mom’ or ‘awesome’. . . [At night] after she’s crawled under the covers, she keeps talking in the dark, rehearsing who she wants to be the next day” (p. 24). Nadira, the younger sister, stays closer to her Muslim family, and in the end, she demonstrates her own strength and coping skills, presenting evidence on behalf of her family when her father is detained because the family’s visas have expired.

The sisters in *The Great Wall of Lucy Wu* (Shang, 2011) also differ in their affiliations initially. Regina, Lucy’s older sister, invests in the Chinese American community, having “single-handedly gotten the school to offer Chinese as a class, persuaded the PTA to buy Chinese language software, and brought dozens of speakers to school to discuss Chinese language, food, history, and culture” (p. 12–13). Lucy, on the other hand, defines herself in terms of participation in basketball at school, and she resists her parents’ efforts to have her attend Chinese school on Saturday. Although

not as fully developed, Kek and his cousin, Ganwar, from *Home of the Brave* (Applegate, 2007) differ in their ability to reach out and form bonds. Ganwar is angry due to injuries sustained from the conflict in Sudan, so he withdraws. Perhaps with unrealistic ability and courage for a newcomer to the language and culture, Kek reaches out to an elderly woman and cares for her farm animals.

English learners come to a new culture and language in a variety of ways—as refugees, immigrants, migrants. Their transition to a new culture and language is influenced by individual coping skills and resilience, the reasons for the move, immigration status, abruptness of change, extent of participation in the new language, and the degree of similarity or difference between the home and new language. Among the 20 books analyzed in the study, six depict immigration due to war, some with the addition of time in refugee camps: *Betti on the High Wire* (Railsback, 2010), *Day of the Pelican* (Paterson, 2009), *Home of the Brave* (Applegate, 2007), *Inside Out & Back Again* (Lai, 2011), *Something about America* (Testa, 2007), and *Tangled Threads: A Hmong Girl’s Story* (Shea, 2003). Within this group of books, *Betti on the High Wire* is different because Babo is adopted and comes to America with new parents who do not speak her home language and are not familiar with her home culture. Therefore, Betti is not part of an ethnic neighborhood and has no language support group to ease her transition.

Other books in this group reflect main characters who may have lost family members due to war, but who are able to flee with family, as in *Day of the Pelican* (Paterson, 2009), *Something about America* (Testa, 2007), *Inside Out & Back Again* (Lai, 2007), and *Tangled Threads: A Hmong Girl’s Story* (Shea, 2003). On the other hand, Kek, in *Home of the Brave* (Applegate, 2007), travels to the US alone, since his mother is missing amidst turmoil in the home country, but on arrival, he is reunited with an aunt and cousin. While the country is not at war in *Flight to Freedom* (Veciana-Suárez, 2001), the political regime change in Cuba forces the Garcia family to flee to Miami, where they live in political exile. Even though the journey to the US may have been abrupt due to situations in their home country, all of these families have a home language support system.

However, some refugees are relocated in geo-

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graphic areas such as Vermont (*Day of the Pelican*), Minnesota (*Home of the Brave*), or Alabama (*Inside Out & Back Again*) where there may not be an ethnic neighborhood to serve as an extension for their home language. On the other hand, time in refugee camps, as described in *Day of the Pelican*, *Inside Out & Back Again*, and *Tangled Threads: A Hmong Girl's Story*, while difficult, provides initial exposure to English to ease some transition issues.

Another seven books describe families who are first-generation immigrants to the US for economic reasons, including *Any Small Goodness* (Johnston, 2001), *Ask Me No Questions* (Budhos, 2006), *Breaking Through* and *Reaching Out* (Jiménez, 2002, 2008), *Life, After* (Littman, 2010), *Return to Sender* (Alvarez, 2009), and *A Step from Heaven* (Na, 2001). Most of these families not only have a home language support system, but they have moved to geographic areas where they can have contact with similar language communities. *Return to Sender* is the exception as Mari's family members are undocumented migrant workers who move to rural Vermont to work on a dairy farm.

Four books, *Bitter Melon* (Chow, 2010), *Good Enough* (Yoo, 2008), *The Great Wall of Lucy Wu* (Shang, 2011), and *Shine Coconut Moon* (Meminger, 2010) depict families with children who are second-generation or later immigrants who may not have learned the parents' home language. The main characters in these books live in areas where there are similar language communities, but they may or may not participate in those. Grace, the focus of *Roots and Wings* (Ly, 2008), is a second-generation Cambodian American whose mother and grandmother fled their war-torn country, initially moving to Florida, where they were part of an ethnic community; later, before Grace is born, they move to Pennsylvania. Thus, Grace grows up outside the Cambodian American community and only reconnects after her grandmother dies. Finally, *Call Me Maria* (Cofer, 2006) is a departure from the books about immigrants since, as a resident of Puerto Rico, Maria is a US citizen. She grew up speaking Spanish and some English, yet she has many of the same transition issues. When Maria moves to New York City with her father, she immerses herself in the barrio and participates in a world of Spanish, English, and a newfound language, "Spanglish."

As English learners move into a new culture and

language, familial and intergenerational roles and dynamics may be affected. Adolescents often pick up a new language more quickly than adults, since they are attending school, interacting with teachers and peers, and using language for purposes beyond social interaction. These differences in the rate of acculturation can lead to a destabilization of family roles and to role reversals in which adolescents translate and negotiate issues for parents. In *Ask Me No Questions* (Budhos, 2006), when immigration officials question her uncle, Nadira sees his embarrassment and anger. "It's like the words are stuck in his mouth, and he can't get them out I know he hates this: He hates that his English has fled him, and his own daughter is showing him up in front of an American man" (p. 81).

As another example, Meli's father (*Day of the Pelican*, Paterson, 2009) was pleased that English lessons were offered at the refugee camp, but as he struggled to learn the language, Meli was relieved when he stopped attending. "How could she learn something with Baba at her elbow feeling lost and hopeless and humiliated by his own children? Still, how were they to get along in America if their father couldn't even speak to people? It would be as though Mehmet [the brother] had become head of the family. . . . What would happen to them in that strange new land without him in charge?" (p. 93).

In many cases, as the younger generation learns a new language, they even correct their parents. On a visit home, Francisco (*Reaching Out*, Jiménez, 2008) causes awkwardness and anger when he tells his father, "Papa, did you know that the word *naiden* should really be *nadie*? This is what my Spanish professor told me" (p. 66). All the while, parents worry about children forgetting their home language and possibly losing touch with family and culture, as depicted in *Day of the Pelican* (2009). "Mama shook her head. 'They're forgetting Albanian'" (p. 110). Children are sometimes embarrassed by their elder's lack of English ability as well, as Grace laments in *Roots and Wings* (Ly, 2008). "I wanted my grandmother to go

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to school to learn English so that she didn't ask what was happening on television when my friends were around or where to sign her name on a form" (pp. 59–60).

Contextual Factors

Contextual factors in community, educational, and political and governmental institutions can serve to marginalize or integrate English learners. These ten-

dencies within the US are related to two contrasting paradigms—monolingual meritocracy and multilingualism (Wong & Grant, 2007). Some communities appear to embrace multilingualism and multiliteracies based on their demographics; however, an examination may yield little evidence of such support.

The church and relocation

agencies in *Day of the Pelican* (Paterson, 2009) and *Home of the Brave* (Applegate, 2007) appear supportive, but in the community at large, the picture is different. Kek (*Home of the Brave*) experiences hostility from a city bus driver when he is uncertain about the process of paying for his ride. "C'mon, hurry up. The driver makes a face that says *stupid-new-to-this-country-boy*" (p. 113). Similarly, in *Good Enough* (Yoo, 2008), Patti and her father encounter prejudice as they check out at the register of a local store.

"Unbelievable," Mrs. Thomas says loudly . . . as she grimaces at us. . . . She rolls her eyes at Stephanie. She lowers her voice as she speaks to her daughter, but I can hear every word. "These people, they come to our country, they don't bother learning the language . . ." (p. 282)

In *Inside Out & Back Again* (Lai, 2011), Há's family tries to reach out and meet the neighbors, but doors are closed against them. In another frightening incident, "A brick shatters the front window, landing on our dinner table along with a note. Brother Quang refuses to translate" (p. 162). After the terrorist attacks on 9-11, Meli and Mehmet in *Day of the Pelican* (Paterson, 2009) experience open hostility from their peers at school, and in *Something about America* (Testa, 2007), a hate group targets the local Somali

community and blankets the neighborhood with racist leaflets. In both books, however, other community members come together and extend support to heal the wounds.

Educational institutions are shaped by the curriculum, expectations, instructional engagement, and access to programs. In schools, a monolingual meritocracy focuses on English in the classroom as the norm for academic achievement, while the model of multilingualism and multiliteracies acknowledges the importance of English as well as preserving home languages (Wong & Grant, 2007). While none of the books illustrated cutting-edge programs, some seemed to make a difference to English learners. In *Home of the Brave* (Applegate, 2007), Kek feels comfortable in his ESL class, and their teacher engages students in hands-on, acquisition-oriented activities. Likewise, in *Tangled Threads: A Hmong Girl's Story* (Shea, 2003), Mai meets Miss Susan who welcomes her to ESL.

"This is my class Some schools call it E.S.L.—English as a Second Language. You speak Hmong first, and you speak it at home. Others might speak Polish first or Spanish first." I nodded. Miss Susan swung the door open, and all the kids stood and said in Hmong, "*Txais tos! Welcome to Roger Williams!*" My eyes got very wet, and I covered my mouth to hide the quivering of my lips. For the first time since my arrival in America three weeks ago, I felt like I belonged" (p. 112).

Negotiating the bureaucracy of political, governmental, and legal institutions can be difficult for the native English speaker; for an English learner, it can be overwhelming. In the United States, ". . . powerful social and political forces operate against [language diversity and] the retention of minority languages. To many and perhaps most Americans, English is more than a societal language; it is an ideology" (Wong-Fillmore, 2000, p. 207). Legal issues regarding citizenship and immigration status arise in several books, including *Ask Me No Questions* (Budhos, 2006), *Breaking Through* and *Reaching Out* (Jiménez, 2002, 2008), and *Return to Sender* (Alvarez, 2009). Additionally, a few books mention resettlement issues related to the characters' refugee status, as in *Day of the Pelican* (Paterson, 2009), *Home of the Brave* (Applegate, 2007), and *Inside Out & Back Again* (Lai, 2011). In each instance, the primary language of interaction is English, with little or no support for the participants' home language. *Ask Me No Questions* also highlights

how immigrants fall victim to unscrupulous individuals, such as dishonest attorneys who hinder rather than help them through the process of immigration.

Interactional Factors

“Discourse has a very real-world effect—what one says or does affects not only others but oneself” (Alsup, 2010b, p. 2). Through social interactions, language identity and power relations are processed and negotiated.

Our first interactions are with family, but that language shifts given generational preferences and family roles. Pura Belpré award-winning author Viola Canales began elementary school speaking only Spanish because “only Spanish was spoken in her home out of respect to her grandmother, who spoke no English, even though her parents, both US citizens, both US high school graduates, were bilingual” (Newman, 2009, p. 67). Likewise, while several fathers require their children to use the home language with the family, as illustrated in *Breaking Through* and *Reaching Out* (Jiménez, 2002, 2008), *Return to Sender* (Alvarez, 2009), and *A Step from Heaven* (Na, 2001), the young people often engage in language mixing as described in *Return to Sender*.

Ofie asked, “*Papa, necesito dinero* for my lunch *porque hoy sirven* grilled cheese sandwiches.” . . . “*En español,*” he reminded her. He already knew that Ofie wanted money to buy her lunch instead of taking leftover tortillas and beans. But he wanted her to ask him in Spanish.” Ofie folded her arms and stood her ground, “I’m American. I speak English.” Papa gave her several slow nods. “Bueno, *americanito, tendras que comprar tu almuerzo con tu propio dinero.*” That night, . . . he turned the TV to a Spanish channel. “*Se termino la television en ingles,*” he announced. No more English or Spanglish in the house. We had to practice our Spanish. (pp. 174–175)

At school, teacher–student interactions may reflect language to include or to exclude. Inclusive learning communities acknowledge all students’ previous linguistic and academic achievement and employ “a range of language registers and codes (e.g., from standard to more colloquial forms of speech and from monolingual to more mixed language uses)” (Franquiz & Reyes, 1998, p. 213). Some teachers, however, suppress or ignore such hybrid moments (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejeda, 1999).

There were no real instances of teachers encouraging multiple languages in the classroom, but there

were teachers who tried to include and those who seemed to exclude English learners. For instance, in *Call Me Maria* (Cofer, 2006), Maria feels that her teacher judges her. “What does he understand? Why I do not always choose to talk in class? Does he understand what it is like to sound different from others so that some people will look at you as if you are from another planet, and others will laugh as if everything you say is a joke?” (p. 89). On the other hand, in *Reaching Out*, Francisco recalls a high school English teacher who reached out and encouraged him to read *The Grapes of Wrath* (Steinbeck, 1939/2002). “It was difficult to read because I was still struggling with the English language, but I could not put it down. I identified with the Joad family.

Their experiences were like my own family’s, as well as those of other migrant workers. I was moved by their story, and for the first time I had read something in school to which I could relate” (p. 9).

In adolescence, peer interactions reflect peer pressure and power relationships as language is used to silence and to position individuals negatively or

positively. Most of the characters in the books analyzed find friends within their own language group, as Mai does with the student aide to her ESL teacher in *Tangled Threads: A Hmong Girl’s Story* (Shea, 2003). “I only come in here for an hour on Tuesdays and Thursdays. But we’re both in the seventh grade, so we have the same lunch period. You can sit with me and my friends if you want” (p. 114). They also form friendships with native-English-speaking peers who help them navigate school procedures as well as English, as is the case with Dani in *Life, After* (Littman, 2010).

“You are one smart cookie, Miss Daniela Bensimon from Argentina. Come on, tell me where’s your next class and I’ll show you the way.” As I told him the classroom number of my next class, I tried to figure out why he was comparing me to a biscuit, and if this was a compliment or an insult. It was no wonder I felt so tired at the end of the day. Trying to think in English was exhausting. (pp. 138–139)

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In comparison, there were many examples of hurtful peer interactions. In homeroom, Kek (*Home of the Brave*, Applegate, 2007) finds a note on his desk and is hopeful that he has a new friend, but when he opens the note, it is a drawing of “a dead body made of bones. ‘Hungry, Kenya?’ a boy in the back asks. His voice has knives in it” (p. 152). Consequently, some

English learners may participate within only one or a variety of communities.

English learners adapt their behavior, as Mai describes in *Tangled Threads: A Hmong Girl's Story* (Shea, 2003). “I’d seen only a few Hmong kids raise their hands to answer or ask a question. At the same

time I sometimes saw American kids laugh at how the words came out or at a question they thought was stupid. I never raised my hand outside [ESL]. I would rather make believe I didn’t understand than raise my hand and lose face” (p. 174).

English learners may participate within only one or a variety of communities, including an ethnic enclave, a diverse multilingual community, or a more monolingual community that could present challenges to recent immigrants and non-English speakers. Betti (Railsback, 2010) is in a unique situation as she is adopted and moves to another country without home language support. However, Betti is surrounded by a caring community who help her. In contrast, in *Flight to Freedom* (Veciana-Suárez, 2001), Yara has access to a strong Cuban community in Miami. In yet a third scenario from *Shine Coconut Moon* (Meminger, 2010), Sammy chooses not to interact with her Indian peers and community because “they talked about things I knew nothing about, sometimes using words in languages other than English—which is the only language I’m fluent in. Things always got real awkward real fast when we realized we had nothing much to talk about” (pp. 51–52).

The Results in Terms of Language Identity

How can the examples found in the analysis of selected YAL be interpreted in terms of adaptation style and language identity formation? What style of adaptation has the character in the book chosen or what style will the character ultimately choose? Based on the analysis of the examples and the factors associated

with them, some possible interpretations follow. As noted earlier, individuals can move through more than one style of adaptation, as is evident from the analysis of the books.

Ethnic Flight

For these individuals, speaking English is more than just communicating. “It also becomes an important symbolic act of identifying with the dominant culture . . .” and perhaps, “moving away from the world of the family and the ethnic group” (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001, p. 104). In *Shine Coconut Moon* (Meminger, 2010), Sammy’s mother definitely chooses this adaptation as she severs ties with her Indian family after her divorce; by suspending any real contact with family or the Indian community, she takes Sammy along this same path. Years later, a visit from her brother and the interest that Sammy shows in reconnecting with her grandparents and her Sikh heritage move Sammy and her mother back toward a transcultural style.

In *Ask Me No Questions* (Budhos, 2006), Aisha also chooses ethnic flight as an initial response after immigration. She believes this choice is the most effective one in her quest to become high school valedictorian and attend college. However, when her father is detained by immigration because the family’s visas have expired, her carefully constructed world collapses, and her sister helps her regain a more transcultural identity. To a lesser extent, in *The Great Wall of Lucy Wu* (Shang, 2011), Lucy chooses ethnic flight because she has a limited world view that revolves around basketball and middle school. When her great aunt visits from China, Lucy literally builds a wall with a bookcase in her room to block out the ethnic and language influence. In getting to know her great aunt, however, she learns about her family heritage and becomes more receptive to learning about the language at Chinese school.

Adversarial identity

Several characters appear to initially choose an adversarial identity, rejecting English and American culture. Given the difficulties they have experienced, this choice is not a surprise. However, this is probably not the end point of their identity formation. First, Há experiences intense bullying from her peers at school in *Inside Out & Back Again* (Lai, 2011), and her

teacher does not intervene to help her, which sends a negative message. In addition, her family relocates to Alabama where there is no strong ethnic language community for support. Except for the “cowboy” who is their sponsor and Miss Washington who tutors Há, they have few friends outside the family unit. Há is especially frustrated by English, which is very different from Vietnamese. Nonetheless, there are encouraging signs in her friendship with Miss Washington, who intercedes at school so Há can have a peaceful lunch alone in the classroom, away from bullies in the school cafeteria.

As noted earlier regarding *Home of the Brave* (Applegate, 2007), Kek’s cousin Ganwar is angry because he was injured in the war. Consequently, he directs his anger outward and refuses to become involved in the community. When Kek mentions that he thinks he will like living in America, Ganwar disagrees. “Yeah, that’s what I thought, too. But you’ll never really feel like an American . . . Because they won’t let you” (p. 87).

Finally, in *Betti on the High Wire* (Railsback, 2010), Babo has many reasons to push back in an adversarial manner. She has to leave her home country, her adoptive parents change her name to Betti, and she struggles daily with English. Yet, despite the language barrier and her enormous sense of loss, her new family is gently supportive, allowing her the space to adjust. Still, it may be harder for her than for characters in the other books to build a transcultural identity.

Transcultural identity

The analysis highlighted at least two examples of individuals who have already built a transcultural identity, incorporating aspects of both their culture of origin and mainstream American culture. First, Francisco Jiménez’s memoirs, *Breaking Through* (2002) and *Reaching Out* (2008) paint a picture of a young man overcoming poverty, language barriers, and prejudice to become fluent in both of his languages. Moreover, because readers can follow his journey from childhood to young adulthood, they get a glimpse of how long it takes to become fluent in two languages for both personal and academic purposes.

In *Call Me Maria* (Cofer, 2006), Maria has enthusiastically embraced Spanish, English, and Spanglish. She feels confident about her abilities. “I know words

in two languages. I will not give up either one. It gives me an advantage to know more than you know. . . . I will not forget my first language. And now I know my second language well enough so that I am not going to be lost in America” (p. 28).

In *Flight to Freedom* (Veciana-Suárez, 2001), Yara shows her ability to integrate her two languages and cultures, all the while struggling with the powerful questions that transcultural identity brings. She remembers that when she first memorized the words to the Pledge of Allegiance, she did not really understand them. “But now I know what those words stand for. When I put my hand over my heart, and when I declare my allegiance to those colors and to the republic they represent, I cannot help but wonder if this means I have forgotten my own birth. This is very confusing, and I’m not sure I can even explain the division I sometimes feel inside my heart” (p. 186).

Yara shows her ability to integrate her two languages and cultures, all the while struggling with the powerful questions that transcultural identity brings.

Conclusion

Each of the transcultural identity examples presented were native Spanish speakers, which coincides with the findings by Rumbaut (2002) who studied the children of immigrants to the US post-1960 to assess whether they maintained attachments to home language and culture into adulthood. The findings of this longitudinal study indicate that the level of transcultural attachment was small—around 10%—but it was more significant with some national-origin groups, particularly Mexican Americans living close to the border. His interpretation of the data was that for second-generation Americans, “theirs was an American future, not a bilingual or binational one” (p. 90).

However, these findings do not take into account some of the factors considered by this limited analysis of YAL, namely, the contextual support of educational institutions and the critical importance of teacher–student interactions that “stress mutual respect, sharing, and learning in a community” (Pavlenko & Norton,

2007, p. 686). English learners “will perform better academically if schools as institutions and classroom teachers in particular make an effort to invite into the classroom the home culture and language from which the students come” (Alsup, 2010a, p. 81). Positive learning environments acknowledge and affirm the

Clearly, in the 20 books examined, language is a part of teens’ negotiation of their own identity as they explore who they are in their new worlds.

learner’s home language and culture, capitalize on the powerful social network of family and community, and help all learners “imagine themselves as members of a linguistically diverse world” (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007, p. 677). The YAL analyzed in this study is just a small subset of the books that could be used to engage English

learners and monolingual English speakers and help teachers spark discussions of language variation that address the Common Core State Standards (<http://www.corestandards.org/>).

Gloria Anzaldúa writes, “I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex, and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself” (1987, p. 59).

Clearly, in the 20 books examined, language is a part of teens’ negotiation of their own identity as they explore who they are in their new worlds.

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*Indicates that the book has been listed on at least one award or suggested reading list (e.g., IRA Notable Books for a Global Society, Pura Belpré, Printz Award).