

# Poetry in TESOL Teacher Education: A Chinese Teacher's Identity Negotiation and Reconstruction Before and During the Pandemic

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## **Abstract**

This case study explores how Meili (pseudonym), a pre-service teacher in a TESOL and World Language Education program, negotiated and reconstructed her identity as a multilingual graduate student in her emergent bilingual poems through two poetry classes offered in spring 2018 and summer 2019. Her reflections and stories in the interviews are analyzed under the framework of arts-based research. The findings point out that this non-English native multilingual teacher negotiated and reconstructed her emerging teacher-poet identity through bilingual poetry in three main ways: (a) she challenged the long-existing norms and judgments set by her English monolingual peers by bringing her multilingual voice in her English poems, (b) she combined her personal experiences as a multilingual international student in the U.S. to reconstruct an ideal identity that she aspires to as a pre-service teacher, and (c) she used translingual creative writing to exhibit and expand her linguistic and cultural repertoires which contribute to the ongoing construction of her teacher-poet identity. This analysis has implications for poetry and other arts-based approaches to be included in TESOL teacher education to help pre-service and in-service teachers from diverse backgrounds disrupt problematic norms in the field during and after the pandemic. The affordance of poetry also enables multilingual teachers to mediate and reshape their desired teacher identity through their poem writing combined with their life experiences.

## **Keywords**

TESOL, teacher education, multilingual teachers, pre-service teachers, poetry

## **Background**

The United States and other western English-dominant countries have been popular destinations for international students. In the U.S., international students are a fast-growing population with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Among international students, Chinese international students are the fastest- and largest-growing group of international students in the U.S. (Qi et al., 2018). Although international students generally face some shared and common challenges, previous studies demonstrated that students from Asia, Africa, and South America in the U.S. face more challenges compared to their counterparts from Europe and North America (Qi et al., 2018). Even among Asian international students, a salient difference would be language barriers that

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Chinese students face since they have lower TOEFL iBT scores (a mandatory language test international students have to take to apply for universities in the U.S.) compared to students from India where English is an official language and Korea where English is not an official language either (Educational Testing Service, 2018). When the language barrier is an enormous challenge to Chinese students, the hardship becomes even more difficult for Chinese international students who are enrolled in the program of TESOL or World Language Education (WLE), in which language proficiency is a prerequisite. Noticing this issue, many scholars advocate to offer more creative approaches, such as poetry, in TESOL programs to help international students navigate in the new host country for their new life, study, and identity (Cahnmann-Taylor et al., 2016; Harman & Zhang, 2015; Kamhi-Stein, 2013). Along with these advocacies, scholars also urge to disrupt the standards set by English native practitioners in the field and offer more creative ways for international students to achieve better in their academic performance and pre-service training (Cahnmann-Taylor et al., 2016; Cahnmann-Taylor & Hwang, 2019).

As most of the teaching all around the world has been interrupted and altered due to the pandemic, it is time for educators and learners to make transformative and critical changes. The recent upheaval of policy that could influence all international students in U.S. academic programs, particularly TESOL, programs should take actions to not only nurture pre-service teachers' academic and professional development but also self-agency and intercultural competency. Thus, in the midst of a global pandemic, I ask two questions related to both arts and the world of TESOL:

1. What role does arts/poetry play in teacher education?
2. What can arts-based approaches offer in TESOL teacher education?

What follows here is a case study of a Chinese international student's personal experience. Through the analysis of three interviews with her, the analysis exhibits problematic norms and concepts that many TESOL and WLE practitioners still carry against international and multilingual teacher candidates, the negotiation and reconstruction of this bilingual teacher's identity, and the affordance of poetry in TESOL teacher education programs. The analysis itself also illustrates the importance of using arts-based research in both teaching and research (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2018; Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2019).

This study begins with a review of the long-existing binary of English-native speakers and non-native speakers in TESOL, translanguaging practices of bilinguals/multilinguals, and the arts in TESOL practice, specifically poetry. After the review, the context of culture and situation is explained to better illustrate Meili's situations in her program and her workplace as an international bilingual educator who was reshaping her identity as a bilingual, novice teacher, and emerging poet.

## **Theoretical Background**

### ***The Binary of English-Nativeness and Non-Nativeness in TESOL***

The expanding role of English as a global lingua franca leads to the demands for more qualified English teachers in the world. Nonetheless, about 80% of English teachers around the world speak another language as their native or first language (Faez & Karas, 2019). However, these non-native teachers' teaching skills are often doubted and challenged since the field has linked teaching skills with "native like" English proficiency. As a result, such a problematic concept situates "non-native English-speaking" bilingual or multilingual teachers in a discriminated side, worsening the

tolerance and embrace of English varieties and localized English in the world. Gradually, this binary lead non-native teachers to identify with the ideology of “nativeness” in the field, ranging from teaching skills to cultural understanding and teaching. This deep-rooted ideology further favors native teachers as well as influencing non-native teachers to perceive themselves as inferior and deficient in English (Nguyen, 2017). Phillipson (1992) challenges such “native speaker fallacy” and he asserts that this proposition is unequal and unethical (p.185). A growing number of scholars call for breaking down the dichotomy and promote counter discourses (Pennycook, 1994). To empower non-native speakers in the field, Samimy and Brutt-Griffler (1999) also advocate for the necessity to “develop an identity of their own construction that neither prescribes a limited role for them in the profession nor specifies definite boundaries to their capacities therein” (p. 418). Therefore, TESOL teacher education becomes extremely important to non-native teacher candidates’ experiences in the training since teachers tend to bring in their own experiences in the program into their future classrooms and form their own beliefs from the programs. For this reason, it is critical to examine if courses offered in TESOL teacher programs are able to influence pre-service teachers’ perceptions and beliefs of non-nativeness and diversity, and if the courses could empower non-native bilingual/multilingual teacher candidates to disrupt problematic norms in the field (Mahboob, 2010). When seeking for critical pedagogy changes and transformations, arts-based teaching and learning offered possible solutions.

### ***Art and Poetry in TESOL Teacher Education***

Dewey (1934/2005) explores the concept of art experience, noting that a person not only transfers materials into art, but artworks also transform the person. Life’s challenges and changes create momentum for personal development and growth. Dewey points out that the human development speeds up when a person overcomes challenges and difficulties to make progress (Dewey, 1934/2005; Richards, 2017). In this process, a person’s artistic transformation takes place when the past experience is carried into the present experience with the desired imagination of the near future (Eisner, 2002). Art helps people better understand the sense of self, the world, and their own life experience (Dewey, 1934). Thus, Dewey’s notion of art as experience highlights the importance of art in human development and growth. As international students constantly face challenges and difficulties during their stay in the U.S. for academic purposes, especially during and after the global pandemic, art should be involved in their life as much as possible to help them carry prior life experiences to their current experiences to fulfil the goals of self-development and self-growth.

With the increasing needs for English teachers in other countries, more and more international students come to the U.S., seeking a graduate degree in teaching English as a second language (ESL) or a foreign language (EFL). To help these students adjust to the new environment academically and socially, poetry has been adopted by TESOL teacher educators as a creative, aesthetic, and critical vessel. Hanauer (2003) conceptualizes that poetry has certain value in promoting multilingualism and understanding diversity in human life. Unlike other linguistic approaches, poetry makes it possible for poets to express their thoughts in an aesthetically pleasurable way, and thus brings back adornment to the original thoughts. Hanauer (2003) also states that poetry offers access to the first-hand experiences in the world, which connect readers with the understanding of the artist’s experiences, thoughts, and emotions that are related to the poems. He further argues that bilingual/multilingual poems have pushed against the assimilation that the dominant monolingual power posts on the multilingual minorities.

In recent research which focuses on poetry in teacher education, especially with international students, scholars demonstrate that by writing bilingual/multilingual poems, multilingual teachers push against the norms set by dominant monolingual practitioners and bring in both multicultural and individual voices in the field. Adding poetry in language teacher education also introduces the new concept of poetic Zone of Proximal Development (P-ZPD) which offers dialogic possibilities to help TESOL teachers identify themselves as collaborative artists in creative multilingualism (Cahnmann-Taylor & Hwang, 2019). P-ZPD can also “impact imitation, grammar, vocabulary, authority, and other classroom concepts in many global EFL classrooms” (Hwang, 2016, p. 159). Training pre-service teachers to be artists means to help students think and act actively and strategically, seeing opportunities when others might see as limitations and impossibilities. The arts make great contributions in TESOL education to help students view English as a meaningful “home” from multilingual perspectives and enable creative and agentive multilingual proficiencies. Artful TESOL practices also connect instructors’ and students’ linguistic and cultural repertoires to learn from cross-cultural sharing, failure, and revisions. Through such an aesthetic self-discovery, students’ authorhood and creative agency will be sharpened and developed (Cahnmann-Taylor & Zhang, 2018). In another word, poetry provides teacher candidates with a space for sharing personal/life experiences with multicultural, multilingual, and multilevel meanings to forefront the process of translanguaging and shaping a new identity as a teacher.

### ***Translanguaging in Poetry***

Translanguaging is a process when multilingual speakers use their multiple languages in meaning making. This discursive process of multi-language use, often simultaneously, is an expansion of languaging featured with speakers’ complex navigation in multiple linguistic and cultural repertoires (Carnagarajah, 2011; García, 2009). Under this framework, scholars push back against the false view of bilingual speakers’ cognition, which describes bilingual speakers as inferior speakers of both languages and double monolinguals (Baker, 2011; García, 2009; García & Wei, 2014).

Since English has become the second or the third language of many people all over the world, translanguaging is prevalently used and implemented in numerous countries. Because of this change, the space for translanguaging is expanding in educational settings at the same time. In higher education in the U.S., as more and more international students come to the U.S. to pursue an undergraduate or a graduate degree, these students certainly employ translanguaging skills in their personal and academic experiences. Hence, such vital change in higher education also requests TESOL educators to accommodate these bilingual/multilingual students’ needs, and to foster their prior skills that they acquired in both their native and second or third languages. Allowing and assisting students’ translanguaging practices opens the door for more potential and possibilities in TESOL programs (De Costa et al., 2017).

## **The Current Analysis: Contexts and Method**

### ***Context of Culture***

The context of culture in this case study is surely consistent with the larger culture of the TESOL world. Meili started her graduate program as soon as she graduated from college in 2018. Meili’s program and its faculty make efforts to reshape beliefs and ideologies of multilingual learners and world English in multiple courses for pre-service and in-service teachers. Among graduate students

in the program, the teaching experiences of students vary. For students who do not have much teaching experience, like Meili, they applied for the program mainly for a pre-service training before their future career. Meanwhile, there are also students who are full-time teachers already, working on another degree for better career choices. Thus, for Meili and many other international pre-service teachers, they regard U.S. in-service teachers as experienced authority in TESOL and WLE. However, idolizing experienced teachers in their pre-service training could be inappropriate since some experienced teachers could bring in misbeliefs about multilingual teachers in the TESOL and WLE world, even though many courses have been correcting and shifting such false concepts. If these pre-service teachers internalize and continue this misconception in their training and future teaching, they might look down upon their own identities as multilingual and idealize the “native speaker fallacy”. Blindly following and legitimizing this norm set long ago by English native monolingual educators is harmful for international and multilingual teacher candidates, especially in their negotiation and reconstruction of their identity as promising educators in the field. Their internalization of these norms could also further hinder their performance and teaching in diverse classrooms where they might serve a great number of multilingual students.

### ***Context of the Situation***

In a university in the Southeastern U.S., Meili, a Chinese international student, enrolled in two poetry classes offered in the graduate-level TESOL and World Language Education program in spring 2018 and summer 2019. When Meili took the first course, it was the first semester of her first year in the program. The course offered in 2018 was a Master-level poetry course for pre-service teachers. In the course, there were four Chinese-L1 international students, including Meili, and four other English-native students (English-Spanish bilingual speakers and English monolingual speakers). In the doctoral level course offered in 2019, Meili was the only international student along with other U.S. students who are both English-Spanish bilingual speakers and English monolingual speakers (six in total). At the end of the second course, Meili had two English poems published in U.S. poetry journals. The purposes of these two courses are helping students acquire poetic crafts to write poems to cross linguistic, cultural, and disciplinary boundaries as well as immersing teachers in the process of writing poetry, regarding themselves as poets, to create more cross-cultural and meaningful instructions in their own language classes. Meili was selected as the focal participant because she took both courses, and she was the only international multilingual student in the summer course who experienced challenges from other multilingual or monolingual U.S. peers. As Meili felt powerless and lonely in the summer course when a U.S. English-L1-multilingual in-service teacher consistently picked on her language use in her poems, Meili wrote the poem “For International Students” to push back against this U.S. in-service teacher’s grammar critiques. In the poem, Meili had written about not only language barriers she faced in the program but also many other challenges that she had to overcome in the new host country.

When the first interview took place, it was the beginning of her last semester in the program as a pre-service teacher. Upon the time the second interview was conducted, Meili had already been working as a full-time Chinese teacher in an elementary school in the U.S. for almost a semester. The third interview was conducted in the summer of 2020 before Meili went back to China to be a full-time English teacher in a local elementary school. In the first two interviews, Meili and I both used English most of the time. For the last interview, Meili chose to use Chinese with only a few English words as she felt more relieved to speak Chinese for the last interview.

### **Data Collection**

To have a better understanding of Meili's prior experience with poetry and literacy before and after she enrolled in the program as well as the two poetry classes, three semi-structured interviews were conducted and audio recorded in the fall semester of 2019 and summer of 2020. The first interview mainly focused on Meili's reflection on the summer course. One of her poems entitled "For International Students" is also partially included in the analysis (see Figure 1 below) as a poetic reflection on her own experiences in the U.S., which epitomize Chinese international students' collective experiences in her program. The second follow-up interview covered more of her early childhood and family literacy practices that indicate her rich poetic repertoire of biliteracy. The third interview unveiled her reflection of the rapid changes in her life before and during the pandemic as well as how poetry engaged in her life during this unprecedented time.

### **Figure 1**

*Excerpt from "For International Students" Poem*

**"For International Students"**

For you cross the sea with 2 overweight luggage;  
 For realizing even YouTube ads know your race;  
 For feeling you shouldn't speak your mother tongue;  
 ...  
 For hearing "We only hire Americans";  
 For depositing triple security when not having the SSN;  
 For changing the tire, then worrying about the next-month-rent;  
 For longing to hear your native songs in restaurants;  
 For furnishing your apartment from dumpsters;  
 ...  
 For not relating to family newborns;  
 For hating yourself when parents sell their house for tuition;  
 For lying "I'm great."

*Note.* The poem is patterned after *Jubilate Agno* by Christopher Smart.

### **Data Analysis**

A thematic analysis was conducted to examine the collected data and identify recurring themes and issues. Line-by-line transcription reading was employed in the first round of inductive thematic analysis. Transcribed and translated data were coded in the chronological order. All themes and categories were generated from the data without any pre-existing presumptions. By using the software QDA miner, pattern and frequency of words were collected and categorized. Some of the frequent words that appeared in the data were "identity", "experience", and "bilingual". After the initial coding, a second round was conducted to analyze the contextual connections and relationship of the patterns. There were three core pattern codes established in this stage: prior

experiences of literature and art, experiences as a non-native bilingual speaker in the U.S., and affordance of poetry in the ongoing negotiation and reconstruction of identity. Under each of these themes, there are several developed sub-codes to better explain, connect, and explore each main theme. Since Meili already employed translanguaging practices during all three interviews by using both languages, “translanguaging” was also coded and categorized as one of the sub-themes.

Although the terms of “native” and “non-native” speakers are still prevalent in TESOL, this paper will consistently use alternative terms, such as “English monolingual,” “English-native bilingual/multilingual,” and “English non-native multilingual.” These terms are selected to avoid spreading and reinforcing the long-existing binary.

## Findings

### *Prior Experiences of Literature and Art*

When international pre-service teachers study in the U.S., their academic ability and knowledge repertoires are usually graded and judged by their English academic writing. This U.S.-centered practice usually neglects the profound cultural and linguistic foundation that these students already established in their native language and culture. The data and findings displayed below showcase Meili’s previous life experiences that shaped her knowledge and ability in language and literacy that the U.S. academic practices often overlooked.

**Meili’s family literacy practice.** In the second interview, Meili revealed her family’s literacy practices when she was a child. These valuable practices with family members established her early literacy skills in her native language. In the excerpt below, Meili described her family’s reading practices with her mother and uncle:

Once I finished my homework, my mom read books. We were in the same room but doing different things. . . she read the book and I read the book. We shared thoughts together. . . Even now, we still recommend books to each other. . . Sometimes I read with my uncle. (personal communication, November 27, 2019).

This vignette demonstrates that her mother helped her develop regular and constant reading habits in her family. Apparently, through reading books while Meili was doing homework, her mother became a role model for Meili when she was young. They shared their thoughts on books they read. Her mother helped her develop her reading ability and possible critical thinking through book discussion. Through her narrative here, it is not hard to understand that her family offered great literature resources for her to accommodate her reading needs.

**Prior experience with literature and cultures of different countries.** Because Meili’s family fostered a great environment and provided her with resources for her literacy and reading development, she was able to read many translated books from world literatures and cultures, along with developing her literacy in her native language (《 》 are used with book titles in Chinese):

I liked books such as *Little Women*, *Harry Potter*, and *Anne of Green Gables*. And 《黑骏马》 (*Black Beauty*), 《古堡里的月亮公主》 (*The Little White Horse*). And some Chinese books. In middle school, that was numerous! So many. . . like *Jane Eyre*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Emma*. *Wuthering Heights*, *Great Expectations*, *Les Misérables*, but all in Chinese though. . . High school, I read some Russian, French, and Japanese literature. I read 《安娜·卡列

琳娜》(*Anna Karenin*) and 《复活》(*Resurrection*). But I don't really like Russian literature. They combined so many descriptions of scenery and the language is kind of obscure. French literature, 《羊脂球》(*Boule de Suif*), 《茶花女》(*La Dame aux Camélias*), 《基督山伯爵》(*The Count of the Mounte Cristo*), 还有一些莫泊桑的短片小说集 (And some other short stories from Guy de Maupassant). Japanese literature, 《菊与刀》(*The Chrysanthemum and The Sword*) (personal communication, November 27, 2019).

Her narrative here is an epitome of her experience of foreign literatures and understanding of diverse cultures through reading classics from her native language and other languages. When recalling these books, she also had a short reflection on Russian literature and her understanding of Russian literature back then. This means she connected her prior experience with her literacy and understanding of Russian literature with her present literacy level to make such a reflection. This excerpt also proves that Meili established primary understanding and gained knowledge of literature, languages, cultures, and histories of other countries, being culturally competent. These experiences surely enabled her to understand multicultural materials at a young age.

**Early experiences with art and literacy.** Similar as books, Meili also had adequate experience with the arts when she was little in both school and home settings. The public schools that she attended helped her with artistic experience:

We also had writing competition and calligraphy competition. I drew pictures and handwrote for our newsletters. . . I drew pictures that matched my articles and combined them together to make posters (personal communication, November 27, 2019).

Meili's school back then provided many art-related activities to help students develop art experiences as well as multimodal literacy by using multi-semiotic approaches. For example, Chinese calligraphy is a kind of art combined with both literature and art, because writing characters on the paper to make artwork requires the artist's ability of understanding the meanings of characters and content as well as making aesthetically beautiful handwriting at the same time. The combination of pictures, handwriting, and articles in newsletters and posters that Meili made also created opportunities for her to develop multimodal literacy of understanding the pictures and the texts in the process of meaning making.

Poetry, specifically, is another type of the arts that is important to Meili, her family, and other Chinese children according to her narrative:

when I was in elementary school, we had poem reciting competitions. Teachers liked us to use poems in our writing. So, I always write my favorite lines from poems in my notes and use them frequently in my writing (personal communication, November 27, 2019).

Using poems in her writing seems like a common practice for Meili, which helped her understand the history and culture of her native language and carry the legacy in her own writing. These poems later undoubtedly became a part of her linguistic repertoire and her English poem writing. In her home setting, poetry also had its own priority:

when I was a kid, my mom taught me how to recite poems . . . when I had summer break, I still remember this, my mom required me to be able to recite one poem every two days. She picked the poems and I really liked them (personal communication, November 27, 2019).



Her mother's requirement of reciting one poem every two days during summer breaks showed the importance and her value of poems in the family. Along with the book reading routine, Meili's mother made many influential decisions on literacy education and art education for her daughter. Besides Meili's prior life experiences, her life experiences in the U.S. are also important components in her English poems.

### *Experiences as A Non-Native Bilingual Speaker in the U.S.*

**Collective experiences of Chinese students.** Carrying her prior life experiences, Meili came to the U.S. as a graduate student in TESOL and WLE program. As a Chinese student, she found the community in which she found a sense of belonging:

I got a lot of help from other Chinese students. . . The person who picked me up at the airport. The first day when I was here was New Year's Eve. And my roommates cooked a lot of food for me and helped me with my luggage (personal communication, November 27, 2019).

Within the community of Chinese peers, Meili learned and shared common experiences as a Chinese international student, for example:

I think we have some similar experiences like the social security number thing. It's like when we first came here, we all don't have social security number and I still remember my first apartment. And we have to pay a-thousand-dollar security deposit. Everyone just does that. (personal communication, September 29, 2019).

In this example, she recalled the experience of paying a higher security deposit for her rent since she did not have the social security number, like all of the other Chinese students (indicated by her use of "we" as heteroglossia and a collective voice) when they first arrived. This experience later appeared in her poem (see Figure 1 above) along with many of her personal experiences. One example of her personal experiences that she included in her poem was an online English teaching job which rejected her application due to her citizenship:

They said, "We can't hire you, not because like you are Asian, but because you don't have American citizenship." The funny thing is that their customers are Chinese students. I think probably I can do it, because it's teaching Chinese students how to say English, right? (personal communication, September 29, 2019)

From the comment on this experience, it is obvious that she regarded herself as a qualified and eligible candidate of this English teaching job, because teaching English to Chinese kids should be her expertise based on her academic, linguistic, and cultural competence. However, her citizenship became the main reason for the company to reject her. This experience exemplifies the challenges Chinese and other international students have to face in their stay in the U.S. for academic purposes. This kind of hardship is exclusive to international students and immigrants because U.S.-born students, monolingual or bilingual, would not have such concern in the program. This kind of hardship and challenge adds more uncertainty to their stay in the new host country.

**Friendship and tension with English-L1 peers.** During her stay in the U.S., she had both friendship and tension with U.S. peers. Although some English-L1 peers came from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, they were able to understand Meili's poems during the poetry class. However, not all encounters with classmates were pleasurable to Meili. In the second poetry class, a U.S. English-L1 bilingual peer criticized Meili's grammar in her poem and further created intense tension which aligned with the long-existing binary of nativeness and non-nativeness in the field:

It's just I feel like she thinks every grammar mistake is because of my English proficiency. That's weird. That's weird. Because I know English is not my native language, so I make mistakes. I accept that fact. But that's not an excuse like she can blame me, or like she can pick my grammar mistakes every time when she saw my poems. Terri is just like she saw this line and she just assumed that I made it because my English is not very good. I don't like it (personal communication, September 29, 2019).

The tension started when the peer, Terri (pseudonym), picked on Meili's grammar use in her English poems. Although Meili admitted and understood her own limitations in writing English poems as a non-native bilingual speaker, she did not think it was acceptable for Terri to criticize her unconventional grammar use every single time. Ironically, Terri herself is also an English native bilingual speaker who has been teaching Spanish for more than a decade in the field. From this scenario, the tension between native speakers and non-native speakers of English still exists in the field. Even English native bilingual educators can spread and repeat such misconceptions in and out of the pre-service training. Since Meili and other students mainly interact with people in the program during the graduate training, it is critical to stop false beliefs in teacher education so that students like Meili can have better experiences in their training.

At the earlier stage of the global pandemic in 2020, Meili also experienced tension and misunderstanding from her colleagues in a U.S. elementary school. As she recalled, her students asked if she had been to China in the last fourteen days in February 2020. When she started taking precautions since she got the information from Chinese media where she learned this virus is extremely contagious, her American colleagues did not think it was necessary:

They only believe what they want to believe. . . They don't understand why I prepare disinfectant and masks. They don't believe scientific and medical information from other countries... I'm always foreign to them (personal communication, August 10, 2020).

Since COVID-19 was first identified and spread in China, her students inevitably connected Meili and the virus together. As a Chinese native bilingual speaker in the U.S. during this time, she certainly experienced racial related distrust and misunderstanding from her working and living environments. When dealing with these tensions in both academic and professional settings, poetry became a critical tool to record and reflect.

### *Affordance of Poetry in the Ongoing Negotiation and Reconstruction of Identity*

**Connecting prior and present experiences.** At the point of writing her poem to international students, Meili connected her prior and present experiences in her poems. As discussed above, paying a higher security deposit for rent took place when she first arrived, in the first several weeks. However, the encounter with the online teaching job happened later in her stay.

Thus, in the same poem, Meili connected her earlier experiences and later experiences in one poem to convey the scenarios of her life in the U.S. Her three-semester experiences in the U.S. were composed in each line in the poem, representing the most important moments of her stay in the new host country. By writing this poem, Meili got opportunities to recall and re-experience these events to reflect on hardships and challenges she had as an international student. Many experiences depicted in this poem have tight connections with her identity as an international bilingual speaker, for example, “For realizing even YouTube ads know your race.” This line represents how the environment in the U.S. reflects and reshapes her own understanding of her identity as being international and non-native, which might not be the same as her prior experience in China. Living in a homogenous region in China, Meili has never experienced being marginalized and non-native. This new experience in the new host country made her reconsider and reshape her own identity.

**Empowering bilingual voices.** By writing and teaching poems, Meili’s bilingual voice and desire of empowering bilingualism were strengthened in an artistic way: “I want to keep my non-native voice. It’s interesting. Sometimes, English is very, very, very, not flexible as Chinese” (personal communication, September 29, 2019). After taking the second course, Meili confirmed that she aimed to have voices from both languages that she can speak in her poems, especially keeping her English non-native voice. The reason behind this goal is based on the inflexibility of English compared to her native language, Chinese. She was able to have this goal because of her knowledge of both languages as a bilingual speaker. After using both languages, she made such choices and goals to keep her non-native voice as a choice of a bilingual poet. This goal could be interpreted that her bilingual voice was empowered through poetry, challenging the voice and standard set by monolingual English speakers.

**Enhancing cross-cultural understanding and translingual practice.** As Meili started her own teaching in fall 2019 in the U.S. as a full-time Chinese teacher in an elementary school, she used poems in her classes to foster her own and her students’ translingual practices to help her students in meaning making:

I will write the first complete sentence as an example, using both Chinese and English. And then, I will leave some blanks for them to finish. . . One kid wrote “我是 (I’m) Pikachu.” And he drew a picture of pikachu, so funny (personal communication, November 27, 2019)!

The method Meili used to teach poems in her classes is truly translingual as well as multimodal just like what she did when she was a kid in her school for newsletters and posters. As a Chinese teacher who can speak both Chinese and English, Meili not only teaches Chinese in her class but also English. For some kids in her classes, Chinese is probably their third language, because 80% students are African Americans, and 10% students are Latinx. Therefore, by learning, writing, and drawing in her classes, students had chances to learn Chinese, as a new language, through poetic and multimodal ways.

At the same time, as a bilingual speaker herself, Meili also respects and encourages students to employ their translingual ability in the school settings:

I encourage them to use more languages in class. I have some kids who can speak Spanish. So, they were so surprised when I say “*Hola*” and “*Gracias*”, and they are so happy. They ask me “How do you know *español*?” I speak Spanish to them, and they use Chinese with me, and usually English. It’s a way to improve the relationship between us (personal communication, November 27, 2019).

This implementation has a close relation with Meili's realization of her bilingual identity and the empowerment from poetry. As discussed above, poetry helped Meili realize and be more confident about her bilingual identity as well as the importance of keeping bilingual/multilingual voices. Therefore, Meili is able to resonate with her multilingual students and try to encourage her students to have multilingual practices in academic settings. The practices of translanguaging and poetry in Meili's class strengthen the relationship between Meili and her students even though they are from very different cultural, linguistic, and demographical backgrounds. The multilingual and translanguaging interactions between Meili and her students further enriched their cross-cultural communication and mutual understanding by using different languages in literacy activities. The relationship between Meili and her students improved since translanguaging practices made students from different backgrounds communicate better in the classroom. The shared experience of being bilingual/multilingual and English non-native in the U.S. built a bridge for Meili and her students. Using translanguaging and poetry in her first in-service practice in the U.S. have significantly positive transition from her graduate training to full-time career.

**Current teaching and imagination of the near future.** Poetry in certain ways also serves as a bridge to mediate new challenges she experienced during the pandemic in the U.S. and transition Meili's imagination of her future in China, facilitating her ongoing negotiation and reconstruction of identity as a teacher and bilingual speaker. Before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, she worked as a full-time teacher in an elementary school in the southeastern U.S. and used poems in her Chinese classes. Poetry can be an effective tool for her to reflect on her own teaching and life, as well as her reconstruction of identity as a teacher: "I guess I can put some teaching experiences in my poems in the future. My students were very surprised when they knew I published poems. They asked for copies so they can read after school" (personal communication, November 27, 2019). Before her job at the current elementary school, Meili already put her prior life experiences in her poem, although without teaching themes since she had limited teaching experience. Themes in her poems before are mainly experiences of her childhood, food, and her family (personal communication, November 27, 2019). However, now Meili plans to include her own teaching experiences and her transnational experience in both countries in her future poems as accumulated present experiences.

Meanwhile, her poems also help Meili and her students build community in- and after-class. Since her students were surprised that Meili writes and publishes poems, they would like to ask for copies to read after school. In this way, a close relationship could be established through poetry reading and discussion (personal communication, November 27, 2019) from more diverse multilingual perspectives. In addition, reading Meili's poem may help her students better understand her not only as their teacher but also an individual with multifaceted identity (e.g., bilingual, international, teacher, poet, etc.).

Another important function poetry has is helping Meili with her desired identity in the near future. Due to the severe COVID-19 situation, visa uncertainty, and discrimination against Asians and Asian Americans during the pandemic, Meili made the decision to go back to her home country. Obviously, this is another major challenge and change in both her life and career. As Dewey (1934/2005) points out, this could be one of the transformative experiences of self-development and self-growth assisted by the arts. Scholars have also regarded poetry as therapeutic in the present time. From a psychological perspective, "Poetic words not only forge links between the writer's voice and the mind and heart of an individual reader, but also provide connection among members of a community" (Chavis, 2011, p. 13). Hedges (2005) also notes that poetry "can give

us a sense of identity with the mood or thoughts or feelings of the poet . . . it broadens out our experience and helps us understand that some experiences . . . poetry also expresses affirmation and inspiration and offers hope” (p. 2). Echoing these points from scholars in both education and psychology, Meili also considers poetry one of the best ways to document this unusual life-changing decision and this unprecedented time with her international and bilingual perspective for both international, multilingual, Chinese, and educator communities. She also asserts that poetry will also exist in her future classrooms when she goes back to China to teach English as one of the most powerful tools for language and literacy education: “Poetry is a good way to express self and who we are. It’s a good way to teach, especially young children. They are the hope of the world’s future. I can see that from them” (personal communication, August 10, 2020). She imagines and expects poetry in her classes to add more therapeutic creativity and possibilities for students in her classes. As an emergent bilingual herself, she feels happy about such possibilities and hopes that she could bring into teaching. Her imagination about changes she could make soon also reveals the self-agency and self-confidence she gained from poetry.

## **Discussion**

### ***Poetry as a Vessel to Connect Prior and Present Experiences***

Meili has been developing and expanding her linguistic and cultural repertoires since she was young with help from her family and her teachers. From Chinese poetry and art to international literatures, Meili sharpened her cultural competence and literacy skills through literacy related activities. These prior literacy experiences later became resources to support her academic performance in the U.S. or materials for her English poems. The literacy practices her family and schools implemented in her childhood were also reformed and implemented in her classes in an elementary school in the U.S.

In terms of her experiences as an international bilingual, poetry gives Meili a space to record, think, retrospect, heal, and relive in those moments when she had hardships and challenges. To be able to write collective or shared experiences of Chinese students’ experiences in the U.S., Meili also brings in the collective voices of Chinese students in her poems to make a more solid reflection on the unique phenomenon of studying abroad as Chinese students. More Chinese students’ prior and present experiences were intertwined and combined in her poems for readers from different backgrounds. Poetry makes it possible to make human connections regardless of the different backgrounds that the poet and readers have.

### ***Reconstructing Identity and Imagining the Near Future through Poetry***

From her reflection during and after writing poems, Meili also pushes forward for identity reconstruction as a new teacher in the U.S. or soon in China. Although this process of reconstruction is an ongoing process, Meili understands what kind of teacher she absolutely does not want to be based on Terri’s reaction in the second poetry class. Due to the tensions with English native peers during their training, Meili learned that unconventional grammar use in bilingual writer’s creative writing is more like a choice instead of a mistake. Simply judging grammar mistakes in teaching and learning loses the opportunity to help multilingual learners add their voice in their writing. Meanwhile, such critiques could also hinder learners’ development of self-agency and self-growth.

Additionally, Meili combined poems and multimodal literacy in her poetry teaching with her students in the U.S. who are also bilingual, emerging bilingual, or multilingual learners. By

drawing and reading poems, her students had chances to learn Chinese, learn poetry, and have positive relationships with her. Such transformation has transformative impacts on both the teacher and students. The affordances of poetry and multimodal literacy help Meili move forward to her goal of being a teacher who can let students have fun and learn at the same time (personal communication, November 27, 2019).

### ***Translanguaging Practices in Multiple Settings***

Meili also explained how she uses poetry in multiple settings. In her personal life, poetry is a way of recording her prior life experiences, her life in the U.S., and some arrangements done by her family to help her settle once she goes back to China. Writing poems becomes a kind of relief and healing as she said, “It’s actually a kind of self-relief, because sometimes I feel really hard to work, to study, and to learn how to get used to American things. So, it’s kind of relief. It’s kind of growth” (personal communication, August 10, 2020). However, writing these personal experiences and emotions in English poems requires her constant translanguaging practices as a bilingual writer. In her classes, she also teaches poetry to help students from different backgrounds express themselves and have conversations in an aesthetic way to embrace and develop students’ translanguaging, multilingual skills, and identities. She thinks to write bilingual poems and to teach students to be creative writers disrupts both rigid language standards set by monolingual native speakers in the U.S. as well as rigid teacher-centered classroom culture from China. Poetry becomes a hybrid space between two countries and two cultures.

### ***Disrupting Problematic Standards of Nativeness and Empowerment***

The tension between Meili and another English-native bilingual peers in the poetry class also displays the dichotomy of nativeness and non-nativeness, although the peer herself is bilingual as well. However, since Meili chose to keep her non-native voice in her poems, her word choices and language use as a bilingual poet questions and challenges the standards set by English native speakers, which is not flexible to bilingual speakers in the U.S. in the process of meaning making. Confronting this tension is not an easy process for Meili, because she regarded experienced English native peers as role models in the field when she entered the program. Therefore, the huge transition from respecting to challenging shows the empowerment assisted by poetry in disrupting the problematic binary and standard by English native speakers, both monolingual and bilingual English-L1 native speakers. After this epiphany, Meili found a sense of self-agency in her poems as an emergent bilingual teacher poet who has potential to make changes in the field. Through the artistic approach, she found a way to push back the boundary of defining qualified and skilled teacher in the field and bring in more justice in the program and field for other pre-service or in-service bilingual/multilingual and international teachers.

This case study with Meili further proves Dewey’s (1934/2005) theory of art as experience that reshapes people when people carry challenging moments in their life into arts-based approaches to achieve self-development and growth. Through poetry, Meili re-experienced and mediated the hardships she has been through in the U.S. as an international bilingual speaker in her program and her job. The process of creating artworks empowered her bilingual voice and agency as a graduate student and novice teacher. Most importantly, this transformation gives her confidence and hope in her future career, believing that she can bring positive learning experience to her students as a bilingual teacher-poet. Her creative poem writing offers her resources to negotiate, reconstruct, and imagine the desired identity she wants to shape as a teacher.

## Conclusion

This study testifies the troublesome concept of nativeness and non-nativeness that many educators still hold in the field of TESOL and WLE. The negative judgement regarding non-native bilingual/multilingual teacher candidates as deficient and inferior better illustrates the importance of more arts-based approaches in teacher education for social justice and the embrace of bilingualism/multilingualism. Meanwhile, it is also an urgent necessity to find effective solutions from art to help international bilingual/multilingual students adjust to the new environment in the new host country during and after the pandemic.

This analysis also showcases benefits of arts-based educational research in future arts-based research to expand educators' understanding and knowledge of the field, teaching, and learning (Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2019). Future studies could also use the approach of different kinds of art to explore the affordance of art in TESOL programs for social justice and meaningful changes.

This case study also has some limitations. Although Meili's poems and reflections consist of many collective experiences of Chinese students, future studies on the same topic should recruit more participants to further explore the collective and individual experiences of Chinese and other international students in the TESOL and WLE programs in the U.S. The final impact of COVID-19 on international and multilingual students deserves continuous attention in future research.

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