

My Language Portrait

Overview

This in-class teaching and learning task provides an opportunity for students to explore and communicate their linguistic identities and language practices and the role these play in shaping their experiences as language learners. Utilising Busch's (2012) multimodal, biographical 'Language Portrait', students create a visual representation of their communicative resources and write a reflective text to share with their peers and teachers. Students begin by creating a self-portrait which they then write about and share with others in small groups. Depending on students' levels, the task can also be extended to engage students in a critical discussion about languages and language use.

Resources have been developed by Kimberley Smith, Blackburn English Language School, in collaboration with Julie Choi, Senior Lecturer in Education (Additional Languages) in the Melbourne Graduate School of Education.

Curriculum Links

Language portraits can be used for different purposes including:

- establishing classroom environment and getting to know your learners
- diagnostic assessment of writing and speaking skills
- exploring plurilingual strategies to support learning
- developing critical thinking skills
- formulating opinions and arguments

Learning Outcomes

- to support students to reflect on their identities as language learners
- to engage students in critical discussion about language and language use
- to empower students to identify and use plurilingual learning strategies in the classroom

Included Resources

- My Language Portrait PowerPoint
- Language Portrait Examples
- Language Portrait Template

Additional Resources

Colouring pencils or markers

Suggested Sequence

The creation and exploration of Language Portraits may take place over several lessons depending on timing and how you choose to use them with your students. The following is a suggested teaching sequence used with secondary EAL new arrival students over 2-3 fifty-minute periods.

1. Introduce concept of language portraits to students using [My Language Portrait PPT](#). This PPT begins with prompt questions which are designed to facilitate an initial discussion with students about how languages are defined and what it means to be a language learner. This concept can be revisited after completing their language portraits with further discussion prompts about language and language use. *(Refer to extension ideas)*
2. If you would like to provide students with a model, read [Language Portrait Examples](#) and identify useful phrases for students to use in their own writing. There are three different examples provided catering to different levels. *(These examples have come from previous students and have been shared with their permission. We have tried to minimise altering them so some errors may be present).*
3. Provide time for students to colour their language portraits using [Language Portrait Template](#) to show their languages. They should be encouraged to reflect on their communicative resources and experiences and to map them on the provided template using different colours. They can draw on memories, people, places, and activities which they affiliate with particular ways of communicating, including their past and current practices as well as those linked to desires and hopes for the future (Busch, 2021).
4. Students write a written description of their language portrait, describing the colours, symbols and placement on their portrait. You may wish to refer to the examples as a model or keep this stage as a free writing task. Depending on students' levels, this could also be completed by providing simple prompt

questions for each language represented: why this colour for this language? why this place for this language? For students with low literacy skills, these questions could be provided orally, and responses recorded by the teacher.

5. Students share their language portraits with one another in small groups or with the whole class.

Teaching Notes

- The body outline provided is a framework only and has been chosen without additional features intentionally so that it can be interpreted in different ways. Learners can also create their own portrait outlines.
- As multimodal texts, language portraits provide visual, written and spoken opportunities for meaning making. They empower learners to actively reflect on and share their lived experiences and allow the teacher to gain a deeper understanding of their learners by drawing inferences about what meaning learners attach to their linguistic resources, their language practices, and their language attitudes (Busch, 2012). When completing language portraits, the more open the instructions, the more wide-ranging and differentiated the results are likely to be (Busch, 2021). Ideally, it is up to the learner to define categories within their portrait, to decide what is considered a 'language' and to represent the relationship and connection between communicative resources (Busch, 2012). Therefore, the level of scaffolding and support should be considered depending on learners' language levels and purpose for completing the task.

Ideas for Extension

As a pedagogical tool, language portraits have the potential to raise EAL learners' awareness of their multilingual selves and to support in the development of inclusive learning environments that value each learner for what they bring to the learning space. They promote respect and tolerance and celebrate difference and diversity within the group as learners are invited to share their language portraits with one another. They also affirm learners' multilingual identities within the learning space and can be used to facilitate critical discussions about language and challenge students to rethink assumptions about their linguistic resources and the ways these can be used to support learning in resourceful and purposeful ways. (Choi, 2022).

After completing language portraits, you could facilitate small group discussions using the following questions as prompts.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you notice about our language portraits? What is similar and what is different?
2. How can knowing more than one language benefit us when we are learning?
3. How do others influence the way we use and feel about languages?
4. Who determines where and how languages are used? Why?
5. How can we challenge these boundaries and/or expectations? At school? In everyday life?

This discussion could then be used to support in the development of agreed class expectations on language use, followed with examples of plurilingual learning strategies or as the basis for an argumentative writing task on the benefits of being a multilingual learner.

Further Reading

Busch, B. (2012). The Linguistic Repertoire Revisited. *Applied Linguistics*, 33(5), 503-523. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/ams056>

Busch, B. (2021). The body image: Taking an evaluative stance towards semiotic resources. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 18(2), 190-205. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2021.1898618>

Choi, J. (2022). Learning about Multilingual Learning Experiences through Language Trajectory Grids. In J. Purkarthofer & Flubacher, Mi-Cha (Eds.), *Speaking Subjects in Multilingualism Research: Biographical and Speaker-centred Approaches* (pp. 163-172). Channel View Publications.