A Transatlantic Teacher Educator: My Life and Career Across Two Countries and Languages

Johanna M. Tigert

Growing up in Finland, I was exposed to many languages; I still never thought English would bring me to the United States, which I have now called home for two decades. My experiences as an immigrant studying and teaching languages ultimately pushed me towards a researcher mindset and a career as a teacher educator. In this chapter, I journey through this development by narrating pivotal moments that have shaped my identity and advocacy as a teacher, teacher educator, and researcher, which, at the same time, informed my own migration experience and identity as an immigrant.

Growing up Multilingual

I grew up in Finland in a working-class family. My family's language practices have always involved what I years later learned to call translanguaging: the creative and nimble shuttling between languages and language varieties that characterizes the everyday discourse of multilingual individuals (Otheguy et al., 2015). In our case, translanguaging involved Swedish and Finnish's Western (Ostrobothnian) dialect. At school, I learned a language-rich curriculum: English, Swedish, Russian, and German. I also took Estonian night classes out of sheer curiosity. Looking back now, English was the most mundane of these languages for me: I mainly used it to watch American sitcoms and pass my high school English matriculation exam. Overall, I had a very utilitarian and fairly uncomplicated relationship with world languages. I was proud of my multilingualism, but it was still more an instrument rather than a part of my identity. With this attitude, I headed for college.

Growing up as a multilingual influenced the topics I researched and still does today. I've been especially interested in questions of language and identity, which to me feels a natural direction to go: in my case, and for many other migrant scholars, research truly is me-search. One of the questions I have explored is: "How do young children's early language and literacy experiences shape their identities?" In my work (Tigert, 2017, 2019), I examined the multilingual socialization of Finnish children living in the United States. For the families I observed and interviewed for that study, multilingualism was a normative, everyday practice, just like it had been for my family. However, there were also marked differences. While in my youth, languages had been just a vehicle for internal family jokes, a fun school subject, or something that might prove to be a stepping stone to a job, they had much higher stakes for the Finnish-American families in my study. The parents were grappling with the tension of trying to maintain a small minority language while having their children immersed in a dominant majority-language environment. The question of identity ultimately connected the parents' efforts at language preservation to the question of identity; could a child remain a Finn if Finnish was not their dominant language?

One of the parents in my study called languages and literacies the "building blocks" of her child's identity. This family had lived in several countries, and Finnish was just one of the many blocks in the transnational identity of the child. At the same time, other parents created artificial Finnish-language "bubbles" for their children: during certain parts of the day or certain days of the week, they offered an influx of Finnish movies, books, and playdates with other Finnish American children in an effort to stave off the influence of English in their children's lives. The interesting aspect of this parenting was that they believed such linguistic purity was needed, lest their children lose their Finnish identities. However, all of the parents themselves

were bi- if not multilingual, indicating that parents viewed the sociopolitical context where their children's bilingualism was developing as a threat to the children's Finnish identities, while the context in which they had developed their multilingualism had carried no such threat to them. These were the types of phenomena I felt could be best examined through a sociocultural lens (Vygotsky, 1978), which has underpinned my research throughout my research career. However, my first exposure to sociolinguistic and political questions involved in language acquisition and identity would come during my college years in Finland, long before I began my Ph.D. journey.

A World Language Student's Changing Perspective

At the University of Eastern Finland, I majored in Russian and spent a study-abroad year in Estonia. I became, maybe for the first time in my life, consciously aware of language rights, identity, and policy, as well as the plight of minority languages. Out of the three Baltic states, Estonia had been perhaps the most successful in preserving its culture and language all through the Soviet occupation. But I also met Mari, Komi, and Udmurt activists from Russia, whose minor Finno-Ugric languages were quickly disappearing under the intense pressure of Russification (Zamyatin, 2012). This could have easily been the lot of Finnish and Estonian, and I felt fortunate to have been born in a sociopolitical situation where my home language and cultural identity had not been threatened in these ways. For the first time, I understood just how political language could be.

Some fifteen years after my study abroad experience, I was working on my doctorate at the University of Maryland, continuing to hone my understanding of the sociolinguistic and political aspects of language acquisition. One of my research questions was about how schools' sociolinguistic and political contexts impact students' linguistic identities. I worked as a research assistant on a large project investigating peer tutoring between linguistically diverse

kindergarteners and 4th graders. Examining students' discourse during these interactions (Tigert et al., 2019), I found that students tended to use English as the language of collaborative meaning-making even when they shared a home language and were in the beginning stages of developing their English proficiency. These students had not only been immersed in the language, as I had been with Estonian during my exchange year; they were immersed in sociolinguistic contexts (i.e.., school) that valued English above all. It was as if the students were developing two linguistic identities – a multilingual one restricted to the home and an English-speaking one "appropriate" for school. Such a division had never been necessary for me in any of the contexts in which I learned world languages. It became clear to me that it was of utmost importance for multilingual students to be able to not only maintain but also develop all of their languages across all contexts in their lives—for school children, this includes the classroom. Since then, I have continued to write about the importance of educational approaches that value and build on students' home language assets (e.g., Colombo et al., 2020).

Immigrant in the Making

After graduating from the University of Eastern Finland, I moved to Maryland with my new husband—an American I had met in Estonia. At first, I viewed the U.S. with some detachment and always thought of myself as more suomalainen [Finn] than ulkosuomalainen [ex-pat Finn, or literally "outside Finn"]. I never thought of myself as amerikansuomalainen [Finnish American] or just American. Part of this was because I communicated daily in Finnish, via email, phone, or in person, and, in the early years, at work as a Finnish teacher. Not all immigrants have the privilege of maintaining their linguistic identity to this degree (Oh & Fuligni, 2010). In my case, being a fair-skinned immigrant from Finland means no one has ever asked me to "speak English" or "go back to my country." Instead, people are curious about and

impressed by my background. This privilege is compounded by the fact that as a college-educated individual, I was able to get a job where I could utilize my language and access resources in Finnish in my free time.

In my current career as an educational researcher and teacher educator, I have often pondered the question of how immigrant-background individuals prefer to label their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identities. How to address students from immigrant backgrounds is an ongoing question in my research and teaching, partially because of my struggle to label myself after my immigration experience. For example, when surveying students of Asian heritage at a community college (Tigert, 2020), I learned how survey categories could fail to offer respondents adequate labels. In this study, 19% of the respondents did not find a label for themselves among the ones our multiethnic research team had come up with, instead preferring to call themselves "multiethnic/other." Similarly, widely used legal labels can fail to capture who students genuinely are. In some of my publications, for example, I have elected to use the federal term classified English Learner (EL) where it concerns students who receive legally mandated English language development services. However, using this label even in this narrow context is controversial to me, because it reduces these students to just learners or English, as if that were their whole identity. Thus, especially in delivering instruction for teacher candidates, I prefer to use the terms "multilingual student" or "emergent bilingual" that are more asset-based (as I have written in Colombo et al., 2018). To me, these types of questions are far from minutiae for educational researchers—language matters. Terminology should be carefully thought through and defined lest it further marginalize already marginalized individuals.

Developing a Teacher's Lens

A few years after migrating to the U.S., I returned to college and graduated with a license to teach English as a Second Language in grades K-12. For the next decade, I worked in elementary schools, teaching a diverse population of classified ELs. I quickly began to experience an EL teacher's low status, which often reflects a "parallel process of marginality in the culture of the school" with their students (Trickett et al., 2012, p. 290). For example, other teachers' schedules took precedence over my instructional time with the students, my first instructional space was a storage closet, I witnessed classroom teachers tell immigrant parents to stop speaking their language at home, and I was told to deliver a pre-packaged decoding intervention in lieu of language development. I came to understand that as thorough as my Master's program had been when it came to content and theory, it did not adequately prepare me for the everyday work of an EL teacher (Faltis & Valdés, 2016), whose identity hovered somewhere between a teacher and a paraprofessional (Peercy et al., 2019).

After a decade of public school teaching, I was so disappointed with what I now view as the dehumanization of both myself and my multilingual students by the systems and practices in place in schools that I left my teaching job and applied for a Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics program at the University of Maryland. The decision was primarily driven by my desire to improve teacher education and help others become better teachers and advocates for their students than I had been as a novice teacher. As frustrating as my public school teaching experience had been, it would also come to inform much of what I have since researched and taught. In a project called Voices from the Field at UMD, I have returned to many of the questions about the role of the EL teacher, in particular, examining the question: "How do novice teachers of multilingual students develop their practice?"

Together with novice EL teachers, we developed a set of what we call core practices for teaching multilingual learners, which stem from the everyday work of teaching and which novice teachers can learn to enact (Peercy et al., 2020). In this work, my background as a second language learner and the challenges I faced as a teacher of multilingual students were instrumental in conceptualizing the core practices. This practical lens that other team members and I utilized was crucial in building the theory-practice bridge novice teachers need. We hope to support novice EL teachers in defining their role in schools and developing the kind of practices necessary for them to serve their multilingual students best. Therefore, we have included advocacy as one core practice teacher candidates should be taught in their programs—something I knew little about when I was a teacher. We have also written about the importance of self-care for novice EL teachers who are in danger of burning out faster than their colleagues due to the emotional toll of teaching a marginalized population (Peercy et al., 2019) – which is also something I experienced firsthand.

These types of personal connections to my research's relevance and outcomes motivate me as a researcher. In educational research, in particular, I feel it is important for researchers to connect to the field, be it as a former teacher or a current teacher educator. Furthermore, even though I don't equate my immigration experiences with the backgrounds of the multilingual elementary students I used to teach since everyone has a different story, I do think being an immigrant and multilingual individual has given me additional insights into the lives of this student population. These lenses that intersect my personal and professional identities are ones I can utilize daily in my current work.

Teacher to Teacher Educator

I now work as an assistant professor of curriculum and instruction at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. In my work, I attempt to shape how content-area teacher candidates position themselves in relation to their multilingual and immigrant-background students. A course I teach regularly is based on Sheltered English Instruction, a pedagogical approach meant to "shelter" students from the linguistic demands of a content-area lesson (Echevarria & Graves, 2007). In Massachusetts, the course is mandatory for all content-area (math, English language arts, social studies, and science) teacher candidates, and it is often the only time they think about their subjects in terms of language (Schleppegrell, 2004). I always start my course by telling teacher candidates that by the end of the semester, I want them to think of themselves as language teachers in their content areas. At first, I typically get blank stares. By the end of the course, teacher candidates' reflections show that they are starting to realize how intertwined language is with their content and how they need to help their students—multilingual students in particular—to learn both.

The Sheltered English Instruction course is a case of "better than nothing" educational policy: it introduces a set of practical strategies and some theories regarding teaching multilingual students to teacher candidates who often have no experience being or even going to school with multilingual or immigrant-background students. However, the course is not based on any particular educational philosophy, and its instructors, such as myself, are left to try to fit in the development of pedagogical orientations that would allow teacher candidates to truly enact classroom practices that serve multilingual students in an equitable manner. Among the orientations I draw from in the course are pedagogies that are linguistically and culturally responsive (Ladson-Billings, 2014) or sustaining (Paris, 2012), social justice-oriented (Dyches &

Boyd, 2017), humanizing (Bartolomé, 1994), and critical (Fairclough, 2014; Giroux, 2020). While these orientations come from different theoretical traditions, they all aim for equity in the education of multilingual and other marginalized students. Enacting them in the classroom means not only "celebrating" or "valuing" the students' backgrounds but actively supporting students in maintaining and developing their ways of thinking, being, and learning as multicultural, multilingual individuals.

Another course I regularly teach in which I attempt to put into practice what I know about these pedagogical orientations is called Educating Diverse Populations, an online course I was asked to create in my first year as an assistant professor. Despite the inherent problems associated with the one-course approach to teaching about diversity (Tigert & Armstrong, 2019), I designed the course as best I could and have continued refining it ever since, based on my evolving understandings of the systemic injustices in the education of multilingual and other marginalized students and the big solutions that need to be envisioned to dismantle them. One of my latest student evaluations from this course stated that I was "pushing a liberal agenda" with "biased course materials." I think the course is getting to where I want it to be since it is this intellectual discomfort with challenging concepts with which I want teacher candidates to grapple. In a way, teaching this course always leaves me a bit hopeless, as it shows the magnitude of the discrimination felt by many who do not represent the dominant groups in the United States. Still, I also hope that the cumulative effect of the many teachers who complete the course teaching hundreds of students over their careers will make a difference.

Designing this course also made me reflect on my whiteness. Growing up in Finland, I never really had to think about race, as the country is racially very homogeneous. Even the word *valkoinen* [white] sooner evokes the image of pith-helmeted colonialists than the average Finn.

Instead, Finland's inhabitants have always used language and culture to categorize each other: Finns, Sámi, Swedish speakers, and Roma. So, for a long time after moving to the United States, I defined myself through my linguistic and cultural identity rather than race—which, of course, I was only able to do because I *am* white—although as an immigrant and a non-native English speaker I don't fit neatly into the category usually thought of as "white" in the U.S. The intersectionality of race and language has become one of the key themes I discuss in both the Sheltered English Instruction course and my Educating Diverse Populations course, and it is one of the lenses for my research on teacher education.

The past four years of working with content area teacher candidates instead of novice EL teachers has shaped my research agenda in many ways. An overarching research question that has been and will be guiding many of my projects is: "How can content-area teachers be prepared to teach multilingual learners?" A new direction in my research introduces the idea that *all* teachers, not only core content area teachers, should be prepared to teach multilingual students. After all, multilingual students are not only present in the math and language arts classrooms—they are also present in art (Leider & Tigert, 2021; Tigert & Leider, 2021), museum education (Tigert & Kirschbaum, 2019), physical education, music, and so on. What has become clear to me is that content-area teachers need not only the knowledge and skills to address the disciplinary language demands of their subjects, but they also need to critically view their role in either upholding or dismantling inequitable educational practices and systems. With the continued growth in the multilingual population of the United States, I envision a future where all teacher education programs will be infused with the common goal of ensuring multilingual students will be educated in a more just, equitable, and humanizing manner.

As I write this, I mark the bittersweet milestone of twenty years since my migration. Over these decades, my experiences as an immigrant have fundamentally changed my relationship with English. Rather than approaching it with the simple "language as a resource" orientation (Ruiz, 2010) I once did, I now view English as a language with an extraordinarily complex political past and present. I recognize that learning English, and the experience of migrating to the United States, can manifest in very different ways depending on an immigrant's racial/ethnic, educational, economic, and other background factors. Without this understanding, my teaching a course like Sheltered English Instruction, with its sole focus on English language development strategies, would easily reproduce the kind of teacher preparation I went through, focusing on mechanistic instructional moves instead of the larger socio-political context. The same shallowness would mark my research agenda. These understandings have also been important for me as I have constructed my identity as an immigrant, trying to hold on to my Finnish roots while defining who I want to be as a U.S.-based researcher, a teacher educator, and an advocate for multilingual and immigrant-background students in schools.

References

Bartolomé, L. (1994). Beyond the methods fetish: Toward a humanizing pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review*, *64*(2), 173-195. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.64.2.58q5m5744t325730

Colombo, M., Tigert, J. M., & Leider, C. (2018). Positioning teachers, positioning learners: Why we should stop using the term "English Learners (ELs)" *TESOL Journal, 10*(2) *e432*. Early view online Dec 21, 2018.

Colombo, M., Tigert, J.M., & Leider, C.M. (2020). Creating a space for writers' voices: Translingual writing in middle and high school English classes. *The Leaflet, 117(*1*)*, 20-29.

Dyches, J., & Boyd, A. (2017). Foregrounding equity in teacher education: Toward a model of social justice pedagogical and content knowledge. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *68*(5), 476-490. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487117705097

Echevarria, J., & Graves, A.W. (2007). *Sheltered content instruction: Teaching English language learners with diverse abilities*. Pearson Allyn and Bacon.

Fairclough, N. (2014). *Critical language awareness.* Routledge.

Faltis, C.J., & Valdés, G. (2016). Preparing teachers for teaching in and advocating for linguistically diverse classrooms: A vade mecum for teacher educators. In D.H. Gitomer & C.A. Bell (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teaching*, (pp. 549-592). AERA.

Giroux, H.A. (2020). *On critical pedagogy*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2014). Culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0: aka the remix. *Harvard Educational Review*, *84*(1), 74-84. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.84.1.p2rj131485484751

Leider, C.M., & Tigert, J.M. (2021). Access and the arts: Preparing teachers to support multilingual students in the arts classroom. *MATSOL Currents, 43*(2), 39-43.

Oh, J.S., & Fuligni, A.J. (2010). The role of heritage language development in the ethnic identity and family relationships of adolescents from immigrant backgrounds. *Social Development, 19*(1), 202-220. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9507.2008.00530.x

Otheguy, R., García, O., & Reid, W. (2015). Clarifying translanguaging and deconstructing named languages: A perspective from linguistics. *Applied Linguistics Review, 6*(3), 281-307. https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2015-0014

Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher, 41*(3), 93-97. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X12441244

Peercy, M.M., Kidwell, T., Lawyer, M.D., Tigert, J.M., Fredricks, D., Feagin, K., & Stump, M. (2020). Experts at being novices: What new teachers can add to the practice-based teacher education efforts. *Action in Teacher Education, 42*(3), 212-233. https://doi.org/10.1080/01626620.2019.1675201

Peercy, M.M., Tigert, J.M., Feagin, K., Kidwell, T., Fredricks, D., Lawyer, M., Bitter, M., Canales, N., Mallory, A. (2019). "I need to take care of myself": The case for self-care as a core practice for teaching. In C.R. Rinke & L. Mawhinney (Eds.), *Opportunities and challenges in teacher recruitment and retention: Teachers' voices across the pipeline* (pp. 303-325). Information Age Publishing.

Ruiz, R. (2010). Reorienting language-as-resource. In K.M. Borman (Ed.), *International perspectives on bilingual education: Policy, practice, and controversy* (pp.155-172). Information Age Publishing.

Schleppegrell, M.J. (2004). *The language of schooling: A functional linguistics perspective*. Routledge.

Tigert, J.M. (2017). *Building block of the world, building block of your identity: Multilingual literacy socialization of heritage language learners.* Doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland College Park.

Tigert, J.M. (2019). Vanilla sauce and songs: Literacies in a heritage language school. *Language, Culture, and Curriculum 33*(1), 100-113. https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2019.1569021

Tigert, J.M. (February, 2020). *Just "hoping for the best": Asian students' experiences in the writing center.* Paper presented at the National Association for Bilingual Education Conference, Las Vegas, NV.

Tigert, J.M., & Armstrong, A.A. (2019). Teaching for diversity online: A teacher educator's perspective. In S. Keengwe & K. Kungu (Eds.), *Handbook of research on engaging immigrant families and promoting academic success for English Language Learners* (pp. 1-19). IGI Global.

Tigert, J.M., Groff, J., Martin-Beltrán, M., Peercy, M.M., & Silverman, R.D. (2019). Exploring the pedagogical potential of translanguaging in peer reading interactions. In J. MacSwan & C. Faltis (Eds.), *Codeswitching in the classroom*: *Critical perspectives on teaching, learning, policy, and ideology* (pp.65-87). Routledge.

Tigert, J.M., & Kirschbaum, S. (2019). How museum teachers scaffold emergent bilingual learners' meaning-making during field trips. *Journal of Museum Education, 44*(4), 439-447. https://doi.org/10.1080/10598650.2019.1673114

Tigert, J.M. & Leider, C.M. (2021). Beyond the "core": Preparing art educators to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. *TESOL Quarterly. 56(1),* 425-434.

Tigert, J.M., Peercy, M.M., Kidwell, T., & Fredricks, D. (2021). Humanizing classroom management as a core practice for teachers of multilingual students. *TESOL Quarterly, Early View*. Published online December 1, 2021.

Trickett, E.J., Rukhotskiy, E., Jeong, A., Genkova, A., Oberoi, A., Weinstein, T., & Delgado, Y. (2012). "The kids are terrific: It's the job that's tough": The ELL teacher role in an urban context. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *28*(2), 283-292.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes.* Harvard University Press.

Zamyatin, K. (2012). From language revival to language removal: The teaching of titular languages in the national republics of post-Soviet Russia. *JEMIE*, *11*(2), 75-102. http://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/downloads/publications/JEMIE/2012/Vol_2_Dezember_2012/5._JEMIE_Zamyatin.pdf