

Centering Identities & Supporting Newcomer Ukrainian Multilingual Learners

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Summary: Since Russia invaded Ukraine, over 16,000 Ukrainians have sought refuge in Washington (Wilkinson, 2023). In this article, I first present a brief narrative of one 11th grade newcomer multilingual learner's schooling experience. I then showcase a few teaching and learning moments. Afterwards, I analyze the experience through identities and translanguaging, transcollaboration, and social emotional lenses. I conclude with a few recommendations to help all teachers to center students' multifaceted identities and support multilingual learners.

Keywords: identities, translanguaging, transcaring, transcollaboration, social emotional learning, Ukrainian, newcomer, literacy engagement

School Context

Ukrainian multilingual learners (MLs) make up the second largest language group in my classroom in the Kent School District, after Spanish. Out of 1920 students in the high school, 775 reported a language other than English as their home language, 40 listed Ukrainian, and 14 listed Russian. 294 (15.3%) are receiving ML services. Table 1 below shows the top five home languages other than English and the number of active MLs in each language. A total of 21 showed Ukrainian as their home language, making up 7.1% of the 294 MLs. There were 6 MLs with Russian as home language, 2 of whom were from Ukraine. Since many other Eastern Ukrainians are bilingual in Ukrainian and Russian, the actual number of MLs from Ukraine could be higher. 2023 WIDA scores of the 21 official Ukrainian speaking students showed 6 MLs scored between 1 and 1.9, 8 between 2 and 2.9, and 7 between 3 and 4.5. For this article, I focus on one multilingual learner, Alina (pseudonym), who scored 1 across all four domains on the WIDA screener. She was placed in our mixed-grade English class, receiving two periods of English instruction, with one offering English Language Arts credits and one offering elective English Language Development credits. Alina also took Algebra, US History, and Physics in the Universe. For electives, she took Physical Education and Studio Photography.

Table 1 Top 5 Home Languages and Number in Active MLs

Home Language	Student Number
Spanish	115
Punjabi	21
Ukrainian	21
Vietnamese	20
Somali	18

Alina's Learner Profile & Schooling

To learn more about each of my newcomers, I fully embraced translanguaging, created translanguaging spaces, and conducted multilingual surveys. Alina's profile is based on the information she shared, with full consent, in Ukrainian from the written surveys, direct conversations with her through Google translate and in English, and in class assignments and projects. Quotes are in the unedited Google translated edition to preserve student voice authenticity.

Before Alina came to Washington State, she had “2 years of kindergarten, 4 years of middle school, and 7 years of high school back in Ukraine” (This should be 4 years of elementary and 7 years of secondary school). For English, she took two 45-minute-long lessons per week for 11 years. She stated they did not have enough qualified English teachers. As for extracurricular activities and leadership, she revealed that “I took part in the library, it was necessary to read books and then go to the Olympiads and retell them. I took part in sports competitions in various handicrafts in school performances in front of the school.”

Alina came here on her own to join her aunt's family, leaving behind her parents and siblings. Her parents said that if Alina wanted to come to America, she could, and they let her come “because it is very difficult in Ukraine now, especially for young people who want to develop.”

When asked how different schooling is between here and Ukraine, Alina shared through the survey,

“These are two different schools but I will never be able to feel as good here as in my village where I grew up but I will give a couple of examples: We never wrote with pencils never only pens...but sometimes we went to the computer science class during class and could work on computers there, but it was once or twice a week, also all our teachers worked in

notebooks, they don't have computers, we went to the store to eat during the break and bought something from us there. You have been studying with the same students for 11 years. Teachers go to our class, but we don't have their own class. And in our school, the school is much smaller, and I knew all the teachers. They wrote down our grades in a diary."

When asked what she liked or disliked about our high school, she wrote, *"There are many nationalities and it's a bit hard to get used to it and sometimes I don't understand a bit with the teachers because it's hard for me to work in a team, but in your class it's great, I have very few Ukrainians in my classes."*

Alina's work samples are included below to showcase authentic student voice collected through Canvas assignments during the 2023-2024 school year and their complex and dynamic identities.

Student Work Samples

Sample 1: 08/31/23, All About Me & My Family

My family in Ukraine, I have more relatives here than in Ukraine one sister can manage. Like to play volleyball. Like to eat Ukrainian food.

Sample 2: 11/20/23, 2 minutes with Alina Script.

Here are some of the prompts: question 4 - What is your favorite subject? Why? question 7 - what do your friends and you do together for fun? and question 8 - what was your proudest moment?

- 1. I'm from Ukraine. I live in America in Cavinton*
- 2. Horse riding, sport, volleyball, football, I like to bake dough*
- 3. My favorite food is pasta dumplings and dumplings*
- 4. My favorite subject is physics English gym mathematics. They have very good studies and these are subjects that I understand*
- 5. I don't even know what is it yet but maybe it will be something in the future*
- 6. All my friends go to the choir go to church we go out together*
- 7. steak and potatoes*
- 8. she came here alone without her parents*
- 9. it*
- 10. I'm not watching anything at the moment*

Sample 3: 01/20/24, My City/My Town

My village is located in Zakarpattia, our village is divided into two names, the main name is Velyki Komyati Mali Komyati

in my village there is one big river and many small ones in which you can bathe, swim, fish, etc.

there is still an abandoned soap factory or mill, it used

to work a long time ago, but now, I think it will be started again soon

we have one factory where food for animals, cats and dogs is produced, many people from our village work there

maybe once I moved to the city to Lviv, because I like this city more, but my village, our mountains, is very beautiful. We invite everyone to visit

Teacher Observations

In this section, I delineate my observations of Alina's schooling experiences both inside and outside classroom, including school/district/community collaborations, specific teaching and learning moments, and friends and family support.

At the beginning of the school year, Alina had a difficult time adapting to the new environment. She broke down in tears walking into my class one day in October. She was able to share with me through Google translate that she really missed her parents and family, and she was the only one here in the U.S. staying with her relatives. Knowing she must be faced with many challenges, I reached out to our school social worker who played a key role in connecting Alina with a variety of resources, including getting Alina needed information on Running Start and seeking extra district support. Our district's refugee navigation specialist was able to check in with Alina periodically. One tutor from the International Rescue Committee also provided occasional support through one-to-one tutoring sessions. During our after-school support classes, a colleague expressed her concern over Alina's misplacement in math classes. This conversation led to a review of Alina's math placement and resulted in a math schedule change. All of these demonstrated the invaluable collaborations taking place in the wider community throughout the school year.

As Alina's English teacher, I now focus on memorable interactions. As shown in the above-mentioned class assignments, I created both formal and informal opportunities for her to share her experiences from Ukraine and about her Ukrainian family. She frequently showed me photos of her family and told me about celebrations and gatherings captured in those photos. I came to know about their family farm and the sow that just delivered tons of baby piglets. I came to see the beautiful church choir performances she has been part of here in Washington, evidence of the strong Ukrainian community support. One day, she walked into my classroom with a big smile on her face and read me a Google translated message on her phone, *"I love your classroom. It's like a home. Very nice!"* On a different day, she came in while on a video chat with her family, excitedly telling me that her mother was on the phone, although it was nighttime, and I could not see them on camera. Then came the special moment when I was able to briefly meet and talk to her parents through the video chat, while Alina and another Ukrainian speaking student both tried to be the interpreter for me! During quarter 4, Alina was sitting there quietly, seeming to be lost in deep

thought. I asked her whether everything was okay. She was about to speak, then paused for a moment, took a deep breath, and decided to share something very personal with me, “*I think I am in love!*” As the school year was coming to an end, the class was discussing what we would do in 10 years, using future tense. Alina said, “*If the war ends, (I encouraged her to use when), when the war ends, I will be back in Ukraine.*” On the last school day when my students presented their country project, Alina co-presented with her peers, teaching the entire class about Ukraine.

Compared with the beginning, Alina became much more confident in speaking English. She volunteered to give her answers in class, tried to help her classmates who speak other languages, was much more outspoken, and seemed much happier with school. The following are a few memorable moments.

In one class assignment, our students worked in groups to develop a project that gives advice to new classmates joining us. Alina worked with two other Ukrainian speakers and created a bilingual PowerPoint that contained key information. As an integral member, Alina first presented sections in Ukrainian. After two rounds of practice, she started presenting some slides in English. It was clear being able to use her home language helped encourage her participation and build her confidence.

In one discussion on fiction and nonfiction, while we talked about time travel and which time period they would be willing to live in, Alina came to the board and wrote 1991. She shared with the class confidently in English that this was the year when Ukraine gained independence from Russia. The Russian-Ukraine war weighed heavily on the minds of Ukrainian MLs. Nearly every single Ukrainian student in my class included “*the war started in Ukraine in 2022*” on their life timeline assignment.

Outside the classroom, I observed that Alina had a close group of bilingual friends who supported her. They showed me photos of their weekend gatherings, church events, and birthday celebrations. Her aunt also played an extremely supportive role and came to the parent teacher conference during the first semester. I was able to review resources Alina could access from home and provided tips and strategies to support Alina’s learning.

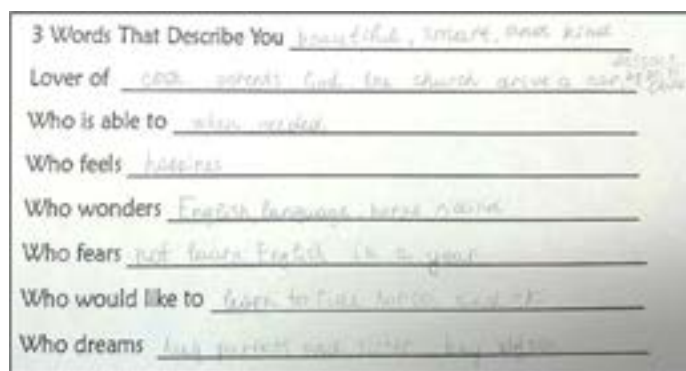
Teaching Recommendations

As a reflexive practitioner-researcher, I take on the identities and translanguaging, transcollaboration, and social emotional (SEL) lenses to analyze Alina’s case and end with practical teacher recommendations.

Multilingual learners like Alina come with multi-faceted identities that should be centered in our curriculum and instruction. Cummins et al. (2015) called for exploring instructional policies and strategies that enable students to use their emerging academic language and multilingual repertoires for powerful identity affirming purposes. The

instructional spaces I constructed encouraged MLs to use their multilingual/multimodal skills as cognitive tools. These identity-affirming translanguaging literacy practices provided them with valuable opportunities to express their evolving identities while engaging them in multimodal literacies development. Their lived experiences, background knowledge, interests and aspirations, became an integral part of my curriculum and pedagogy. Alina’s biography poem written below on 11/1/2023 gave her the opportunity to experiment freely with her ideas and her self-knowledge. By inviting students’ language, culture, and history into my classroom space, I connected my instruction to their lives, increased their level of literacy engagement, and created a close bond that fostered whole person multilingual identities development. Through identities focused translanguaging assignments, MLs from all backgrounds can show their true selves, celebrate their families and histories, and grow their dreams. The classroom space becomes the nexus of their past, present, and future. Without centering students’ multicultural multilingual identities and embracing translanguaging, elevating funds of knowledge and assets of multilingual learners, newcomer multilinguals like Alina would not have had the freedom and space to shine.

Alina’s Biography Poem



My second analytical lens is transcollaboration. Transcaring strategies delineated by García et al. (2012) includes transcollaboration of the educators with parents, family, community, and outside agencies, extending services within and beyond school walls and straddling language and cultural practices. Alina’s educational journey captures transcollaboration in action! She was not alone and received wrap-around services. When we can connect with in-school, in-district, and outside agencies, we are better equipped to provide wrap-around services that promote academic, social, and emotional development of our MLs. My 12th grade MLs needed extra guidance and support from counselors, and college preparation advisors through the College Success Foundation; we were able to collaborate with students to ensure the completion of the Washington state graduation requirement, the High School and Beyond Plan, so that our MLs could participate in the graduation ceremony. Without transcollaboration, it would be more challenging to meet our MLs’ unique needs.

My third analytical lens is social-emotional learning (SEL). Pentón Herrera (2024) SEL strategies in his 9th grade newcomers classroom and highlighted poetry and classroom decorations as some of the effective SEL practices. In that study, a 9th grader named Jesús wrote a poem about how much he missed his family in Honduras. Similarly, Alina is able to embrace her family in Ukraine and mitigate her anxiety by sharing her lived experiences and aspirations through her timeline story, and other assignments that focus on identities, such as *two minutes with Alina* in the student work samples at the end of this article. For her proudest moment question, she wrote “*she came here alone without her parents.*” As for the classroom decorations, the Ukrainian flag she brought in, the student-made flags as part of our door decoration, and the Ukrainian words she wrote on our whiteboard and taught to our class all provided the valuable ambience that helped create her sense of belonging and contributed to her positive feelings and emotions.

Alina is only one of many MLs that educators support daily. I encourage all of us to affirm the multilingual and multicultural identities of our students, create collaborative third in-between spaces that transcend linguistic and cultural differences between schools and homes, and enact transcaring to foster the dynamic development of MLs’ “fluid subjectivities that extend beyond ‘first’ or ‘second’ languages and cultural identities” (Garcia et al., 2012, p. 299).

In her historically responsive literacy framework, Muhammad (2020) elaborated approaches for learning and understanding the histories, identities, and literacies of students. The below excerpts (p. 51) are great questions we should ask ourselves:

Questions for Learning Students’ Histories

- *What are the histories of my students’ schooling/school experiences?*
- *What are the histories of my students’ families/cultures?*
- *What are the histories of our students’ wider histories in their communities, in society, and in the world? Who are their people? How did they practice literacy and language historically?*

Questions for Learning Students’ Identities

- *What are ways in which my students see and define their own lives?*
- *How are my students defined by others (both positive and negative representations)? If negative, how can we provide learning spaces to name, critique, and push back against such views? If positive, how can we provide learning spaces to help them trust and believe in the ways other see them?*
- *Whom do my students desire to be in their future? how do my students see their most desired future versions of themselves? How can my classroom instruction enable and*

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