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LINCing learners to digital literacy: supporting social integration and English language learning during COVID-19

https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2024-0024
Received January 30, 2024; accepted August 22, 2024; published online October 2, 2024

Abstract: Many newcomers to Canada experience significant difficulties adjusting to life in their new community, with few more challenging than learning English. While Canada's Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program suggests a pathway to social integration, ideologies pertaining to language and diversity that inform the LINC program can lead to the assimilation and marginalization of immigrant and refugee newcomers. The disruptions that COVID-19 brought to LINC classes exacerbated these issues. Here, we explore these themes in an ethnographic study of one LINC site and suggest that the incorporation of digital technologies could offer a space for a translingual pedagogy to take root. With appropriate guidance, the adoption of a translingual pedagogy could work against the problematic discourses perpetuating within LINC and improve English learning outcomes by providing increased opportunities for digital literacy socialization.

Keywords: translingualism; literacy; critical pedagogy; additional language acquisition; neoliberalism

Abstrait: Plusieurs immigrants au Canada éprouvent des difficultés majeures alors qu'ils s'adaptent à la vie dans leur nouvelle communauté. Peu de ces difficultés sont plus difficiles que l'apprentissage de anglais. Tandis que le programme du Canada, *Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC)*, suggère un chemin à l'intégration sociale des immigrants, des idéologies relatif à la langue et la diversité qui informes le programme LINC peuvent conduire à l'assimilation et la marginalisation des immigrants et des réfugiés. En plus, le COVID-19 a bouleversé les cours de LINC,

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ce qui n'a fait qu'exacerber ces problèmes. Ici, nous explorons ces thèmes avec une étude ethnographique d'un site de LINC et nous suggérons que l'incorporation des technologies digitales peuvent offrir un espace pour une pédagogie translinguistique pour débuter. Avec des conseils appropriés, l'adoption d'une pédagogie translinguistique pourrait travailler contre les discours problématiques qui se perpétuent à l'intérieur LINC et les résultats d'apprentissage pourraient être améliorés par les opportunités accrues de socialisation en littératie numérique.

Mots-clés: Translinguisme; Alphabétisation; Pédagogie critique; Acquisition des langues supplémentaires; Néolibéralisme

1 Introduction

Funded by the office of Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program is a vital part of Canada's settlement and integration plan, providing elective English language and literacy classes to permanent residents (Government of Canada 2010, 2021), who are not Canadian citizens but have a permanent right to live and work in Canada (IRCC 2017). Currently, 23 % of people in Canada are landed immigrants or permanent residents, the highest proportion in Canadian history. Around three-quarters come from Asia or Africa (Statistics Canada 2022a), and while immigrants are more educated than ever, they disproportionately experience low wages, unemployment, discrimination and COVID-19 vulnerability (Barker 2021a, 2021b). Though 60 % of migrants hold at least a bachelor's degree, around a quarter with foreign credentials work in jobs requiring only a high school diploma, more than twice the rate for Canadian-educated immigrants and citizens (11.8 % and 10.6 %) (Statistics Canada 2022b).

Around 22 % of permanent residents identify fluency in one of Canada's official languages as the greatest obstacle to employment, rising to 69 % among those who cannot communicate in either English or French. The federal government therefore considers language instruction a necessary first step for successful integration into Canada (Barker 2021b; Government of Canada 2010). Far more than an English class, LINC is a vehicle for social integration, and a pathway towards Canadian citizenship and a unified labour force (Barker 2021a, 2021b; Haque 2017; Government of Canada 2010). Nevertheless, the LINC program has been critiqued for the pressures that its requirements place on teachers (Abdulhamid and Fox 2020; Desyatova 2020b; Haque and Cray 2007), its limited vision of language and literacy, and its myopic and neoliberal approach (Barber 2021a; Fleming 2007; Haque 2017). Scholars argue that LINC's conception of language and multiculturalism, combined with the limited English instruction it offers, fails to fulfill its raison d'être of social integration,

instead promoting assimilation into a uniquely Canadian racio-class hierarchy (Barker 2021a; Fleming 2007; Guo 2013; Haque 2010). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these issues, leaving newcomers isolated and reliant on digital interactions, further increasing their marginalization (Barker 2021b; Craig et al. 2021; Haque 2021).

Our research is an ethnographic study of a Level 1 LINC class (for those with the least proficiency, out of 7 LINC levels) organized in partnership with DIVERSE*city* Community Resources Society in British Columbia, a registered charity whose mission is to cultivate inclusive communities by offering education, settlement, and employment services (DIVERSE*city* 20220). Conducted between October 2021 and May 2022, our study considers how the switch to virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic presented an unexpected opportunity for an alternative form of literacy education to take shape. Although Zoom lessons were largely experienced negatively by the class, the adoption of tablets and a WhatsApp group chat facilitated the emergence of a translanguaging space (Garcia and Li 2014) that centered digital literacy.

We assert that this digital translanguaging space enables, even in a post-pandemic era, opportunities to extend beyond the LINC program's rigid language standards and instrumentalist view of literacy education (Burgess and Rowsell 2020; Currie and Cray 2004). Combined with critical pedagogy around translingualism (Poza 2017), we believe that LINC students could be socialized into alternative visions of language, literacy, and identity that directly contest the monolingual and neoliberal ideologies of the LINC program. Further research is needed to determine the impact of a critical, translingual pedagogy on the language learning and integration outcomes of students in LINC programs.

2 Context

2.1 Additional language learning for a globalizing world

In today's context of global capital flows and migration, facilitating migrants' integration into host countries' labour markets is a key concern in many states, with national language programs a central component of such integration strategies (Del Percio 2018; Flubacher et al. 2016; Haque 2017; Rydell 2018). The underlying technological, economic, and social processes of globalization have dramatically reshaped language use, learning, and multilingualism, ushering in a new era of linguistic superdiversity that is redefining what it means to be multilingual (Blommaert 2010; Douglas Fir Group (DFG) 2016; Duff 2019; Heller and Duchêne 2012). Moreover, the evolving modes and media for language use are creating new challenges for language teachers and students, including the mismatch between policies grounded in monolingualism and the diverse linguistic reality of migrants' lives (DFG 2016; Ortega

2019; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2011). Given that learning the majority language(s) of the society in which they settle is vital to migrants' social integration and participation (Bradley et al. 2023), research on addressing the emergent needs, goals, and challenges faced by language learners and teachers is needed (DFG 2016; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2011).

The field of second language acquisition (hereafter referred to as additional language learning, or ALL, to recognize that language learning often extends beyond two languages and is an ongoing, lived process, rather than the 'acquisition' of a linguistic code (Chew et al. 2023)), plays a crucial role in resolving the emergent language learning challenges that students and teachers face (DFG 2016; Ortega 2019). While language learning is a complicated process involving various cognitive, neurological, and linguistic factors (Li 2018), ALL scholars assert that the complexities of globalization require that research be situated in the "social worlds" of language learners and users (DFG 2016: 20; Duff 2019: 6–7). Many ALL analysts argue that embracing social justice should be its primary goal, prompting critical examinations of biased practices that have limited the impact of scholarship on student outcomes (Campbell and Rosenhan 2023; Duchêne 2020; Ortega 2019; Pennycook 2021).

Trends in globalization profoundly impact migrants' integration into their receiving countries. For example, monolingual paradigms of standardized national languages – which frame language as a bounded system tied to identity and territory – are being replaced by a discursive regime embracing multilingualism (Gal 2012; Heller and Duchêne 2012), which does not entirely abandon monolingual ideologies, nor its involvement in power dynamics and the hierarchization of languages and their speakers. Rather, the longstanding discursive link between standardized languages and national identity and tradition is now more explicitly accompanied by a neoliberal discourse of 'profit' that frames language as an economic and instrumentalist commodity (Gal 2012). This neoliberalization of multilingualism valorizes the linguistic flexibility of multilinguals but perpetuates stigmatizing monolingual tropes by framing languages as bounded, standardized systems and valuing their acquisition as a marketable skill (Flubacher et al. 2016; Gal 2012). It is often the institutions of power, not the workers themselves, that benefit the most from this added value (Duchêne 2011). Neoliberal logics can even extend to the language learning process (Soto and Pérez-Milans 2018) as communicative competence and successful outcomes for migrants are formulated as subject to individual choice, despite the inherently relational and contextualized nature of communication (Rydell 2018). Embedded in the policies and assessment practices of educational institutions, such policies can adopt a deficit-based perspective that fails to acknowledge a learner's communicative competence and instead emphasize what they are thought to lack (Campbell and Rosenhan 2023; Haque 2017; Ortega 2019;

Rydell 2018). Notwithstanding the claims that celebrating multilingualism as a skill is conducive to social mobility, this discourse erases language's role in producing (and legitimizing) social difference as well as managing diversity within institutions through language standards and assessments (Duchêne 2020; Flubacher et al. 2016; Gal 2012; Rydell 2018).

Despite the challenges that the modern era has created for migrants learning new languages, opportunities for innovation and creativity exist. Digital technologies have expanded the possibilities for social interaction, information access, and enriched student-teacher relationships (Lazebna and Prykhodko 2021; Li and Lan 2022b), thereby increasing opportunities for language socialization by bridging the gap between formal and informal learning (Bradley et al. 2023; Golonka et al. 2014; Li and Lan 2022a, 2022b). Furthermore, the multimodal capabilities of digital tools challenge the notion of 'autonomous' literacy, which conceptualizes literacy as an independent, transposable skillset that necessarily develops linguistic, cultural, and cognitive abilities, in favour of culturally relativistic approaches that acknowledge reading and writing as context-dependent, sociocultural practices (Hanks and Turin 2021).

COVID-19 underscores the need to address equitable teaching practices using digital technologies. The pandemic significantly disrupted classrooms and integration services, while also exacerbating the marginalization of migrants (Barker 2021b; Haque 2021; Li and Lan 2022a). The pandemic highlighted the central role of language during public health emergencies and showed the limitations of an English-centric, monolingual approach to disseminating information to linguistically diverse citizens (Craig et al. 2021; Li et al. 2020; Piller et al. 2020). The pandemic also expanded pathways for growth, with digital technologies helping foster communities of support for linguistic minorities (Jang and Choi 2020; Piller et al. 2020). Researchers and policymakers can usefully collaborate to develop effective strategies from the lessons of COVID-19 to mitigate future crises (Piller et al. 2020; Shen 2020).

2.2 New directions for ALL: translingualism

The theoretical framework of translingualism offers a means for reimagining ALL pedagogies that are more equitable for migrant students using digital technologies. Translingualism has been effective in educational settings where the language of the school or the language-of-instruction differs from the language of the learners (Li 2018), the development of literacy (Canagarajah 2013b; Hornberger and Link 2012) and harnessing the multimodal capabilities of digital technologies in productive ways (Burgess and Rowsell 2020; Canals 2021).

Emerging from the 'plurilingual turn' in language studies, translingualism is best understood as a "hybrid orientation" to language that conceptualizes multiple linguistic repertoires as constituting a dynamic, holistic, and open system (Canagarajah 2013a; Kubota 2016; Li 2018). In shifting the analytical focus from 'language-as-object' to its *use in practice*, translingualism understands language to be ever in a process of *becoming* within interactions. Language is not cleanly or mechanically reproduced but *grows* and *changes* organically as diverse semiotic resources, modalities, and contextual features interact to holistically produce meaning (Canagarajah 2013a; Garcia and Li 2014; Larsen-Freeman 1997; Li 2018).

Translingualism is a significant departure from the monolingual tradition of ALL, which focussed exclusively on 'acquiring' an L2 as a code reproduced by an idealized monolingual speaker, rather than teaching students to become competent *multilinguals* (Campbell and Rosenhan 2023; Li 2018; Ortega 2019). Recognizing that demarcated, standardized languages are cultural-political constructs associated with modern nation-states and power (Bourdieu 1992; Flubacher et al. 2016; Gal 2012), translingualism instead defines language as a "multilingual, multisemiotic, multisensory, and multimodal resource for sense- and meaning-making" (Li 2018: 22).

The key distinction is that translingualism reframes language as both a practice and a process of *language use* and *knowledge construction* which transcends linguistic structures and the ideological barriers that have pervaded language research and education (e.g., target language vs. mother tongue; oral vs. literacy; immigrant vs. citizen) (Hornberger and Link 2012; Li 2018). Aligning with scholarship from language socialization (Duff 2019) and the Complex Dynamic Systems perspective of language (Larsen-Freeman 1997, 2012), translingualism alters the communicative goal from repeating standard forms to learning how to "communicate across difference" through mutually created meaning (Canagarajah 2013b: 5). Garcia and Li (2014) assert that such interactions create "translanguaging spaces" capable of blurring, dismantling, and transcending the ideological barriers separating linguistic codes, spaces, and identities (24).

The central goal of a pedagogy of translingualism therefore becomes building the repertoires (Canagarajah 2011) and critical, creative thinking skills (Campbell and Rosenhan 2023) that students need to become effective multilinguals who are (1) cognizant of the inherently political nature of language; and (2) capable of harnessing all available resources (i.e., various languages and literacies) to achieve their own communicative ends (Li 2018).

Translingualism broadens ALL possibilities by considering how abilities in one language or medium (e.g., Arabic literacy) may enhance fluency in others (e.g., spoken English) (Garcia and Li 2014; Hornberger and Link 2012). Moreover, intersecting with poststructuralist notions of identity, literacy, and social learning (Canagarajah 2013b; Duff 2019; Garcia and Li 2014; Hanks and Turin 2021), translingualism

abandons the assimilationist and prescriptivist tendencies baked into the deficit model to instead teach students to activate all facets of their selves at once by *embracing* their own voices and linguistic resources (Campbell and Rosenhan 2023; Canagarajah 2013a; Garcia and Li 2014; Hornberger and Link 2012; Poza 2017). In doing so, translingualism can foster student investment (Norton 2013) in learning the target language by facilitating a stronger identification with it and by supporting flexible language use and digital, multimodal literacy (Canals 2021; Darvin and Norton 2015).

Canagarajah (2011) identifies various issues within translingualism scholarship, including an excessive focus on oral interactions at the expense of translingual literacies and a strict focus on multilinguals, often intentionally neglecting data from monolingual speakers. This not only creates scenarios that do not represent the involvement of monolinguals in translingual interactions, but also essentializes an unproductive division between multi- and monolingual individuals (Canagarajah 2011).

Important questions regarding assessment in translingual pedagogy remain, as the theory's characteristic flexibility could imply that all translingual texts and utterances are flawless (Canagarajah 2011; Campbell and Rosenhan 2023). Translingualism diverges from monolingual, deficit-based assessment standards, advocating instead for a dialogic assessment approach that prioritizes critical thinking and creative interpretation. This approach defines errors as deliberate linguistic choices that do not resonate with an intended audience. Scholars argue that the dialogic approach addresses inequities in education and better equips students to communicate in a globalizing world (Canagarajah 2011; Campbell and Rosenhan 2023). Insider perspectives on translingualism are thus needed to better understand the language choices that produce talk and text (Canagarajah 2011). Such insights are important because language ideologies impact the attitudes of students and teachers towards translingualism, and thus affect translingual pedagogies (Canagarajah 2011; Poza 2017).

Furthermore, a lack of insider perspectives in translingual research and pedagogy risks diluting its transformative potential, as the framing of language as 'resources' can parallel neoliberal logics that marginalize minority students in schools (Flores 2013; Poza 2017). When translingual competence is viewed solely as a tool for economic advancement, educators may overlook power dynamics and linguistic hierarchies; an oversight that can inadvertently institutionalize translingualism as a colonizing force by promoting certain hybrid linguistic forms while marginalizing others (Flores 2013; Kubota 2016; Poza 2017). To safeguard its emancipatory potential, Poza (2017) argues that translingual pedagogies must be implemented on a structural scale that goes beyond simply scaffolding 'remedial' students into the linguistic status quo.

2.3 The LINC program

The LINC program offers a unique opportunity to interrogate the development of equitable translingual pedagogies for migrant students. Created in 1992, LINC marked a pivot in Canada's immigrant language training policy by connecting language education to settlement services (Fleming 2007; Haque 2010). LINC soon supplanted other adult English language training programs, becoming the primary model for immigrant language curricula development and assessment across Canada (Fleming 2007; Haque 2010). Rather than fostering integration, scholars have suggested that the program has instead been complicit in the socioeconomic marginalization of newcomers by requiring their assimilation into prescribed language standards and cultural ideals (Barker 2021a; Fleming 2007, 2015; Guo 2013; Haque 2010, 2012, 2017).

First, the neoliberalization of language training for newcomers is apparent in the fact that the LINC program in Anglophone Canada actually *reduced* the level of English instructed by earlier immigrant language training programs to basic, or survival-level English, shifting the responsibility for meaningful linguistic and social integration onto the newcomers themselves (Cray and Currie 2004; Fleming 2007; Haque 2010). While the level of language instructed by LINC has now (in some institutions) been increased above basic English, the focus of these higher-level classes is explicitly work-oriented language, rather than related to meaningful social integration (Haque 2017).

Second, the deployment of a national language standard and associated assessment procedures – the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) and the Portfolio Based Language Assessment (PBLA), respectively – within the LINC program constitute another arena where the neoliberalization of Canada's language training and integration services is apparent. The CLB were created in 1996 (revised most recently in 2012) to establish a common reference framework for recognizing, describing, and assessing the language abilities of newcomers learning English as an additional language (CCLB 2015; Desyatova 2020a). The CLB is now administered by the Center for Canadian Language Benchmarks (CCLB) – a non-profit organization responsible for promoting CLB in educational, training, community and workplace contexts (CCLB 2015). This framework adopts a monolingual and autonomous approach to language and literacy by dividing competencies into four discrete skills (Speaking, Listening, Reading, and Writing) and advocates for language education that reflects communicative situations relevant to learners' lives (CCLB 2015). More than just a language standard, the CLB are a key instrument of national language policy that acculturate newcomers into Canadian citizenship (Fleming 2015).

Developed from a theory of language *ability* rather than of ALL, the CLB conceptualize language competencies as developing along a 12-point continuum that charts a learner's progression from 'initial to fluent' through the completion of tasks in contexts of increasing demand (for example, from speaking basic greetings to analyzing academic articles) (CCLB 2015). These twelve points represent the language standards that guide the various levels of the LINC program. No LINC programs instruct past Level 7 (Haque 2017), a level defined as an individual holding an adequate linguistic ability in modestly complex tasks in contexts of moderate stakes (CCLB 2015: 13).

The PBLA is an ostensibly learner-centered assessment model that was officially incorporated into LINC in 2016 (Desyatova 2020a). The PBLA requires three to four assessments a month to measure a student's abilities in the four defined CLB skills, with the results compiled into individual portfolios to track progress. After passing 32–40 assessments proving their competencies (approximately 10 assessments for each language skill) students can progress to the next level (Desyatova 2020a). The PBLA has been criticized for inadequately serving the needs of beginner-level students, increasing stress and workloads through near-constant assessments, and abandoning its learner-centered principle by centering evaluations as the goal to the detriment of practical language learning (Abdulhamid and Fox 2020; Burgess and Rowsell 2020; Desyatova 2020a).

Though originally proposed as guidelines, the nationwide adoption of the PBLA has mandated that curricula planning, instruction, and assessment align with the CLB (CCLB 2015). A clear gap has now emerged between the rhetoric surrounding the CLB and its application in the LINC program. Despite declarations of being learner-centered, flexible, and supportive of teacher agency regarding the 'how' and 'what' of lessons, the task-based nature of the CLB and the strict requirements of the PBLA have essentially turned the CLB into a 'hidden curriculum' centered on the uncritical devaluing of languages other than English and promoting 'Canadian' neoliberal values (Burgess and Rowsell 2020; Desyatova 2020a; Fleming 2010, 2015; Haque 2017). While teachers are not prohibited from instructing content that goes beyond the CLB, the status that the CLB hold as Canada's official language standard – in addition to the heavy workloads and time constraints (Haque and Cray 2007) – ensures that CLB tasks are prioritized in class (Fleming 2015).

The LINC program's hidden curriculum implicitly harms newcomers by devaluing their own social practices and their mother tongues, and by framing active citizenship and critical thinking as solely operating in a level of English that few newcomers will immediately attain (Fleming 2015; Haque 2017). Changes to how LINC is implemented are needed to support the better integration of newcomers by shifting language instruction away from its current assimilationist approach.

2.4 DIVERSE*city* as a case study for adopting translingual pedagogy in LINC

In 2021–2022, Surrey-based DIVERSE*city* supported 2,369 clients in British Columbia by providing LINC classes, with Syria, Eritrea, and Afghanistan being the most common countries of origin. The most prevalent first languages spoken by DIVERSE*city*'s clients were Arabic, Hindi, Pashto, Punjabi, and Swahili (DIVERSE*city* 2022). DIVERSE*city* offers LINC classes ranging from pre-literacy (which prepare students for CLB Level 1 classes) to CLB Level 6 (a benchmark defined as the 'developing ability on moderately complex tasks in moderately demanding contexts' (CLB 2015: 13)). We observed a class that targeted CLB Level 1, defined as 'initial ability on simple tasks in non-demanding contexts' (CLB 2015: 13).

Because LINC classes must adhere to CLB and PBLA assessment standards and practices, scholarly critiques of the LINC program are applicable in DIVERSE*city*'s classes. However, DIVERSE*city*'s commitment to supporting their clients with interpretation services in their mother tongues, along with supplemental 'Conversation Circles' for practicing oral English beyond LINC classes (DIVERSE*city* 2022), suggest that DIVERSE*city* may be a conducive environment for a translingual LINC pedagogy to take root. Additionally, realignments due to the COVID-19 pandemic created opportunities to envision how translingual pedagogies might manifest in increasingly digital and online spaces.

Our research was guided by the following questions:

- RQ 1: How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the lived reality of English language and literacy learning in DIVERSE*city*'s classes?
- RQ 2: Are there opportunities for incorporating translingual pedagogies into the classroom to mitigate learning challenges created by constraints in policy?

In critically examining the transition to virtual and hybrid learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, our research contributes to scholarship on critical pedagogy for the LINC program, and ALL more broadly. Our focus on digital literacy addresses a gap in translingualism research, which has historically emphasized oral interactions (Canagarajah 2011).

3 Methodology

3.1 Methods

Fieldwork occurred between October 2021 and May 2022, when DIVERSE*city* was restructuring their lesson delivery following the dramatic shift to virtual learning

that occurred at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. Before the pandemic, students met Monday to Thursday for 3-h in-person classes, switching to Zoom during the pandemic. Lesson time was reduced by half, and digital technologies became vital for social interactions both within and outside of class time.

At the start of fieldwork, DIVERSE*city* had transitioned to a hybrid model of both in-person and virtual classes. The LINC class we observed continued to meet four days a week, although in-person learning occurred only once a week and was reduced to no more than seven people, divided into two groups which met separately on either Monday or Wednesday. The students' placement in a group was based on whether they shared a common language. While one group attended in-person classes, the other group continued to meet virtually on Zoom to review lessons and assignments with a volunteer TA.

Participant observation was used during DIVERSE*city*'s in-person and virtual learning spaces. This is a proven method for interrogating the '*messy*' social patterns and dynamics of language ideologies and community construction within language classes (Shulist and Rice 2019: 37, 44). The data produced via participant observation were in the form of field notes created during and after class instruction. Digital copies of learning materials were also available upon request (handouts, worksheets, etc.) and photographs of resources were taken.

In an intentional move to disrupt traditional research practices that situate researchers as the sole producers of knowledge (Patel 2016), we used the '*Collective Pedagogical Inquiry*' model (CPI) to facilitate the co-production of knowledge necessary for collaborative research. The CPI model blurs the boundaries between 'teacher' and 'researcher' by involving both in each other's roles to identify learning challenges, consider the reason for certain pedagogical practices, and develop alternatives through combining researcher and teacher understandings (Ntelioglou et al. 2014).

Two of our research team adopted the roles of volunteer teaching assistants (TA) in the LINC class in October and December 2021. After consultation with DIVERSE*city* leadership regarding study design, the researchers obtained these volunteer positions by applying through DIVERSE*city*'s formal channels and participated in the requisite training sessions before entering both virtual and physical classrooms. Researcher 1 (the first author) served as a TA for approximately 72 h over the course of 3 months, while Researcher 2 dedicated about 4 h to the LINC class during the same time period, for a total of 72 h of class time. Both researchers engaged in participant observing. The TA role entailed important ethical considerations as it established us, at least in the students' perception, as holding positions of authority. Even though we had no influence on assessments or their progress through the LINC program, the students may nevertheless have regarded us as part of DIVERSE*city*'s teaching staff, potentially influencing their behaviour.

The purpose of the researchers' presence in the class was explained to the students (in English) by the teacher following admission to the class. Arabic and Hindi interpreters were also contracted to explain the purpose and process of the study and to ensure that the majority of students could exercise informed consent to opt in, or out of, classroom observation and interviews. Only Arabic and Hindi interpreters were hired because these were the most prevalent languages spoken in the class, and budgetary constraints prevented hiring interpreters for all languages spoken by the students. Students who elected not to participate in the study or did not have access to an interpreter were not included in our study. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of those who consented to participate. Given that informed consent could not be assured for all class participants, no audio or video recordings of classroom interactions were made.

Semi-structured interviews were another major component of the data collection process, which we completed in January and May 2022. Such interviews are an invaluable method for research in classroom-based ethnographies as they provide researchers with a means to explore events that are difficult to observe (Forsey 2010), such as the reasons behind certain language practices, or discussion in a language the researcher did not understand. Ethnographic interviews are a process of engaged listening that uncover individuals' stories, deriving insights and forging connections with the wider research context (Forsey 2010).

One of our research team conducted individual interviews with one teacher and three Arabic-speaking students in the months following the participant observation research phase, with eight interviews in total (two with each interlocutor). Interviews were only conducted with Arabic-speaking students because informed consent could not be obtained from the other students. One interview was completed in-person, and all the rest were completed over Zoom after the Omicron variant wave of COVID-19 forced a complete return to virtual learning in early 2022. Interviews were between 60 and 90 min in length and were recorded for later transcription. The interviews with students were facilitated by Arabic interpreters as our research team did not speak Arabic. All quotations from interlocutors contained in this article derive from interview transcriptions.

Given the teacher's heavy workload, interviews (and other, less formal conversations) were the primary means through which we interacted as co-researchers. Two interviews with the teacher were bookended by student interviews, allowing us to first discuss the teacher's goals for the students, and their interpretations of the students' experiences, progress, and desires before interviewing students. During the second interview with the teacher, we discussed the initial findings and ideas for innovations and adjustments to teaching strategies and goals. Unfortunately, the teacher's heavy work commitments limited their participation to the co-analysis of preliminary findings and prevented them from co-authoring this article.

To analyze how language learning and socialization occurred in DIVERSE*city*'s Level 1 LINC class, we used field notes and interview transcripts. We applied a hybrid approach to thematic analysis that involved both deductive coding (top-down) and 'grounded theory' (bottom-up) in the data analysis phase of research (Xu and Zammit 2020). Our analytical process began with themes derived from scholarly literature on the LINC program (e.g., social integration; neoliberalism; identity) and ALL (translingualism; emotion and affect; literacy; technology). In applying grounded theory, we inductively coded notes and transcripts to identify categories and develop themes to make sense of the social reality of the LINC class (Maher et al. 2018). The following themes emerged in the course of our grounded theory coding: contexts of learning; structure and agency; and social connection.

Guided by Norton's (2013) concept of investment – which goes beyond a student's basic desire or motivation to learn a language to consider how power dynamics shape a learner's socially constructed relationship towards targeted language practices – we assessed the ideologies, practices, and structural limitations influencing the students' learning experiences. This assessment was then compared against the stated goals of the teacher and students to evaluate their investment in the language being taught.

3.2 Participants in DIVERSE*city*'s LINC class

Throughout our fieldwork, the LINC class had between eleven and fifteen enrolled students (all of whom identified as women between the approximate ages of twenty-five and sixty), with one teacher, a teacher's assistant (online-only), and two members of the research team. The students hailed from Afghanistan, Burundi, Iran, Iraq, Somalia, and Syria. There were five mother tongues represented in the class (Arabic, French, Kurdish, Multani, and Somali), and additional languages, including Hindi and Pashto.

Three Arabic-speaking students were interviewed in this study. Their pseudonyms are Yasmin, Inas, and Sagal, and their countries of origin are Syria, Iraq, and Somalia, respectively. During the interviews, each recounted their journey to Canada, which involved escaping war, years-long waits in refugee camps in Turkey, and learning to navigate the complicated bureaucracies of UN refugee programs and Canadian immigration policies.

Yasmin and Inas both identify as monolingual Arabic speakers, while Sagal is a bilingual Somali and Arabic speaker, having learned the latter language in school as a teenager and while living in a refugee camp in Syria for two years before its own civil war pushed her into Turkey. Inas entered Canada in 2018, though she could only enroll in the present LINC class in August 2021. Sagal arrived in 2020 and has been

enrolled since July 2021, while Yasmin arrived in March 2021, and enrolled in September 2021.

The teacher is originally from Poland, and much like her students, arrived in Canada with limited experience in the English language. Identifying as multilingual, the teacher has significant classroom experience learning additional languages, such as Russian and German, and had previously lived in Germany before immigrating to Canada in the 1990s. After working variously as a translator, interpreter, and Career Development Practitioner assisting newcomers develop jobs-oriented skills, the teacher discovered a passion for teaching English as she responded to her clients' requests for help with English by incorporating language lessons into the employment workshops she ran. She officially became an English teacher in 2014, and a LINC teacher with DIVERSE*city* in 2021.

4 Findings

In Section 4.1, we describe changes made to DIVERSE*city*'s LINC class in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of these changes on the students' and teacher's classroom experiences. Section 4.2 addresses how the LINC programs' task-based learning approach is enacted in DIVERSE*city's* program, with particular attention to its treatment of literacy and the possible consequences on student investment in writing. In Section 4.3, we highlight the significant role that translingual interactions serve in supporting the students' acquisition of English language and literacy abilities, highlighting the opportunities for engaging in translingualism in-person and on the digital platforms provided to DIVERSE*city*'s students. Section 4.4 explores the changing understanding of literacy produced by a sudden reliance on digital technologies and the role of the PBLA and CLB in structuring the direction of learning.

4.1 Restructuring LINC for COVID-19: disrupted learning and lost connections

COVID-19 brought significant changes to DIVERSE*city*'s LINC classes, reshaping both the delivery of lessons and the dynamics of classroom engagement. In addition to the changes made to the class outlined in Section 3.1, DIVERSE*city* loaned tablets to students to ease their transition to digital learning, though it was common for some students to phone-in to the Zoom classes due to unreliable internet and other technical challenges.

The changes made in response to COVID-19 created two distinct forms of classroom experience at DIVERSE*city*: *in-person engagement* (inside physical classroom spaces) and *digital engagement* (interaction through Zoom during class times and throughout the week by phone and instant messaging on WhatsApp). All in-person engagement was mediated by public health precautions for preventing the spread of COVID-19, such as mandatory facemasks and social distancing. The pace of the class was significantly slower, with time spent learning English in-class (both in-person and virtually) reduced from 12 h a week to only 6.5 h, with one class each week dedicated to reviewing activities rather than introducing new content. The division of students into smaller cohorts for in-person classes meant that students socialized with fewer classmates.

Despite reporting positively on their experiences learning CLB English in the LINC class, Sagal, Inas, and Yasmin all reported experiencing significant issues with hybrid learning. All interlocutors described notable differences in the 'quality' of interactions, stating a clear preference for in-person engagement over Zoom lessons. As Yasmin explained: "I don't feel like I'm learning anything online or understanding quite as much." During in-person classes, Yasmin reported "learning better, understanding better… I'm enjoying it more."

Sagal and Inas had similar experiences, clarifying that the Zoom platform had communicative limitations when compared with in-person classes. Inas related that she:

Excerpt 1:[1]

> **feel[s] like online is not as good as in-person at all** [emphasis added]. Because online there's no opportunity for everyone to answer questions, or the attention from the teacher to a particular student is not the same as when we are all in the classroom. Because as soon as she asks a question, all of us, for example, will speak at the same time, **so I get confused about who said what** [emphasis added]. So, it's not as effective as in-person, in the classroom.

The students' account of digital engagement contrasted starkly with their experience of in-person learning. As Sagal explained, the communicative challenges endemic to Zoom classes were absent in the physical classroom: "Now, it's more personal. We go to class, we hang around, talk to the teacher, ask her questions. It's better now". Summarizing the issues that she and the other students experienced on Zoom, Sagal simply stated that "We missed that human connection".

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1 All of the interview transcripts have been simplified for readability and do not represent verbatim transcriptions. Ellipses (…) indicate pauses in speech or omissions from the original transcript. *Italics* denote emphasis on specific words or phrases made by the speaker, while **bold text** denotes emphasis added by the authors.

The idea of a "personal" or "human" connection being lost on Zoom was also noted by the teacher. Reflecting on her experiences teaching English before COVID-19, she explained:

Excerpt 2:

> Everything is different. When I was teaching before…you have a group that comes every day. *Friendships are being formed* [original emphasis]. We celebrate. One of the best perks of this was having potlucks… and it's this beautiful, international display of food. And *we can talk about the food*, and you can *bring pictures* [original emphasis]. It was more of a **family feel** [emphasis added]… It was easier to create. And now… you just meet the students on Zoom. When they came here first [in-person] I remember I didn't recognize them because they had masks on [laughs]… Yes, there's not this family feel, and I think that's very important when you are in a new country.

Further reflecting on the dynamics of in-person learning before the pandemic, she added:

Excerpt 3:

> We all knew what was sort of happening in each other's lives and that creates that… *connectivity*… **English class was always like your family**. And you have those memories forever. So, it's very important. That's your sort of like first impression… **That's where you learn what life here is [like]** [emphasis added].

Our interlocutors identified that a feeling of *connection* between members of the LINC class was missing and linked this directly to COVID-19 health precautions. Overall class time was reduced, and students were isolated from peers in their class and from those in other LINC classes and levels. In addition to limited opportunities for informal socializing that the teacher deemed crucial for learning and integration, the limitations of digital connection over Zoom resulted in frequent communicative breakdowns.

Factors contributing to communicative breakdown and feelings of disconnection included: students lacking experience with computers, Zoom, and classroom spaces (let alone a *digital* classroom space); limitations to only the audio component of an otherwise multimodal learning environment when phoning in to Zoom sessions; a reduced capacity to meaningfully interact because Zoom prioritizes one speaker at a time and literacy levels were ill-suited for effective communication using the text chat feature.

4.2 Task-based learning prioritizing oral language

Whether online or in-person, the classes followed a similar format, embodying the task-based approach to language learning advocated by the LINC program: teaching

language alongside cultural knowledge vital for living in Canada by contextualizing CLB English vocabulary and grammar into scenarios that students were expected to encounter.

Each class would start with warmup speaking, listening, and reading exercises for the students to practice standard greetings while communicating important information, such as dates and the weather. The teacher would initiate a call and response activity, asking the students individually or in a group about the weather and dates of the present, preceding, and following days, while writing these phrases on the whiteboard (or screenshared Word document) to guide them. Other commonly-used teaching practices included explanations of linguistic and cultural information, role-playing interactions, listening and singing along to educational songs, and literacy activities (i.e., short stories, song lyrics, etc.). Participant observed lessons focused on teaching students how to navigate the city using public transportation, communicate symptoms of illnesses to doctors, call in sick to work or school, find items in grocery stores, and what to expect during upcoming holidays.

Literacy learning followed the same task-based structure, though it was oriented around supporting *oral language* abilities with traditional pen-and-paper literacy practices. With certain exceptions, most literacy practices involved iteratively reading or copying vocabulary words and phrases that would typically be *oral speech* (such as greetings, or whole conversations) onto paper or worksheets. Though this approach reflects the students' perceived language needs for social integration given their minimal experience with the English language, it is demonstrative of a monolingual, form-focused, and autonomous approach to literacy. Though seemingly in line with translingualism, it demarcates the students' linguistic competencies into strict categories (Reading, Speaking, Listening, Writing, English, Other languages), emphasizes the reproduction of form rather than reflecting on situational communication needs, and treats literacy as a decontextualized skill that requires mastery before higher level reasoning can occur (Hanks and Turin 2021). Consequently, developing oral CLB English language abilities is prioritized over literacy abilities. The teacher explained:

Excerpt 4:

> The language learning is part of the settlement. So, what they really need at this level is… speaking and listening, even though we're teaching all [of the CLB skills]… Because at this level, what they mostly need is speaking and understanding. They're not going to be writing exams for the university, *not yet*. So, the reading and writing is a little bit lagging behind [Original emphasis]

The teacher's statement reflects her students' perceptions of their own language needs and the instrumentalized role of language as a "key" and "door to almost

everything" in Canada (according to Yasmin and the teacher, respectively), with literacy framed as a "tool" (according to the teacher) for becoming a competent English *speaker*, a role that is also reserved for critical thinking when the students' English is at a higher level. We assert that this approach does not effectively teach students the value of communicating or socializing through written media, despite this being a vital skill for connecting with others in digitally-mediated contexts, such as the Zoom chat. Consequently, the mismatch between the CLB's approach to literacy, the perception of the students' communicative needs, and the reality of online learning may have negatively impacted the students' investment in developing their literacy repertoires.

We wish to highlight that the flexibility of the LINC program allowed the teacher to use monthly student feedback to guide lesson content for the upcoming month. Though the students emphasized their desire to become fluent in all domains of the English language, when asked about their immediate language goals (during both the interviews and when the whole class was asked for feedback by the teacher), the consensus prioritized speaking and listening because it was those competencies, rather than literacy, that they imagined would better integrate or "blend [them] into" (Inas) the Canadian community. Therefore, this LINC class's focus on oral skills does not stem only from the teacher, LINC policy, or CLB standards, but also from the students' own understanding of language and their anticipated learning needs for social integration.

4.3 Translingual learning

Linguistic practices within DIVERSE*city*'s LINC class extended beyond CLB English abilities: the in-person classes were regularly abuzz with students conversing in their mother tongues and a more flexible form of English than that outlined by the CLB. Adopting a translingual perspective shows how these linguistic practices form an important element of students' communicative and learning processes, despite being misrecognized as deficits by current assessment standards (Burgess and Rowsell 2020).

During in-person lessons and interactions, it was common for students to talk among themselves in their mother tongues about the meaning of a particular element of oral or written language with which they had been presented before offering the intended CLB English response. This form of collaborative, translingual communication – much harder to achieve during Zoom lessons – even occurred during quieter moments in class, such as when the students supported one another in making sense of learning activities using their mother tongues. As Yasmin explained:

Excerpt 5:

> Yes, [speaking in Arabic] is very helpful because it happened many times that myself and my friend, if I don't understand anything and she does, she explains it to me in Arabic. And the other way around as well.

The application of translingualism as a learning support was further apparent in the literacy practices observed in-class and discussed during the interviews. When recalling her own experience learning English, the teacher explained one of the learning strategies she used to develop her literacy abilities:

Excerpt 6:

> **Teacher**: "I was aiming for [complete English immersion], but of course you use whatever… helps. In the beginning when I was learning English… we use Polish spelling, right? To spell the words… If I would learn the word 'sneeze', in the class, then uh… [gets up to write on the whiteboard nearby]… I would write… this [on the board: sniz]"
>
> **Robert**: "Oh okay. And what was helpful about that?"
>
> **Teacher**: "That I can use [the Polish language phonetics]… because I wouldn't know how to sound it out… because English is very confusing."
>
> **Robert**: [laughs] yeah, yeah… So the S-N-I-Z, that phonetically says 'sneeze', but that's not actually a word in Polish?"
>
> **Teacher:** "No, no, no …. or 'cough', that would be [writes on the board: kof] … because now I know how to read it, but when you are a new learner, it's like 'cowf'? 'Cow?'. So, when I write this, I know it's 'kof' … the vowels are deadly in English [laughs]."

In harnessing a Polish literacy repertoire to support an English oral and literacy repertoires, the above example demonstrates the common assertion by translingual scholars that linguistic modes and media can – and often are – fluidly harnessed for language learning (Canagarajah 2013a, 2013b; Garcia and Li 2014), despite the ideological demarcations between English and Polish (evidenced by the teacher's stated desire for English immersion).

The teacher sometimes encouraged students to engage in similar translanguaging strategies during class, despite having never previously encountered translingualism as a concept or theory. For example, having distributed the lyrics to the song 'Cough and Sneeze' – which taught the students how to prevent spreading communicable illnesses – the teacher encouraged the class to write words in their mother tongues beside the English lyrics to assist with their comprehension. The students engaged more generally in such translingual learning strategies, as evidenced by the Arabic writing added by a student to a short story booklet about Christmas rituals in Canada (see Figures 1–3).

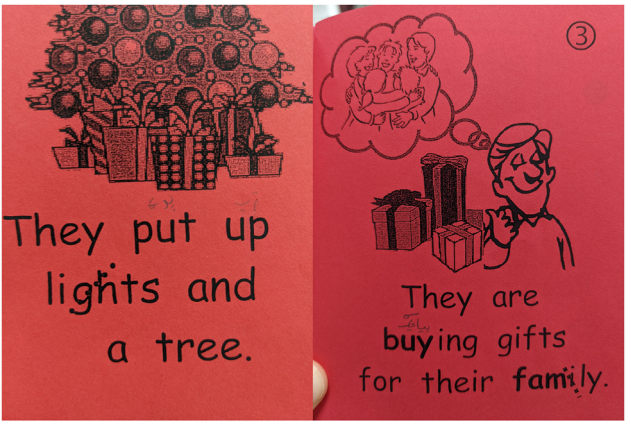

Figure 1: Arabic writing added by students above the words ‘put up’ and ‘buying’.

Figure 2: Zoomed-in image of Arabic translation by student.

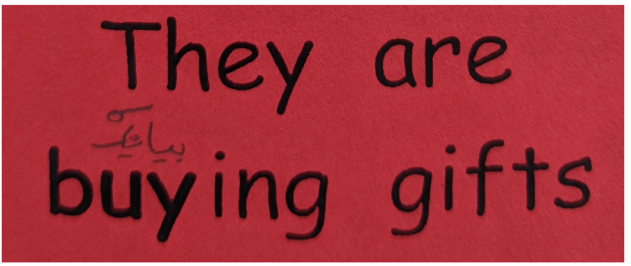

Figure 3: Zoomed-in image of Arabic translation by student.

Crucially, the students' translingual learning repertoire was not limited to in-person engagement. Two significant changes to DIVERSE*city*'s LINC programming in response to COVID-19 – the loaning of tablets and the creation of a WhatsApp class group chat – enabled translingual learning to extend into digital spaces. While we were unable to join the class's WhatsApp group chat for ethical reasons, our interlocutors reported that their interactions in the group chat typically involved texting by hand, rather than through text-to-speech or recorded voice notes. Additionally, the teacher reported posting audio clips, such as speech and songs, to the group chat, providing further opportunities to simultaneously practice the CLB targeted skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing outside of class.

In our own WhatsApp conversations with interlocutors, we used Google Translate to communicate in both English and Arabic as needed, regularly complementing written texts with emojis, stickers, and GIFs. Now a vital part of our texting practices, these multimodal features helped to bridge the uncertainty of mistranslations by directly communicating the intended affect. Inas reported that the translingual capabilities of digital technologies constituted a major component of her own learning practice:

Excerpt 7:

> I keep searching words on Google and learn it. [I] try to listen to it first in English and then take this word and take the translation for it in Arabic in order to understand and keep listening to the word back and forth until I learn it.

Despite the use of translingualism within the class, the teacher was concerned about the widespread use of other languages in the classroom. A firm believer in the benefits of monolingual language immersion, the teacher felt that the learning benefits of translingualism would be eroded if students relied heavily on their mother tongues. This position reflects a transitional model of learning in which a "balance" (teacher) must be struck at the lower levels between one's mother tongue and the target language, with increasing reliance on the target language as students proceed to higher levels. The teacher's implicit acceptance of translingualism in class was likely due to the students' beginner status, demonstrating a scaffolded approach to translingual pedagogy intended to remediate students (a position critiqued by Poza 2017).

Despite adopting translingual practices in their interactions and learning strategies, the students also demarcated their linguistic repertoires and worked to produce a form of English uninfluenced by their mother tongues. Though all the interlocutors still closely identify with their mother tongues (Arabic, Polish, Somali) and continue to speak them at home with their families, they consider English to be fundamental to a 'Canadian' identity and to navigating public spaces in Canada.

4.4 Digital literacy and PBLA assessments

The shift to digital engagement forced newer technologies into the center of classroom dynamics and social connection, bringing shifting conceptualizations of, and possibilities for, literacy learning to the forefront. As the teacher explained:

Excerpt 8:

> I'm starting to look at things differently because I see those students who sometimes never use paper. But they use phones all the time… It was a shock… The child-minding ladies who had Zoom classes with the children [of DIVERSE*city* clients in classes]. They would sometimes ask the child to bring a piece of paper and a pencil. And they would say there is no paper [laughs]… And yes, like why would you need paper if you don't write?… But [the students] do have a phone and they know how to use it…. It's a big opportunity.

The teacher continued:

Excerpt 9:

> [Literacy] is way more complex than it used to [be]… It used to be reading and writing and now it's so much more… Even though in my heart of hearts I would like to sit and do cursive writing [laughs] because I strongly believe in, you know, learning the foundations. But… [learning language] is about *surviving*, really, in this world, and whatever tool you can get to communicate, you should use it… **because sometimes literally it means saving your life** [emphasis added].

The move to digital engagement helped to surface previously implicit assumptions about the presence and role of literacy in the lives of DIVERSE*city*'s students, alongside opportunities for rethinking its place in their English language learning. Of note was the realization that mobile devices are tools most students are already comfortable using. The teacher marveled at the speed at which her students began using tablets for the purposes of writing. Compared to the "struggle" (teacher's chosen word) involved in imparting traditional literacy skills, the teacher recorded students working through introductory digital literacy lesson in half of the allotted time. Reflecting on this, the teacher noted, "I think it's because they're using [mobile devices] all the time to communicate… everyone has a smartphone, and everyone is using it to communicate with their families back home".

The teacher also found one tool in particular to be a powerful addition to their pedagogy:

Excerpt 10:

> I really like the WhatsApp group that we have. **And I look at it as a teaching tool** [emphasis added]. Yes, it's a communication device, but I love when they write me. And I know they use Google Translate often, but that's *also learning*… And you know, someone says she's sick and we say, 'oh, I hope you feel better.' *And they write it!* [Original emphasis]

In contrast to Zoom, both the teacher and students identified WhatsApp as an effective tool for developing English language abilities and social connections between members of the LINC class. The teacher stated that the use of digital technologies was a change brought about by the pandemic that she hoped would endure, and she has since been using the group chat to share resources, such as links to educational websites, videos, and audio clips. The students similarly reported that WhatsApp, alongside the resources that shared on the platform (by the teacher and other students), was beneficial to their language learning, a sentiment contrasting with their experience of Zoom classes. Inas explained:

Excerpt 11:

> Yes, so sometimes people put new words, or even the teacher sends new words to learn and then when we just click on it and… we learn a lot of stuff through the sharing of people, together.

Yasmin agreed, further stating that tools like her smartphone and the loaned tablet were her favourite options for practicing literacy:

Excerpt 12:

> I prefer using the iPad. But whatever I use, I practice on paper [as well]. So… whatever I want to practice, I write down on paper to remember. I write notes on the side…. So, basically, I use both.

Yasmin's account of her own learning strategy exemplifies a translingual approach to literacy in which traditional and digital literacy are not oppositional, nor does one necessarily precede the other. Both are components of one's holistic communicative repertoire and can be integrated and learned alongside the other, even at the beginner level. However, despite the success of digital literacy lessons, the teacher was unable to fully incorporate these learnings into the class because of PBLA requirements. When asked if she found the PBLA useful, the teacher responded:

Excerpt 13:

> …No, I don't think so… [the students] have to have 3 to 4 assessments a month… and in order to give them an assessment you have to teach… what is in the assessment, **not necessarily what they would need in the real life** [emphasis added]… and I'm always trying to find the ones that are the most practical and useful in real life situations… But I have to [adhere to the content of the assessments]… because of the PBLA"

While acknowledging the ostensible freedom she had to instruct whatever content she wished, such inclusions are only permitted *in addition to* completing the PBLA assessments. In reality, the labour demands and time constraints of the LINC program and PBLA effectively prohibit supplementary inclusions. The teacher highlighted another complicating factor introduced by the PBLA, explaining:

Excerpt 14:

> In one sense, yes, [the PBLA] brings some discipline to learning, but… I think it makes things more complicated, because in the end it's not just the assessments that they need. It's the assessments **plus the opinion of the teacher if the student is ready** [emphasis added]. So, right now I have some students who have enough assessments… and they *could* progress [original emphasis] but they will not because they are not ready. They're still struggling with the letters and sounds and writing… So, in the end, do we really need the assessments? The teacher knows… if they are ready or not.

There are two critical takeaways from this statement: First, advancing a student relies on the teacher's understanding of the student's capabilities to communicate rather than requisite assessment; and second, the teacher's evaluation reflects (albeit to a limited extent) dialogic assessment principles of translingual pedagogy, which emphasize meaning negotiation over form reproduction (Canagarajah 2011; Campbell and Rosenhan 2023). The focus on PBLA, though, is problematic because laboriously compiling assessments feels pointless, and also distracts students from the wider goal of the class, which is to develop their English language competency. The result is that students focus on collecting assessments rather than critically analyzing their current language abilities and exploring how best to improve with the stated goal of integrating into Canada. The teacher explained:

Excerpt 15:

> I always talk about assessment, but at the end, when they look at me with big eyes I say 'test'… I hate that word [laughs]. But everyone understands 'test'…. And what they understand is 'oh, we need 8 papers', and they want to get those papers because they know they have to get [CLB] level 4 to become Canadian citizens."

The teacher's impression of her students' understanding of the assessments was borne out in our interviews with them: they all described their language learning in terms of the assessments they needed to move to the next level of the LINC program. The teacher believed that the students' focus on assessments showed a failure on their part to understand how to improve their own language abilities, resulting in students attempting to cheat on assessments. Referring to one student who was having difficulty progressing with her literacy abilities, the teacher explained how:

Excerpt 1:

> [The student] will do whatever it *takes* [original emphasis] because they need this [CLB] Level 4. So, she will try to get the answers from her friend… and it's just to have that… another assessment, another assessment. And I know once she has enough assessments, and I will say you're not ready, it will be a big… problem… So yes, having those assessments… sometimes gives them a false security, I think. 'Oh, I have 8 tests, so I can progress', but that's not everything.

In sum, despite the benefits of incorporating digital literacy lessons into the class, the PBLA assessment requirements diminished the degree to which these understandings could be explicitly taught and practiced during class time. Prioritizing form-focused assessments further emphasizes language learning as credential accumulation rather than the development of genuine communicative skills in English and the ability to critically reflect upon them. The teacher had to balance fulfilling PBLA requirements with teaching real-world competencies and helping students understand how to advance in the LINC program.

5 Discussion

DIVERSE*city*'s shift to virtual learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic made English language learning exceptionally difficult for the LINC students endeavouring to integrate into their new community. While unavoidable, this transition was complicated by both limitations in the Zoom platform (which hindered meaningful interactions between students and the teacher) and policies mandating adherence to the monolingual and autonomous literacy standards of the CLB and PBLA. Aligning with previous research on the LINC program (Abdulhamid and Fox 2020; Burgess and Rowsell 2020; Fleming 2015; Haque 2017), our research finds that these frameworks treat language and literacy as tools for socioeconomic mobility by emphasizing credential acquisition rather than dynamic social practices for connection. This approach, especially problematic for print literacy learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, divorces literacy from its social utility and neglects to teach students how literacy practices vary across contexts (Burgess and Rowsell 2020; Currie and Cray 2004; Hanks and Turin 2021), similar to digital literacy. Students are being taught how to read and write, but not how to be *literate* as lessons focus solely on replicating form rather than *creating, communicating, and socializing* through text, despite their demonstrated capacity to do so using WhatsApp.

We argue that this method does not teach students the vital role that literacy can play in creating and fostering connections with others (Miller and Horst 2020), and also fails to cultivate their investment (Norton 2013) in linguistic practices crucial for digitally-mediated interactions. We also assert that the emphasis on PBLA assessments neglects to teach students to critically analyze their own language learning progress. Contributing to scholarship on the linguistic and economic integration of migrants more broadly (Del Percio 2018; Duchêne 2011, 2020; Flubacher et al. 2016; Rydell 2018), our study illustrates how the ideological and the practical limitations of the LINC program hindered its adaptation to virtual learning and newcomer integration.

However, the translingual and digital interactions and practice strategies observed and discussed in this article reveal how, despite the constraints of the CLB and PBLA, the students and teacher readily engaged with translanguaging as a learning strategy and with literacy as a social practice when given the opportunity to do so using WhatsApp, as noted by scholars of translingualism (Canagarajah 2013a, 2013b; Li 2018). One caveat, however, is that the translingualism present within the in-person and digital engagement was uninformed by critical pedagogy, limiting its transformative impact (Garcia and Li 2014; Poza 2017). This is evidenced by the teacher's and students' continued adherence to instrumentalized and monolingual language ideologies.

We assert that integrating translingual, digital literacies into students' daily interactions through digital technologies alongside critical pedagogy could enhance their learning and linguistic agency by enabling them to draw upon their "funds of knowledge" (Hornberger and Link 2012: 271) and become *authors* of English texts (Burgess and Rowsell 2020; Currie and Cray 2004; Lu and Horner 2013). By harnessing the demonstrated capacity of digital technologies to nurture meaningful relationships (Broadbent 2020; Miller and Horst 2020) and create translanguaging spaces through their multimodal capabilities and translation tools (Canagarajah 2013a; Garcia and Li 2014), we consider that the social utility of literacy can be effectively demonstrated as students are taught how to creatively infuse their own languages and identities into the texts they produce. In this way, the students' investment in literacy practices may increase as they learn to communicate using dynamic and real-world literacy abilities afforded by digital technologies.

While the above suggestions are purely theoretical in nature – and obtaining empirical evidence supporting their effectiveness was beyond the scope of the present study – we believe they represent a promising next pathway for LINC teachers to consider implementing to strengthen student outcomes and buttress their classes from unforeseeable disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic.

6 Conclusions

6.1 Limitations

This study is limited by the small sample size of its participants and its relatively short duration, which did not allow for the progression of students' language abilities to be tracked over a longer period of time. Conducting this study during the pandemic was a further limiting factor as social distancing precautions significantly constrained the extent to which we could interact with our interlocuters. At the same time, the pandemic also provided an opportunity to deepen our understanding of

digitally-mediated pedagogies. Despite the high degree of linguistic diversity among the students, only literate, Arabic-speaking students participated in the interview portion of this study. This limited our ability to record interactions in the class and on the WhatsApp group chat due to a lack of informed consent from all students. Our findings regarding the utility of digital technologies may not apply to individuals who have no prior experience of written language or digital communication tools.

6.2 Conclusions

The shift to hybrid learning in our case study of a LINC classroom, brought on by health and safety restrictions, severely limited the opportunities for the students and teacher to interact, socialize, and learn together. The students and teacher primarily reported negative learning experiences of their Zoom lessons, attributed to an inability to effectively communicate with one another on the platform. Our findings indicate that Zoom's technical limitations, in addition to the LINC program's approach to language and literacy, hindered the ability of DIVERSE*city*'s Level 1 LINC students to engage in the collaborative, peer-to-peer, and translingual learning opportunities that characterized the more positive experience of in-person lessons.

And yet, the introduction of digital technologies created an opportunity for digital translanguaging spaces to take shape through mobile devices and WhatsApp. These devices (and the digital translanguaging spaces they fostered) were positively received by students and the teacher alike, facilitating the implementation of more practical digital literacy lessons that engaged the students in real-world, literacy skill building and socialization opportunities. Regrettably, the LINC program's policy constraints – namely the heavy PBLA assessment workload – prevented such lessons from occupying a more meaningful place in the curriculum.

In sum, although translingual practices were present throughout DIVERSE*city*'s in-person and digital learning spaces, and manifested in student study habits, the subversive potential of translingualism (Garcia and Li 2014; Li 2018) failed to catalyze. We argue that this is due to the absence of a critically-oriented pedagogy that goes beyond the monolingual and neoliberal logics that guide the LINC program (Fleming 2015; Haque 2010, 2017). When treated just as a scaffolding strategy for developing CLB English competency, the conditional acceptance of translingual practices is not sufficient to challenge the dominant monolingual and instrumentalist language ideologies structuring the CLB, PBLA, and the LINC program. Additional research exploring the implications of incorporating a supplementary translingual pedagogy using digital technologies into a LINC program would continue the present line of inquiry, and future research could also extend to minority language programs to understand the potential of translingual pedagogy to

support social integration and counteract hegemonic linguistic and neoliberal discourses.

While a fundamental reshaping of LINC policies would be ideal, this is not the only pathway for improving the outcomes of social integration for newcomers to Canada. What is needed most to resist marginalizing discourses is a concerted effort by scholars, language teachers, educational institutions, and community organizations to collaborate and work against them (Kubota 2004; Poza 2017). By organizing alternative learning spaces to sustain community connections within and beyond the classroom, a more impactful level of equitable social transformations can be achieved. None of this will be possible if opportunities for innovation and recalibration, no matter how small, are ignored.

Acknowledgments: We extend our thanks to Elise McClay from Simon Fraser University for her dedication, insights, and support. We also thank the staff, teachers, and students at DIVERSE*city* Community Resources Society for working with us in the planning and implementation of this project.
Research ethics: The study received ethics approval from the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board, certificate No. H21-00918.
Informed consent: Not applicable.
Author contributions (for double- anonymized journals: please use initials): All authors have accepted responsibility for the entire content of this manuscript and approved its submission.
Use of Large Language Models, AI and Machine Learning Tools: None declared.
Conflict of interest: The authors state no conflict of interest.
Research funding: This study was conducted under the auspices of a research partnership grant funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada (No. 895-2020-1004).
Data availability: Not applicable.

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