Plenary Speaker

Critical framing of transversal competences: Promoting intercultural responsibility through cross-language and cross-curricular teacher collaborations

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Abstract

Transversal competences have gained importance in educational programs, particularly with the emphasis on plurilingual approaches in the Common European Framework of Reference. These competences include global citizenship, intercultural communication, and critical thinking. However, many educational statements define these competences narrowly, often reflecting a neoliberal agenda focused on market-oriented education. This paper repositions transversal competences within critical pedagogy and decolonial perspectives, centering language education on students' critical global perspectives and intercultural reflexivity for civic engagement. Drawing on Guilherme's concept of intercultural responsibility, I discuss a collaborative action research study with two Quebec elementary teachers (English and French) to show how their cross-language efforts promoted students' transferable language skills, enhanced students' cultural awareness, and fostered a reflexive disposition to work across differences and embrace collective responsibility in an increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords: Transversal competences; plurilingual pedagogies; collaborative action research; critical literacies; intercultural responsibility; cross-language curricular planning

Résumé

Les compétences transversales ont pris de l'importance dans les programmes éducatifs, surtout avec l'accent sur les approches pédagogiques plurilingues dans le Cadre européen commun de référence. Elles incluent la citoyenneté mondiale, la communication interculturelle et la pensée critique. Cependant, de nombreuses déclarations éducatives définissent ces compétences de manière étroite, souvent en reflétant un programme néolibéral orienté vers le marché. Cet article repositionne les

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compétences transversales dans une pédagogie critique et des perspectives décoloniales, centrant l'enseignement des langues sur les réflexions critiques et interculturelles des étudiants pour un engagement civique. S'inspirant du concept de responsabilité interculturelle de Guilherme, je décris une étude de recherche-action avec deux enseignantes québécoises du primaire (anglais et français), démontrant comment leurs efforts interlinguistiques ont favorisé les compétences linguistiques transférables, renforcé la conscience culturelle des élèves et encouragé une disposition à travailler au-delà des différences dans un monde interconnecté.

Mots-clés : Compétences transversales ; pédagogies plurilingues ; recherche-action collaborative ; littératies critiques ; responsabilité interculturelle ; planification de programmes d'études interlinguistiques

Introduction

In mainstream Canadian classrooms, French and English, be it first or second language (L1 or L2), are often taught in silos and in separation from students' home languages for fear of "interference" (Jacobson & Faltis, 1990). Yet these monolingual approaches do not account for students' competence and knowledges in other languages acquired inside or outside school, hence squandering valuable pluri-lingual/cultural resources. This approach also reproduces hierarchies of language, culture, and worldview, putting minoritized language communities to shame and even in danger of extinction as in the case of Indigenous speakers (Ball & McIvor, 2013; Sterzuk, 2020). Monolingual mindsets and practices also preclude opportunities for more coordinated collaborations between language teachers to support transversal competences and more complex engagements that foster critical global citizenship.

Addressing the conference theme of *Bilingualism and Multilingualism: Transversal Competences, Mobility, and Well-Being*, I focus on what transversal competences mean and how language education can promote these core competences. Transversal competences have become a key focus in transnational educational reforms often as a vehicle to advance the neoliberal agenda of cultivating cross-cultural sensitivity and competences for trade negotiations, strategic networking, and alignment with the clientele. In this article, however, I reframe transversal competences within the lenses of critical pedagogy and decolonial perspectives, which calls for epistemic diversity and plurality to disrupt monolingualism, monoliteracy, and monoculturalism. Challenging hierarchies of knowledge and universal truths, transversal competences articulated here aim to foster border-crossing knowledges, compassion, and empathy to support intercultural responsibility (Guilherme, 2021). Elaborating on a collaborative action research study with

two Quebec elementary teachers (English L1 and French L2), I discuss how the teachers' cross-language and cross-curricular efforts were put together to engage students in critical inquiry of the issues related to children's rights while promoting transferable language strategies and critical cultural awareness. Through vignettes from the studies, I aim to showcase how critical global perspectives and intercultural reflexivity could be promoted in language classrooms for students' civic engagement in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world.

Colonial roots of applied linguistics and second language learning

Language is always political. And it becomes problematic when we try to ignore these political and sociocultural aspects in language teaching and learning. As Pennycook (2022) argues, the enduring problem with applied linguistics is "the colonial roots of linguistics, and the separation of language from all that it is part of: bodies, lives, stories, histories, articulations of the past, the present and the future" (p. 3). When educators and researchers treat language as if it were stand-alone, autonomous processes that are separated from the people, the land, and the place where the cultures and histories of communications and relationships take place, we are teaching and learning discrete language parts abstracted from its whole and ignoring the social purposes, indexicalities, and consequences that language can have on the people and situations involved.

I remember at university when I started learning French, my first class was about self-introduction, sharing our basic personal information, including our name, age, nationality, and job. As we proceeded to the second unit, in the textbook there was an illustration of people chatting during a *cinq à sept*, and one person asks his friend, "*Toujours célibataire?*". Our teacher then explained the meaning of *célibataire* and went on to introduce other marriage-related words, such as *marié(e)*, *divorcé(e)*, *veuf(ve)*, etc. Attempting to recreate a near-authentic communicative task, the teacher then asked us to incorporate these words in our self-introduction. And we did, compliantly, thinking naively that was the francophone cultural practice of sharing openly their marital status (note that this took place in 1980s pre-internet Hong Kong). Looking back, I realized that these marriage-related words used in a context of first encounter could communicate a message and create an undesirable positionality or identity that we might not intend (e.g., being flirtatious, inviting sexual advances, etc.). No doubt, communicative tasks help promote "authentic" language use, but often the primary focus on *meaning* (Ellis, 2009) is narrowly defined. What was missing from this lesson was discussions about the cultural practices of self-introductions and how the inclusion of one's marital status (or not) is a socially acceptable or customary practice,

and how adopting (or not) such a practice would construct certain identity or positionality for individuals. Another example of treating language as merely abstracted rules was from an observation I had of a post-secondary ESL class where the instructor was teaching the use of stative verbs (i.e., verbs showing mental or emotional states such as *like*, *love*, *understand*, *believe*, etc.). While stative verbs are seldom used in a progressive form, when they are used, the goal is often to accentuate emotional intensity. A case in point would be the famous slogan used by McDonald's — "I'm lovin' it". However, the teacher, rather than explaining the pragmatic use of the form, told the class that this slogan was a perfect case of bad grammar and warned her students of never using a stative verb such as *love* in the *-ing* form. After the class, she divulged to me that she knew very well that stative verbs could be used in progressive form particularly for emphasis. However, she explained, "If I tell my students they can use it this way, they will get all mixed up. I just like to control them, so that they don't make mistakes." My heart sunk as I heard those words. While I reckoned her good intention, her practice of separating language *learning* from language *use* just for control and policing was problematic.

Unfortunately, these two stories are not anomalies but rather enduring practice of decontextualized language teaching prevalent in most bilingual or second/foreign language classrooms. When prescriptive language accuracy is erroneously equated with language learning, we deprive our students of the opportunity to learn and use the language for inquiry and for its real sociocultural purposes. In both cases, the two teachers failed to anchor language learning in situated use, arbitrarily putting structures above language in use and ignoring the need for sociolinguistic and intercultural awareness for real communication purposes. My personal experience of colonial English education in Hong Kong left me believing that learning a language is to master an idealized language standard, which was of course tied to work and study opportunities. How the language is used in real sociolinguistic contexts was never a concern in the curriculum. This has re/produced a deferential attitude in me and among learners towards the language, feeding an "inner critic" (Miller, 2018) who often stops ourselves from trusting our own experience and thoughts. Many learned to speak and write in ways that are safe, to avoid making mistakes rather than to communicate. The language is more often than not used as a tool to write exams, rather than a tool for inquiry and critique, to think things through, and to wrestle with our ideas. Without a meaningful communicative context for real social use, learners often resort to parroting, memorizing, and mimicking the authoritative ways of speaking, doing, and writing, mostly as an academic or professional exercise for exams and job interviews.

While these pragmatic goals are important and essential for the material

lives of language learners, as Motha (2020) argues, if all our energies are spent on helping our students to acquire the language standards without attending to the broader social, political and economic factors that produce and govern language ideologies, hierarchies, and standards, we are complicit with colonial practices of silencing and oppressing plural voices and local knowledges and experiences. As I became an ESL teacher and later an educator, I kept asking myself: how do I teach a second/foreign language in ways that can promote students' learning and access to the prestigious forms while also engaging them in inquiry about social issues that matter to them, including the dominance of imperial languages? In other words, how do I promote their language learning in meaningful ways that it becomes alive with real social purposes? (Lau, 2019). How do we strike a tenuous balance between access and critique (Janks, 2010)? I bear these questions in mind as I consider what transversal competences mean in language classrooms.

What are transversal competences?

Significant focus has been given to transversal competences[1] in many educational policy reforms and statements in the past decade. A number of global organizations such as United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the European Commission, among others, have launched research into key competences deemed essential for twenty-first century success in education and training. These transversal competences are often defined as core qualities, skills, values, and attitudes that allow individuals to adapt to the changing demands and opportunities in today's new sociocultural, economic and technological realities (Devika et al., 2020). Transversal competences, though named or categorized differently by different organizations, are transversal in the sense that they are relevant across the spectrum of all subject disciplines (European Centre for Modern Languages, 2021) and can be readily transferred to any context, including occupational sectors and civic or community engagement (Hart et al., 2021) so that individuals can continue to learn, reflect, and act on new possibilities and challenges in their study and work as well as public and private life. For example, UNESCO's (2015, p. 5) "Transversal Competencies in Education Policy and Practice" propose these six transversal competences:

1. global citizenship: awareness, openness and responsibility for diversity, intercultural understanding, etc.;

[1]The word "competences" and "competencies" are used interchangeably in most educational documents (European Centre for Modern Languages, 2021).

2. intra-personal skills: ability to adapt changes and persevere, self-awareness, learn independently, etc.;
3. inter-personal skills: communication skills, collaboration, empathy, compassion, etc.;
4. critical and innovative thinking: creativity, resourcefulness, reflective thinking, etc.;
5. media and information literacy: communicate through ICT, use media to participate in democratic processes, evaluate media content, etc.; and
6. physical and psychological health: healthy life style, physical fitness, self-respect, etc.

These transversal competences are very similar to those outlined by the European Centre for Modern Languages (2021), and many of the related values, knowledge, skills, and attitudes are implicitly and explicitly pertinent to language education. First, language learning is fundamental to inter-personal skills — how we communicate and establish relationships with others in both physical and virtual spaces. In view of this, language is inseparable from media and digital literacies as an ensemble of linguistic and other semiotic resources (audiovisual, spatial, gestural, etc.) required for reading, analyzing, and evaluating content and messages (García et al., 2009; Meyer et al., 2015). Second, in bilingual or second/foreign language contexts, learners need plurilingual competences and intercultural awareness to be able to engage in cross-language and cross-cultural exchanges and develop positive and respectful relationships with people from other linguistic/cultural backgrounds. Language learning is hence inextricably connected to the promotion of intercultural understanding, respectful dialogue, and collaborative and collective responsibility for the interconnected world. Third, language competences are recognized as "an integral part of subject competence" (Council of Europe, 2018). It is important to understand how language is used in specific disciplines across cultural and language communities in order that learners can follow the content and communicate with others about their learning (Coyle & Meyer, 2021).

Transversal competences undoubtedly articulate some core essential educational goals. However, many related documents such as those issued by the OECD and the European Commission (e.g., Hart et al., 2021; OECD, 2014), transversal competences tend to be conceptualised and imagined as tools in service of economic advancement (Kallo, 2021). In the 2014 *OECD* "Competency Framework," for instance, cross-cultural sensitivity is represented as client-focused communication and diplomatic skills for negotiation and influencing. Its most recent framework, "Learning Compass

2030" (OECD, 2019), does articulate a broader vision of the types of competencies students need to have for both individual and collective well-being, including key areas drawn from the "Sustainable Development Goals" outlined by the United Nations (2015), such as reducing inequalities, eradicating poverty and hunger, ensuring quality education and gender equality and calling for action on climate, change and peace, justice and strong institution, among others. However, as Hughson and Wood (2022) argue, while the "Learning Compass" offers an exciting possibility, like previous OECD documents, it continues to be governed by instrumentalist discourses and defines disciplinary knowledge in restrictive ways, exclusively as something which has "an immediate and practical value in a marketized world" (p. 634). The question remains how language educators and researchers can reorientate language educational goals towards equity and empathy, compassionate civic engagement, care for the environment, and not merely for economic advancement and productivity.

Toward a critical framing of transversal competences

To prepare students for responsive and responsible global citizenship, transversal competences in language education should shift away from purposes largely defined by their market value to those that foster critical literacies and intercultural reflexivity to enable our students to navigate the multilingual and multicultural complexities in today's world. The prevailing trans/plural turn in applied linguistics (Hawkins & Mori, 2018) opens up spaces and possibilities for such dialogic knowledge exchange and intercultural understanding. Apart from destabilizing fixed language boundaries and borders, translanguaging (García & Li Wei, 2014) and plurilingual pedagogies (Marshall & Moore, 2018), for example, both call attention to inter/trans-cultural awareness and position language speakers as cross-linguistic/cultural mediators. Plurilingualism, for instance, views "language as in action" in real social situations involving language production for self-expression, social interaction, and importantly, mediation to bridge barriers for communication, whether cognitive, relational or crosslinguistic/cultural (Piccardo et al., 2019). Notably, Byram reminds us that within the purview of plurilingualism, despite its emphasis on individuals as "social actors" (Council of Europe, 2001) who mobilize plurilingual and pluricultural resources to construct meaning and take part in intercultural communication, social agency does not necessarily imply critical engagement. Critical engagement involves critique of both social and political practices to strive for a more equitable and just society. Critical scholars also argue that interlinguistic/cultural awareness alone does not necessarily disrupt unequal statuses that exist among different languages. Often teachers promoting

plurilingual and intercultural awareness might not engage students with discussions about "histories of oppression and social inequalities that produce the minoritized status of both regional minorities, including autochthonous and [I]ndigenous peoples, and especially immigrants" (García, 2017, p. 268). Treating languages as if they were "neutral" and have equal status reflects a "liberal egalitarian perspective" (Pennycook, 2022, p. 7) that ignores existing prevalent discrimination against minoritized languages and communities. Therefore, promoting students' language awareness or respect for linguistic diversity must go hand-in-hand with sensitization towards the unequal relations of power inherent in language status, ideologies, practices, and policies.

In response to the need for critical engagement, Guilherme (2021) puts forward the notion of *intercultural responsibility* to highlight the knowledge, skills and values (*savoirs*, *savoir faire* / *comprendre* / *apprendre*, and *savoir être*) for intercultural awareness and respect (Deardorff, 2009; Rawal & Deardorff, 2021), and more importantly, critical collaboration and respectful dialogues across cultures and worldviews, aiming to nurture collective responsibility for a sustainable world. Intercultural responsibility is built on previous works on intercultural competence that embrace a more reflexive and critical component, particularly Byram's work on "critical cultural awareness" (*savoir s'engager*) (1997, 2012). Drawing on Fairclough's critical language awareness and critical discourse analysis (1992, 1995), Byram defines critical cultural awareness as the "ability to evaluate critically … perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (1997, p. 53). This disrupts an ethnocentric focus solely on "understanding otherness" to include critical understanding of oneself and interrogating one's own worldviews (Byram, 2014, p. 213). It echoes the notion of *transculturación* (García & Li Wei, 2014) which aspires to the encounter of different "linguistic consciousnesses" (Bakhtin, 1981) to decolonise linguicism, language ownerships and standards, and all the ideologies and practices related to linguistic imperialism (Pennycook, 2022). The language-culture nexus in language, be it first, second or foreign, hence highlights the need to learn a language not merely as a *code* but to also acquire critical knowledge of the cultural significance of its usage and what it means to individuals.

Going back to the example described earlier about marriage-related French words (e.g., *célibataire*, *marié[e]*, *divorcé[e]*), to learn to use these words should involve not only learning to pronounce or memorise the meaning and spelling of the words but also a critical knowledge of how these words translate and function differently or similarly across cultures. Learners also should be equipped with the knowledge of how certain word or grammar usage might create various social positions for them as speakers and for

their interlocutor(s), considering the diverse intersecting cultural positions or identities each embodies (including gender, class, religious faith, ethnicity, sexual orientation, among others). The ultimate goal is for learners to understand critically how language is used in various cultures to empower or marginalise certain social groups, ideas and perspectives, and how we might use it to enact equitable change. Importantly, this also shifts the goal of target language learning from emulating the *native-speaker model* (the so-called "standard" language and accent) to becoming an *intercultural speaker*, a go-between for people situated in two different language communities (Byram & Wagner, 2018). Bilingual or second/foreign language learning thus entails a crucial component to decenter students' ethnocentric worldviews and assumptions, to come to question and reflect how we see ourselves and the world as well as how others see us and the world (Wagner et al., 2018).

Guilherme's intercultural responsibility (2021) is built on critical notions of language and cultural awareness within the framings of critical pedagogy and decolonial perspectives from the global South (e.g., Freire, 1998; Mignolo, 2007; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Southern perspectives represent a metaphorical geographical reference to epistemologies that have been subjugated and rendered irrelevant and invisible due to the "pretended universality" of the knowledge and worldviews imposed by European colonialism (Antia & Makoni, 2022; Heugh et al., 2021; Windle et al., 2023). The articulation of the core decolonial ethos demands a "thinking Otherwise" (Mignolo, 2000; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) to disrupt the sociopolitical and epistemological dominance of the global North and to foreground and reclaim legitimacy and importance of pluri-versality of languages, cultures, and epistemic systems. The focus of trans/plurilingual approaches should hence go beyond language-culture diversity or hybridization to underscore "critical inter-epistemic and decolonial dialogue" (Guilherme, 2021, p. 608) to seek collaborative and collective efforts for social and cognitive justice. It should prioritize pluri-versality and inter-epistemic ways of thinking, being, acting and relating. Through contact with other languages and cultures, students learn to reflect on how their own and others' positions or ideas are shaped by socio-cultural and political conditions and feel others' feelings through placing themselves imaginatively in others' shoes, while engaging in critical evaluation and interrogation of differences. It promotes humility in recognizing the limitations of one's own knowledge and culture and appreciating other's cultural strengths (Porto & Byram, 2022). Therefore, centering language education within the critical framing of intercultural responsibility, teachers and educators need to transcend its prevalent "linguistic-system orientation" (which prioritizes structural accuracy and standards, just as the two examples shared earlier) to one that encompasses an equity-focused citizenship and

intercultural education.

Promoting transversal competences through critical trans/plurilingual approaches

Elaborating on a research study with two English and French elementary teachers, I aim to showcase how their cross-language and cross-curricular collaborations defied language compartmentalization and mobilized students' full communicative repertoires to foster transversal competences for critical literacy and intercultural responsibility. I adopted collaborative action research as a participative-based research methodology and epistemology that disrupt positive scientism in prevailing research culture and to recover people's knowledge through a participatory and sustainable capacity-building process that meet community's situated needs (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). I worked with teachers closely to engage ourselves in collaborations across curricular, linguistic, disciplinary, and institutional boundaries. Through cycles of strategic planning, action, evaluation, and critical reflection, we found creative solutions to address concerns in the immediate context (Kemmis, 2010). Our monthly Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings provided co-learning spaces where we read and discussed literature about trans/plurilingual pedagogies while iteratively analyzing ongoing data from class observations, student interviews, and work samples. Our living inquiry through ongoing personal and collective reflections inform our co-development of the emerging curriculum and instruction. More importantly, through the PLC we built relationships and shared experiences and stories of our personal and professional lives. It is in this context of human relationships and a caring learning community that we mutually contributed to creating a change-enhancing teaching and learning environment to promote intercultural responsibility among the students (Maguire, 2006).

The children's rights project

Working with two elementary teachers, the Children's Rights project explored how conceptual and linguistic coherence could be strengthened in the English Language Arts (ELA) and French second language (FSL) curricula, promoting students' critical biliteracies and agency for social change. Our collaboration later evolved into a multi-year project, anchoring language learning in social justice related issues, engaging children in inquiry about their ethical responsibility toward their community and broader society. In our first-year collaboration, the ELA and FSL teachers shared two Grade 3 classes and taught their corresponding subject to their own and their partner's classes. In Years 2 to 4, the teachers got approval to create a Grade 4–6 multi-age classroom whereby both teachers were present at all times but leading and/or sharing

the teaching of different subjects in the two languages (e.g., ELA, Math and Science and Technology in English while FSL, Social Studies and Arts in French). The co-presence of both teachers also allowed the use of English and French in a more strategic and systematic way. We mainly adopted the use of *coordinated translanguaging pedagogy* (Pontier & Gort, 2016), meaning the two teachers engaged the children in interconnected language learning activities while providing the respective language models when reading or discussing texts in either English or French. In this way, we ensure children would have ample exposure to the target language models while feeling less pressure for monolingual use knowing that they could code-switch when needed to support for the meaning-driven discussion or writing tasks. As the project progressed, the team also learned to differentiate when to accommodate and when to push for students' risk-taking in target language use, taking into consideration individual differences in their readiness of language production as well as the nature of the task at hand (see Lau, 2015 for study in Year 1; see Lau, 2020; Lau et al., 2017 for Years 2-4). In general, most student participants were English-dominant with a small proportion of French-dominant students. Depending on the year, the percentage might vary, but close to half of the students had either parent or both parents speaking both languages at home. Through a year-long social justice related theme, both teachers worked together to engage in interdisciplinary curricular design, creating and making linguistic and conceptual links whenever appropriate while ensuring alignment with subject-specific requirements.

This article focuses on the first-year project with the theme on children's rights, aiming to support students' understanding of universal children's rights and why they were not equally respected around the world. Students also explored ways to protect these rights and reach out to children beyond their community whose rights were threatened. To elicit students' interest, the year started with an invited talk in French by a former college instructor who set up a foundation to provide education for former child soldiers in Uganda. Then we had a university student who spoke in English about her volunteer work in western Thailand, near the border with Myanmar, giving ESL lessons to Burmese children with refugee backgrounds. I was then involved in this community project, training university volunteers about intercultural sensitivity and preparing them for culturally and linguistically appropriate teaching approaches. Both talks provided a broader picture of children who were under precarious circumstances and were deprived of formal education due to war and political instability in their home countries. The children wrote a journal entry after each talk about their learning and questions in either English or French depending on which language lesson they had following the talks.

Children's Rights Convention

After these introductory talks were a series of activities aimed to support students' understanding of the Children's' Rights Convention (United Nations International Emergency Children's Fund [UNICEF] Canada, 2009). We started with simpler concepts in the FSL class, for example, getting the children to differentiate between needs, rights, and wants while learning related vocabulary and grammar. This included the use of *articles définis* (*la*, *le*, *les*), *articles indéfinis* (*un*, *une*, *des*), and *les accords en genre et numbre* (e.g., *de l'air propre*, *de l'opportunité pour partager nos opinions*, *des soins de santé*, *l'éducation*, *des terrains de jeux et de récréation*, *un téléviseur*, *un ordinateur personnel*, etc.). Using these newly taught vocabulary and grammatical structures, students discussed what basic rights and needs were and how they differed from wants. Then in the ELA class, students started reading the children's rights articles. To facilitate deep comprehension, students were given daily life scenarios to debate whether they were fair or unfair according to the different articles of children's rights. Here are two examples of the scenarios:

- My brothers go to the local school, but I am the only daughter. My family needs me to help out with work in our home, so I cannot go to school. I am 7 years old.
- I am 13 years old, and my country has been fighting over a boundary with another country for three years. A captain from the army came to my home to tell me that because I am big and strong, I should join the army and fight for my country.

Engaging in meaning-driven discussions, the children were asked to focus on their critical analysis of the scenarios and justifications of their opinions about fairness, all supporting their deep understanding of what rights meant in a democratic society. Their reading of the first 42 children's rights articles were done bilingually — the first half was read in the English class and the other half in French. The children then illustrated one article that spoke to them personally (Figures 1a and 1b) in either French or English, and together they created a big children's rights quilt (Figure 1c) on the bulletin board in the corridor, which drew many teachers' and children's attention and started many conversations on the topic.

Further, to promote the children's analytic skills, the teachers created a concept formation task, adapted from the UNICEF handbook. Each child was given a card with a rights article written either in English or French. The task was for them to talk to each other and then form themselves into groups each representing a particular category of children's rights (Figure 2). An easier

(a) *A student's illustration for Article 12 in French*

(b) *A student's illustration for Article 32 in English*

(c) *Bilingual Children's Rights Quilt displayed outside the classroom*

Figure 1

way, but cognitively unchallenging, would be to just tell the children how the children's rights were categorised into three main groups: 1) provision rights, 2) protection rights, and 3) participation rights. This would have deprived the children of using the two languages to negotiate meaning and think critically about the rights. The teachers instead created a bilingual concept formation task whereby the children had to support each other's understanding in both languages and collaborate to create conceptual links among the different rights. In the end, the children came up with these categories: *protection*, *education*, *family*, and *la vie* (which included the right to opinions, play and rest, and privacy, etc.). Each group had to defend their decision and through the collaborative sense-making process, the children gained a deeper knowledge of how these rights were distinct but also inter-connected with each other.

Figure 2
Children discussing their rights in both languages

Children's literature and pen-pal exchange

While working on the rights convention, the teachers also read narrative and information-based texts with the children to understand rights-related issues faced by children in different socio-economic and political situations. For example, we read *Beatrice's goat* (McBrier, 2001) in English, which is based on a true story of Beatrice, a Ugandan girl who because of a gift of a goat through Heifer Project International was able to go to school. The children also read *If the world were a village* (Smith, 2011), which invites readers to imagine the whole world of 7 billion people as a village of just 100 people and provides proportionate statistics on languages spoken, religions practiced, money and possession, and other information on food, health, energy consumption and so on. Through a bilingual jigsaw activity, children in their home groups gleaned information from the assigned pages, in either English or French, which they then shared and discussed in the expert groups. The book allowed the children to become more world-minded, realizing their privileges while discovering inequitable distribution of wealth and resources around the world. The discussions also fostered an understanding that our rights also come with responsibilities, for example, the right to practice one's culture or share opinions entails our responsibilities to respect other cultures and express our opinions in ways that do not harm other people's rights.

Through the community project with the refugee/migrant schools in western Thailand (mentioned earlier), we created pen pal exchange among the children on both sites. We encouraged them to write letters in both their home/strong language and a second language they were learning at school (i.e., mostly in Burmese and in English for the children in Thailand, and English and French for those in Quebec). When the Canadian children received the first letter, they were amazed and intrigued by the beautiful round, curly scripts of

Burmese and tried to look for the corresponding meaning of individual words by comparing them to the English version of the letter. The bilingual letter correspondence not only raised the children's curiosity to other languages but also strengthened their confidence and pride in learning and writing in French, knowing that children in other parts of the world were also learning additional languages (Figures 3a and 3b).

Figure 3

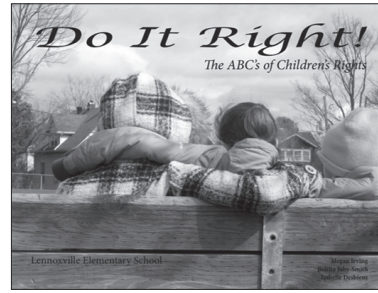
Students reading their pen-pal's bilingual letters (English & Burmese), curious about their lives, cultures, and bi/multilingualism

In the class discussions, the third graders also revealed some of their assumptions about people who were displaced. Most of the children had fixed notions of refugees and expected to read about their harrowing experiences of displacement, family loss or separation, and stark poverty. However, many of their Burmese pen pals shared their hobbies, interests and dreams and ordinary things about their family and activities. Confounded, one student asked:

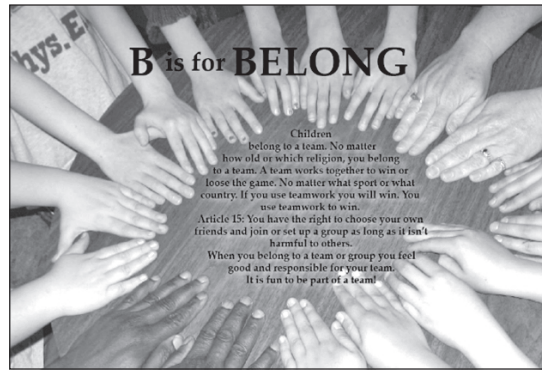
> Aren't their parents killed? How do they get to know about them? Cause my pen pal said that his dad is an engineer. (Class recording)

This reflected the children's preconceptions of who refugees were, defining them strictly by what they might have lost while discounting their ordinary life as individuals with families. The teachers grasped this opportunity to discuss stereotyping images of refugees and inviting consideration of possible diverse and unique circumstances to which different families might be subject. The letter exchange opened doors for the children to reflect on their cross-cultural encounters and examine hidden assumptions about other communities.

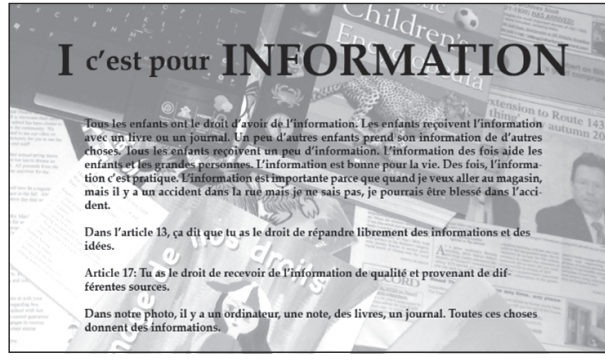
The children's bilingual reading, writing and discussions all prepared them for the final culminating project — the creation of a bilingual book, *Do it right! The ABC's of children's rights* (Irving et al., 2013) (Figure 4a). It is an abecedary of children's rights, with each letter illustrated by a photographic image, accompanied by a short paragraph describing the children's reflections and understanding of the word (Figures 4b and 4c).



(a)



(b)



(c)

Figure 4
Do it right! The ABC's of children's rights
Book cover (a), pages for letters B (b) and I (c)
(Irving et al., 2013)

The trans-systemic ways of meaning making utilized students entire linguistic and other semiotic repertoires to create meaning and identities of change agents. Interestingly, for letter O, the class decided to go with *Opportunity*, which was resulted from their discussions about the interconnections between *rights* and *responsibility*, as the students wrote on that page: "Opportunity means you have a chance to do something you want to do but it comes with responsibility" (Irving et al., 2013, p. 16). The class discussions had supported their understanding that rights and responsibilities are two sides of the same coin, sensitizing them to the fact that the privilege to enjoy certain rights also comes with the ethical responsibility to ensure respect and equity. At the end of the school year, the teachers organised a book launch, inviting students, administration, parents and the local community for a book signing event. The children also put on a show where they performed bilingual dramatic skits to represent different children's rights.

Discussion and conclusion

The ELA and FSL teachers' cross-language/curricular collaborations supported the children's year-long inquiry into the children's rights, deepening their understanding of what these rights meant to them and why children in certain parts of the world do not equally enjoy these rights due to war, political instability, and poverty, among others. Recognizing their own privilege, they understood the need to assume responsibility to ensure these rights are respected and that more equitable distribution of resources and wealth is key to rectifying these rights violations. Based on interview and class observation data as well as the teachers' reflections, the children responded well to the project: Not only did they see themselves as ambassadors for other children but also as agents of change who were called upon to help educate other people on children's rights issues. One child in the program-end interview divulged to the research team that he "detested writing" in French before because he "didn't know what to write about", and his previous FSL teacher's insistence on French only in the classroom also made him "scared of making mistakes". The co-ordinated translanguaging (Pontier & Gort, 2016) approach had allowed him and other children to mobilize all their knowledge and skills in both languages to concentrate their effort on making meaning, which also helped abate their fear in making mistakes had the class been focusing solely on accuracy or standard pronunciation. The issue-focused inquiry hence invited risk-taking among the children as they knew they did not have to be perfect in the language before using it. Making mistakes was normalised and students' confidence and willingness to actually write and speak with purpose had also been boosted. As the ELA teacher said in an interview, it was not like the children wrote and then the writing was put away for no real purpose except

for a mark in their report card. Language learning, she continued, is "for the children's development; it's life." This was echoed by the FSL teacher who underscored the need to bring languages together — despite learning in two different languages, "we're learning about the same thing." Engaging the children in a common theme supported interconnected ways of knowing and thinking about the same issue and the languages were put to use in meaningful ways. In the process, the children got to encounter other languages and cultures through talks by speakers in global humanitarian work, reading related narrative and information-based texts as well as the pen pal exchange. Their world-mindedness was expanded and some assumptions about certain cultures and social groups were challenged. They came to understand what children's rights meant to them and to other people, as well as their own ethical responsibility (Guilherme, 2021) to reach out to the less privileged, and take actions to ensure equitable distribution of resources. Both teachers understood critical language learning should never be a one-off but rather ongoing effort of all teachers. Instead of aiming for some grand-scale transformation, the most important thing for them was that the inquiry had touched the children's heart, creating an affective opening for further change possibilities (Benesch, 2012).

The project described here reflects a reframing of transversal competences using the lenses of critical pedagogy and decolonial perspectives. Transversal competences, touted as essential competences for study and work in the twenty-first century, are often narrowly defined and promoted based on their marketable and marketized value. No doubt respect and openness to diversity, communication skills, collaboration, critical and innovative thinking, and digital literacy are all important. Yet critical literacy or ethical responsibility is not quantifiable; changing hearts and minds involves complex processes that cannot be adequately captured in report cards. The prevailing focus on decontextualized linguistic structures in most language classrooms needs to be shifted to a sociolinguistic and sociopolitical focus of its significance in the real world. Language has to be taught, learned and used as a tool for learning and inquiry, or else it remains an academic exercise. Reiterating Pennycook's (2022) words, the colonial practice of separating "language from all that it is part of: bodies, lives, stories, histories, articulations of the past, the present and the future" (p. 3) will result in learners' memorization and mimicking of the idealized language standards. The focus of bilingual and second/foreign language education should be recentered on the development of *intercultural speakers* (Byram & Wagner, 2018), rather than the replication of native-speakers, who, through learning other people's language, disrupt their ethnocentric perspectives and develop inter-knowledge to build relationships and reciprocity to collectively embrace ethical responsibility to generate and sustain personal, social, and environmental well-being.

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