
**TEACHING MIGRATION, DRAWING BELONGING: INCLUSIVE
ESL PEDAGOGY THROUGH STUDENT- CREATED POSTERS**

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DOI: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijarp.8946>**ABSTRACT**

This study examines how a poster-based, multimodal ESL activity on migration promotes students' sense of belonging and inclusion in a post-secondary ESL classroom. Conducted at an institution providing English as a Second Language (ESL) education to international students in Toronto, Canada, the study involved 20 multilingual learners who are originally from Asia and South America. Against the backdrop of the global migration crisis, students engaged in guided discussions on migration and were subsequently invited to create posters representing their understandings, experiences, and reflections on the topic. Positioned within the scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) framework, the classroom-based inquiry adopts a qualitative approach, using student-created posters as primary data sources. The posters were analyzed to investigate how students visually and textually expressed themes of migration, identity, borders, displacement, and belonging. The use of multimodal pedagogy allowed students to participate meaningfully regardless of different linguistic proficiencies, thereby supporting equitable engagement and valuing diverse forms of knowledge-making. Findings suggest that poster creation functioned as an inclusive pedagogical practice by centering student voice, validating lived experiences, and fostering a classroom environment where learners felt seen and included. The activity also enabled students to connect language learning with critical global issues, contributing to deeper engagement and reflective learning. This study demonstrates how teaching migration through multimodal, student-centered activities can promote belonging in ESL classrooms and offers practical insight for educators seeking to advance equity, diversity, and inclusion in post-secondary language education.

KEYWORDS: Critical Pedagogy, ESL education, Migration, Multi- Modal Pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

Migration defines contemporary global life, directly shaping the demographics of Canadian post- secondary classrooms, where English as a Second Language (ESL) learners navigate new academic and social landscapes (Piquet & Lawlor, 2022). Despite students' lived experiences with migration, the topic is usually sidelined in language curricula, missing a critical opportunity to connect learning with reality. This neglect is problematic, as studies indicate prevalent negative attitudes toward migrants in Canada, often rooted in perceptions of economic or cultural threat (Harell et al., 2012; Pruyers, 2020). Consequently, ESL classrooms must become sites not only for language acquisition but also for fostering inclusive communities where students feel a sense of belonging—a state achieved when students' identities and experiences are valued as assets rather than obstacles (Moriña, 2017). This study argues that multimodal pedagogy, which legitimizes expression beyond linguistic accuracy, offers a pathway to such inclusion (Li, 2020). Grounded in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), this classroom-based inquiry investigates how a poster-based multimodal activity on migration can cultivate belonging. It explores how leveraging visual and textual modes allows multilingual learners to engage equitably with this complex theme, centering their voices and validating their knowledge in the academic space.

Migration and the ESL classroom

Migration is a decisive feature of contemporary global life, shaping societies, institutions, and classrooms across the world. In Canadian post- secondary education, ESL classrooms are often composed of students whose lives are directly shaped by migration, whether through international study, forced displacement, or transnational mobility. Despite this reality, migration is frequently.

Treated as a peripheral topic in language education, rather than as a meaningful context for learning. Addressing migration in ESL classrooms offers an opportunity to connect language learning with students' lived realities, while also engaging them in critical reflection on global social issues. Felten (2013) suggests that in SoTL, “not only disciplinary knowledge or skill development, but also the cultivation of attitudes or habits that connect to learning” are important. It is understood that discussing migratory issues in the ESL classroom is important, as derogatory attitudes towards migrants are developing in Canada. According to a study conducted by Piquet and Lawlor (2022) “ Canadian citizens tend to overestimate the number

of immigrants in their countries and that overestimation is associated with negative feelings about immigration” (p. 831). According to Harell et al. (2012), one of the reasons for the negative attitudes towards migrants is the concept of “threat”. The concept of threat “ can be (a) economic, that is, taking away jobs from natives or being an economic drain on the welfare system, or (b) cultural, that is, culturally, religiously or ethically distinct groups that threaten the identity of the dominant group (p.501). According to Pruyers (2020), who has conducted a study of the attitudes towards Canadian immigrants, posits that there are other individual- level reasons for this resistance, and one of them is being on the right of the political spectrum.

Inclusive Education, Belonging, and Language Learning

Inclusive education extends beyond access to learning and encompasses students’ sense of belonging, recognition, and participation within educational spaces. Inclusive education focuses on the need to provide a high-quality educational response for all students, increasing the practices that lead to full participation (Ainscow 2015; Messiou et al. 2016). Further, it aims to improve the learning and active participation of all the students in a common educational context (Moriña,2017, p.3). For multilingual learners, feelings of marginalization may arise from linguistic barriers, cultural differences, or deficit- oriented views of language proficiency. Research in inclusive pedagogy emphasizes the significance of creating learning environments where students’ identities and experiences are valued and accepted as resources rather than obstacles. A study conducted by Pablo (2025) illustrates how transnational, multilingual youths returning to Mexico encounter persistent discrimination within an education system structured around monolingual and monocultural expectations, revealing how such exclusionary practices marginalize their identities and limit their participation. By foregrounding the voices of these learners, the study calls for inclusive, socially just pedagogical approaches that move beyond deficit labeling and recognize transnational students’ linguistic and cultural resources as assets rather than threats. In ESL contexts, fostering belonging is particularly important, as language classrooms often serve as primary spaces where international students negotiate identity, voice, and participation in new social and academic settings.

Multimodal Pedagogy as Inclusive Practice

Multimodal pedagogy recognizes that meaning- making occurs through multiple modes, including visual, textual, and symbolic forms, rather than language alone. In ESL classrooms,

multimodal activities can reduce reliance on linguistic accuracy and provide alternative pathways for participation, particularly for students at varying proficiency levels. Despite the fact that many teachers are unprepared for multimodal pedagogy (Ajayi, 2010; Coyle, Yanez, & Verdu, 2010; Farias & Veliz, 2019), many studies underscore that ESL students develop multiliteracy skills, negotiate their identities, and reinforce learning motivation and autonomy through multimodal practices. Visual tasks such as poster creation allow learners to express complex ideas, emotions, and experiences that may be difficult to articulate solely through written or spoken English. Li's (2020) study emphasizes the idea that “ multimodal project, as an important form of formative assessment, greatly engages learning (p.12) and challenges the idea that “paper-based forms are more rigorous and legitimate forms of assessment” (p. 12). As an inclusive practice, multimodal pedagogy supports equity by expanding what counts as legitimate knowledge and expression in the classroom.

A SoTL Approach to Teaching Migration

Situated within the scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), this study adopts a classroom- based inquiry approach that systematically examines teaching practices to enhance student learning. SoTL emphasizes reflective, evidence- informed pedagogical experimentation grounded in specific disciplinary contexts. By teaching migration through a poster- based activity, this study explores how inclusive pedagogical strategies function in practice and how students engage with complex social themes in ESL learning environments. Student- created posters serve not only as learning artifacts but also as valuable data sources that reveal students' understandings and experiences.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how a poster- based, multimodal ESL activity on migration fosters students' sense of belonging and inclusion in a post- secondary ESL classroom in Toronto, Canada. Based on the question, how does a poster-based, multimodal ESL activity on migration foster students' sense of belonging and inclusion in a post-secondary ESL classroom?, this paper uses student- created posters as primary data sources. The study explores how multilingual learners visually and textually represent migration and belonging during a time of global migration crisis. By highlighting an inclusive, student-centered pedagogical practice, this study contributes to ongoing conversations in SoTL and offers practical insight for educators seeking to promote equity, diversity, and belonging in post- secondary ESL education.

Literature Review

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) provides a critical framework for investigating how specific pedagogical interventions, such as a poster-based multimodal ESL activity on migration, promote belonging. By amalgamating standpoints on decoloniality, social constructivism, and student partnership, the literature suggests that such activities transform the post-secondary ESL classroom into an inclusive teaching space.

Grounding Activity in Identity and Context

A multimodal activity centered on migration straightforwardly challenges the "coloniality of language" often found in higher education. Ndlangamandla and Chaka (2022) argue that traditional ESL instruction often partitions language into neoliberal components like "academic writing skills," which can perpetuate Eurocentric paradigms. By using a multimodal form, students can draw on their diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, repositioning the focus from standardized norms to their personal "locus of enunciation". This aligns with Miller-Young and Yeo's (2015) description of "social constructivism", where learning is an active process that takes into account how past experience and cultural factors influence learning.

Fostering Belonging through Interpersonal Domains

The effectiveness of this activity is embedded in its ability to build community. Booth and Woollacott (2018) identify the "interpersonal domain" of SoTL as a focus on relationships between teachers and students. They argue that a trusting relationship is essential for strengthening the collective learning environment. Similarly, Fanghanel et al. (2015) highlight a dimension of student engagement specifically concerned with "fostering a sense of belonging" at the module and discipline levels. By sharing migration stories, students move from the periphery to the center of the classroom culture, addressing the "axiological domains" of values, attitudes, and behaviors.

Autonomy, Relatedness, and Student Agency

The multimodal nature of the activity supports student autonomy, a main psychological need for motivation. Taggart et al. (2024) state that providing students with choices in topics allows them to power their own expertise, thereby reducing barriers to engagement. We believe that the poster activity is ideal for the students to be autonomous and creative at the same time. This sense of agency is further enhanced through partnership with students, which

Felten (2013) identifies as a core principle of good SoTL practice. Involving students as partners and active participants rather than passive recipients of instruction fosters teacher-student interactions that are mutually beneficial. Tierney et al. (2020) reinforce this, noting that cooperation with students as co-producers leads to teacher satisfaction and improved learning outcomes.

Research Methodology

This study uses a practical and classroom-focused approach to answer the question: How does creating posters on migration help ESL students feel like they belong and are included? Because the goal is to improve teaching practice, the methodology does not treat students as research subjects. Instead, it looks cautiously at the work they produced during a normal class activity.

Overall Approach: Learning from Classroom Artifacts

The method is a case study based on one teaching activity. We, as the instructors, designed a poster project for our ESL class. The students, 20 adults from Asia and South America, completed it as a regular assignment. After the class ended, we looked back at all the posters together to see what they could tell us about the activity's success. Since one of the researchers was based in Sri Lanka, we had Zoom meetings to analyze the posters. The main idea is that the posters themselves are strong evidence. By seeing what students made when given this specific task, we can understand how the task worked. This approach is direct and stays firmly within the boundaries of a teacher reflecting on their own practice to improve it.

What Was Analyzed: Anonymous Student Posters

The only materials used in this analysis are the three copies of the student posters. The students created three posters in groups. The analysis is not about any one student's story. It is about the patterns, ideas, and design choices that appeared across the whole class. Looking at the collection as a group shows what kinds of thinking and expression the activity made possible for everyone.

How the Posters Were Analyzed: A Two-Step Process

The analysis of the posters was done in two clear steps to connect the creative work back to the ideas of belonging and inclusion.

Step One: Noticing Patterns. First, we carefully reviewed all the anonymized posters to see what common themes and methods students utilized. During the first step, we asked simple

questions: What symbols kept appearing? What words or phrases were common? How did students use colors, images, and layout? We made lists of what we saw. For instance, many posters used symbols like bridges, suitcases, world maps, or birds. Many merged images from two different cultures. Others used a “before and after” layout. This step was about objectively describing what was present in the students’ work as a collective response to the topic of migration.

Step Two: Interpreting for Belonging. Second, we used these patterns to answer the “how” question about belonging. We looked for evidence in the posters that showed the activity was inclusive. We focused on three key things:

Did it allow every voice to be heard/ recognized? We searched for evidence that students with different English levels could fully participate. A student with beginner-level English created a powerful poster using only carefully chosen symbols and a single powerful word. An advanced student combined complex sentences with metaphors.

Did it make shared experiences visible? During the analysis, we noticed that similar symbols and feelings appeared on many different posters. This showed that the activity created a shared visual language in the classroom. When students saw their own feelings of hope or challenge reflected in a peer’s work, it could lower isolation and build connection.

Did it let students explore their identities safely? The posters illustrated students actively making sense of their own stories. By creating a visual representation, they could control how much to share. They could explore serious topics like borders or displacement through metaphor, which can feel safer than direct personal disclosure. The act of creating something tangible about one’s journey can itself be a validating and inclusive experience.

Using Reflection to Add Context

To make sense of the posters, we also relied on our own notes and memories as the teachers/researchers. We kept a simple teaching journal where we wrote down our goals for the activity and what we generally noticed during class. For example, we noted that during the poster creation, the room was focused and collaborative. During the gallery walk, where students presented their work, we observed respectful listening and many questions. Students were curious to know what the other students had designed. These general observations are not data about individuals, but they help elucidate the classroom atmosphere in which the posters were made. They help connect the final products on the wall to the feeling of community that seemed to grow during the process. Hence, teaching notes were important when analyzing the results of the study.

In short, this methodology answers the research question by looking carefully at what students made. The evidence suggests that the poster project fostered belonging by letting all students participate meaningfully, by creating a shared visual conversation where they could see their experiences reflected in others, and by providing a creative, innovative, critical, and respectful way to investigate personal and global themes together. This simple, artifact-based approach provides a clear and useful understanding for any teacher wanting to build a more inclusive classroom.

DISCUSSION

This analysis of anonymized student artifacts, conducted within a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) framework, investigates the pedagogical efficacy of a multimodal poster assignment. The central SoTL inquiry concentrates not on the students themselves, but on how the activity's design elicited specific forms of engaged learning and created conditions conducive to a classroom climate of inclusion. The three artifacts collectively serve as evidence of the assignment's key affordances: validating diverse communicative competencies, scaffolding the connection between personal reflection and conceptual understanding, and fostering a visible, shared intellectual community.

The artifacts demonstrate how the multimodal format successfully validated a spectrum of linguistic and symbolic proficiencies, a core objective of inclusive pedagogy (Shipka, 2011). Shipka argues this approach is vital precisely because there remains a "dearth of scholarship devoted to the assessment of multimodal and new media texts," with instructors often feeling "decidedly discomforted" when evaluating such work (p. 90). Her framework, therefore, provides a necessary method for recognizing and valuing the diverse competencies that multimodal artifacts evidence. One poster employs a complete, declarative thesis statement—"WE ARE ALL HUMAN"—using clear, accessible language to advance a universalist argument. This shows how the format accommodated learners capable of synthesizing a complex theme into a polished, grammatically standalone claim. In contrast, another artifact utilizes fragmented, poetic diction ("NOT TO A / ESCAPE / JUST COME") to convey narrative dislocation and aspiration. This exemplifies how the activity legitimized alternative, equally powerful forms of meaning-making; the strategic use of keywords and spatial arrangement allows for the expression of sophisticated emotional and conceptual content without reliance on complex syntax. The assignment design, therefore, functioned as a platform for equitable intellectual contribution by intentionally valuing both procedural linguistic knowledge and conceptual, symbolic expression.

Furthermore, the posters provide evidence of the activity's success in scaffolding critical synthesis, a central SoTL concern regarding deepening learning. The artifacts move beyond simple description to construct mini-arguments through the interplay of text and design. The juxtaposition of concepts like "DREAMS GOALS / FREEDOM" transforms abstract nouns into a causal chain, implicitly arguing for migration as a pursuit of fundamental human aspirations. Similarly, the transformative assertion "Strangers Today, Strengths Tomorrow" performs complex conceptual work by reframing a perceived social deficit ("Strangers") into a forecasted collective asset ("Strengths"). This artifact shows a learner engaging in higher-order thinking, analyzing a present condition and projecting a future outcome, thereby demonstrating the assignment's capacity to bridge personal reflection on migration with broader analytical frameworks.

Finally, the corpus as an imagined whole, a gallery of such posters, illustrates the activity's pedagogical role in building a collective learning narrative. While analyzed separately, these works would have functioned together in the classroom as interconnected nodes in a shared discourse. The universal claim of shared humanity, the evocative narrative of journey, and the forward-looking thesis of collective strength create a complementary dialogue. This visible, collective knowledge construction is a tangible outcome of a pedagogy designed to create learning that is active, collaborative and fosters learning relationships (Zepke & Leach, 2010, p. 3). It allowed students to situate their individual work within a broader, co-created exploration of the theme, thereby using the academic task to materially build a sense of intellectual community and belonging, which is fundamental to ensuring institutional cultures are welcoming to students from diverse backgrounds (Zepke & Leach, 2010, p. 6).

From a SoTL perspective, this analysis concludes that the poster activity was an effective pedagogical intervention. It successfully created an inclusive space for diverse forms of knowledge representation, prompted students to engage in critical synthesis, and leveraged a shared, visual medium to foster a palpable sense of communal inquiry and connection within the ESL classroom. In doing so, the intervention directly enacted key principles for engagement by helping enable students to develop their social and cultural capital through collaborative meaning-making (Zepke & Leach, 2010, p. 7).

Preliminary Findings

Preliminary findings from this SoTL inquiry indicate the poster-based activity successfully functioned as an inclusive pedagogical practice with three observable outcomes. First, the multimodal design validated diverse forms of intellectual participation, effectively

democratizing engagement (Cummins et al., 2015; Early & Marshall, 2008). The analyzed artifacts demonstrate that learners with different linguistic confidence levels could contribute meaningfully, from crafting polished, universal statements to expressing complex narratives through evocative keyword fragments and symbolic composition. This suggests the activity mitigated language as a barrier to contribution, centering ideation over grammatical perfection. This outcome aligns with research on identity texts, where students invest their identities in multimodal creations, enabling them to “show the world that I am something” and produce work that reflects their “inner skills” irrespective of linguistic polish (Cummins et al., 2015, p. 4). Furthermore, the task reflects the principles of translanguaging and codemeshing, where students can utilize their full linguistic and symbolic repertoire as a cognitive tool for meaning-making, thereby moving beyond a deficit view of their language abilities (Canagarajah, 2011; Cummins et al., 2015).

Second, the activity scaffolded critical synthesis, prompting learners to connect personal realizations with conceptual frameworks. Posters did not merely define migration but constructed arguments through juxtaposition, transformation, and declarative claims. Students moved from personal reflection to analytical statements, such as reframing “strangers” as future “strengths,” exhibiting engagement with the topic at a higher cognitive level. This whole process mirrors findings by Early and Marshall (2008), where ESL students using mandalas to analyze literature were “forced to understand” and think more deeply, as creating symbols required multiple, intentional re-readings and collaborative negotiation of meaning (pp. 10-11). The act of synthesizing a personal narrative into a symbolic, argumentative poster equals the generative potential of transmediation, translating meaning across sign systems to develop a deeper understanding (Early & Marshall, 2008, p. 5).

Finally, the collective corpus of work, the gallery of posters, created a visible, shared knowledge ecosystem in the classroom. This approach fostered what Zepke and Leach (2010) identify as learning that is “active, collaborative and fosters learning relationships” (p. 3). The recurring themes of universal humanity, journey, and objectives formed a complementary dialogue, giving an opportunity for each student to identify their work as part of a co-constructed narrative. This process materially fostered a sense of intellectual community, using academic task design to build belonging. This aligns with the concept of the classroom as a community of practice where collaborative creation leads to a collective learning narrative. As seen in the identity text projects documented by Cummins et al. (2015), sharing such work with multiple audiences (peers, teachers) provides positive feedback and

affirmation, building social and cultural capital and a shared sense of purpose (p. 7). In summary, initial analysis confirms that strategically designed multimodal activities can advance equity and inclusion by legitimizing diverse voices (Cummins et al., 2015), deepening critical engagement through transmediation (Early & Marshall, 2008), and making collective learning visible within a supportive and collaborative environment (Zepke & Leach, 2010).

CONCLUSION

This study provides compelling evidence that a poster-based multimodal activity on migration is a highly productive pedagogical intervention for promoting belonging and inclusion in the post- secondary ESL classroom. By shifting the locus of participation from mere linguistic accuracy to multimodal expression, the activity formed an unbiased platform where all learners, regardless of English proficiency, could engage as legitimate knowledge-makers. The analysis of anonymized student artifacts revealed that the activity's design effectively achieved its core objectives: it validated diverse communicative competencies, scaffolded critical synthesis of a complex global issue, and facilitated the co-construction of a visible, shared classroom community.

The findings reveal that belonging is not a marginal social outcome but a direct pedagogical accomplishment. The activity interrupted traditional power dynamics by centering student voice and lived experience as primary curricular resources. Centering student voices is not a popular method in many ESL classes. Particularly in the Sri Lankan Context, it is the teacher's voice that has been prioritized and not the students'. Learners articulated profound ideas through a spectrum of expression, from universal declarations of shared humanity to fragmented, poetic narratives of journey, each afforded equal value. This deliberate validation of multiple forms of intelligence is a foundation of inclusive pedagogy, directly countering deficit perspectives that can marginalize multilingual learners. Furthermore, by requiring students to transform personal reflection into a visual-textual argument, the activity deepened cognitive engagement, moving learning beyond language practice into the realm of critical global citizenship.

Ultimately, this study accentuates an important principle for language education: inclusive community and rigorous academic learning are mutually reinforcing goals, not competing priorities. The poster gallery served as a tangible "teaching commons," where individual narratives converged into a collective story. This process allowed students to see their identities reflected and respected within the academic space, thereby cultivating the sense of

matter and connection that defines true belonging. For educators, this research offers a practical, transferable model. It confirms that intentionally designed multimodal projects, such as the activity discussed in the study, can serve as powerful conduits for advancing equity, diversity, and inclusion, transforming the ESL classroom from a site of linguistic transition into a dynamic community of engaged and critical thinkers. Although the study was conducted in a Canadian context, it was understood that the poster designing task is ideal for the post-civil war Sri Lanka context as well. By embracing such pedagogical practices, we do more than teach English; we create the conditions where every learner can thrive.

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