

From language portraits to language playlists:

Charting methodological possibilities with multilingual youth in crisis

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In partnership with

YESS
youth empowerment & support services



01 Introduction

While interviews remain a staple of qualitative research (Roulston, 2021), talk is not always the most apt mode (Kress, 2010) with which to attend to our research questions—especially when participants have experienced significant trauma (Busch, 2020). Indeed, traumatic experiences can have a significant affect on narrative production (Busch & McNamara, 2020), so creative methods are often used in research with youth navigating trauma (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2017). However, these methods have been overwhelmingly visual. Sound has unique and underexplored potential to inform research on people's lived experiences of language, and particularly with youth in crisis as it "creates a sensory space... that facilitates the sharing of 'biographical salient moments,' and sometimes even critical moments" (Østergaard, 2021, p. 127).

02 Research Questions

In this pilot study, I worked in partnership with YESS (Youth Empowerment & Support Services) to explore the implications of using image and song alongside interviews about youths' lived experiences of language.

I asked:

1. What autobiographical memories do language portrait drawings or participant-selected songs prompt for them in relation to descriptions of their language maintenance, use, or loss? What emotional, political, cultural, or embodied experiences do the drawings or songs evoke?
2. How do participants' narratives differ in terms of content, amount of detail, and affective descriptions or display from the language portrait interview to the language playlist interview?

03 Methodology

This study consisted of two group interviews mediated by drawing and song. In the first session, I provided youth with a colouring sheet depicting the outline of a human body and asked them to locate their language practices on the body using colour. We then talked about what they drew. In the second session, I asked them to share songs with the group that reminded them of times in their lives when language was salient for them. We talked about their choice of song and the memories they associated with them before, after, and as the songs played.

Participants

- Youth in an emergency shelter program, ages 16-19
- Most identified as mixed-race and/or Indigenous
- Indigenous Cultural Coordinator, Mel, was there to support

Language Portraits (20 mins)	Language Playlists (20-40 mins)
Alex June Jonah	Alex Matt Solé

All names are pseudonyms

04 Results

Language Portrait Interview

Ava: If you were to put those on [this paper, where would you put them?]
June: (groans)
Alex: I don't know
Ava: Do you want to try?
Alex: (deep outbreath)
Ava: You take your time.
June: xxx
Ava: Okay so now we've got your languages out, we've got Black, we've got-do you speak White?
June: Wow! (laughs)
Alex: No.
Ava: No? Just Black?
Alex: Yeah (laughs)
June: (laughs)
Ava: And you used to speak Cree?
Alex: Yeah.
Ava: And anything else?
Alex: No.
(pause)
Ava: No do you--
Alex: 'Y'all should get smudge for us since the smudge--
...
Alex: Can we smudge?
...
June: Sara was supposed to give me a smudge kit!
Alex: Wait, we... we can smudge right now?
Jonah: Can't smudge if you're high, [n-word]
June: (laughs)

- Drawing seemed to be uncomfortable for the youth (groans, deep outbreaths). Only Alex and June created language portraits. Alex asked if he could play a song for us; Mel suggested he play it at the playlist interview. He returned the following week for the playlist interview



Alex's language portrait: "Red is love" ¹

The prompt to represent languages on a rendering of the body also seemed to foster a lower-stakes space that welcomed levity and verbal interaction in ways that a talk-based interview may not have.

Linguistic and cultural erasure were express goals of the residential "school system. It is remarkable how the mention of Cree as one of Alex's past or lost languages prompted him to inquire about smudging. Smudging can be used to promote a sense of spiritual safety, which is significant in an interview about language use with a white settler researcher.

While Jonah spoke minimally for most of this 20 minute interview, his enthusiastic observation about smudge protocols also indexed deep funds of knowledge about his cultural heritage. This context, together with his use of the n-word to Alex in this context are evidence of the relational space that these topics seemed to foster.

05 Discussion & Conclusions

- Participants' narratives differed significantly in terms of content, amount of detail, and affective display from one interview to the next.
- Both methods seemed to foster a space for youth to engage in practices of self-authoring, alone and in relation to one another, across scales of time and space.
- The language portrait method in the group interview setting seemed to foster a space for youth to connect with each other over the topic of language through playful talk (cf. Becker, submitted; Becker-Zayas, Kendrick, & Namazzi, 2018).
- Like language portraits, the language playlist interviews were largely participant led (see Purkathofer & Flubacher, 2022). However, while the visual can "be held still, so that they can be scrutinized in detail, dissected... Sound... is not, and can never be, an object which can be grasped and possessed. It can only be experienced and remembered." (van Leeuwen, 1999, p. 195). In this sense, the aural mode offered participants greater agency both in terms of self-representation and in deciding how and how much to participate in the research.
- Music and reference to cultural practices, like smudging, seemed to offer youth a way to remain in the interview on their own terms, despite discomfort or tensions they might have been experiencing (Becker, submitted).

06 Implications

- The narratives youth co-produced in the language playlists were heteroglossic and chronotopic, drawing on other voices across spatiotemporal scales (Bakhtin, 1981; Blommaert, 2015), which has implications for how we conceptualize "voice" in interviews with youth who are navigating complex trauma and the harms of multiple intersecting structural inequities.
- This pilot study has implications for conducting interview-based research with a trauma-informed lens (Isobel, 2021) and for decolonizing interviews with multilingual youth who have experiences of language loss and reclamation, as well as intergenerational trauma.

Language Playlist Interview

(Billionaire by Travis McCoy ft. Bruno Mars plays)
Alex: I don't know
Ava: What is it about this song?
Alex: 'Cause I wanna be rich (laughs)
(Billionaire continues)
Ava: So how would life be different if you were rich?
Alex: At least I'd have a place, like my own place to stay and shit
(pause)
and I would support my kokum and shit and give her money.
(pause)
Ava: When do you play this song? Like...
[...]
Alex: I got another one.
Ava: Kay.
Alex: I'll play my grandma's favourite song.
(advertisement plays)
This is not my grandma's favourite song. This is an ad.
Alex: I know right!
Matt: Oh this is such a W song bro!
Ad: ...fifty dollar bonding treatments...
Alex: Fifty dollar bonding treatments such a good song
Matt: Hell yeah!
Ava: (laughs)
(advertisement continues and then ends)
Alex: This is my grandma's favourite song
(Juicy by Notorious B.I.G. plays)
Yeah, this album is dedicated to all the teachers that told me I never amount to nothing'
...
Matt: Oh this song, it's...
To all the people that lived above the buildings that I was 'tillin' in front of called the police on me when I was just tryin' to make some money to feed my daughter (it's all good) and all the niggas in the struggle it was all a dream, I used to read Word Up! Magazine Salt-n-Pepa and Heavy D up in the limousine hangin' pictures on my wall
(Juicy continues)
Ava: So why does your grandma like this song so much?
Alex: What?
Ava: Why does your grandma like this song?
Alex: 'Cause she's old!
Ava: 'Cause she's old?
(all laugh)
Ava: I have to say...
Matt: [She's not that old!
Alex: She's been to residential schools and shit.
Matt: Oh. This song isn't that old.

- It is worth noting that Matt mentioned that music was what drew him to participate in the second group interview.

In talking about lived experiences of language through the lens of music, Alex drew links not only to significant people (his kokum), but also to the historical events that shaped them (e.g., residential schools)

The first three times I asked Alex when or why he played a particular song, he would say "I got another one," using the music as a socially sanctioned way to shift the topic on his terms, while staying with overarching theme of the interview. However, toward the end of this excerpt, he chose to respond to my question with his own voice, which led to a playful exchange, and sharing that his kokum had gone to residential "schools.

The unexpected ads that would pop up before some songs also seemed to facilitate a lower-stakes space, and also one where the youth could further subvert the traditional interview genre in a playful way while building positive connections with each other.

The songs Alex chose to share also introduce other voices and narratives into the interview that merit closer consideration for their heteroglossic and chronotopic (Bakhtin, 1981) quality.

References



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