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Plurilingual repertoires and identity constructions in transit states of the Arabian Gulf: A language portrait study with young people in a Turkish school

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the role of plurilingual repertoires in the construction of identities among adolescents in the Arabian Gulf region. The region attracts numerous migrant workers, each contributing to the linguistic diversity of a largely multilingual yet under-researched population. We analyzed visual data - specifically language portraits (LPs) - and interview responses from twelve adolescents attending a Turkish school in this region. This school was chosen for two reasons: firstly, its plurilingual environment was representative of the diverse linguistic interactions we aimed to study, and secondly, the school offered convenient access to the study group as the first author was working there as a teacher. Our analysis contributes to the understanding of the complex and dynamic interplay between plurilingual repertoires and identity constructions. A thematic and metaphorical analysis of LPs reveals how the young participants navigated their identities amidst intricate relationships among social, territorial, imagined, and symbolic affiliations. These connections notably shape the dynamics of *transit* societies, particularly in settings where English is the common language.

Keywords
identity,
plurilingual repertoires,
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migration

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Introduction

Populations in Arab Gulf states, often referred to as GCC[1] countries, tend to be super-diverse and highly multilingual (Calafato & Tang, 2019). Sometimes referred to as *transit states* (Khalaf et al., 2015), these locations bear little resemblance to the migratory destinations of Europe and the USA in terms of societal participation and integration (Dito, 2015), and incomers are often not expected to converse in Arabic, the national language. Indeed, socio-political and cultural segregation between the larger incomer group and minority national Arab populations is the norm (AlShehabi, 2015; Dito, 2015; GLMM, 2016; Khalaf et al., 2015). This segregation becomes especially evident in educational settings, where students often attend schools based on their family's country of origin. This segregation means that newcomers and

[1] The Gulf Corporation Council consists of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

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national Arab populations are less likely to interact in substantial ways, contributing to a divide in societal participation and integration.

The relationship between languages and identity in GCC seems to be an under-studied but emergent field. There is a small body of relevant research, mostly on adult workers and their situations in GCC (Hillman & Eibenschutz, 2018; Hopkyns & Zoghbor, 2022; Khondker, 2017; ONeill, 2017), but little on adolescent groups. Khondker's chapter on UAE-based Bangladeshi learners, published in Hopkyns and Zoghbor's (2022) book, is of particular interest here, as it resonates strongly with our study on young transnationals that we present in this article.

We developed a professional interest in a specific group of transnational young individuals who were enrolled in a Turkish Community School in the GCC. Our rationale for this focus stemmed from the fact that the first author of this study was an English teacher at this school. Through his observations, he noticed that the learners exhibited the ability to utilize multiple languages. Prompted by these observations, we were led to question the following: "What roles do learners' plurilingual repertoires play in the identity construction of young people in a Turkish Community School in the Arab Gulf?" Thus, our professional interest in this particular group of students was driven by both the research potential presented by their plurilingual backgrounds and the insider perspective provided by the first author's role at the school.

Drawing on Blommaert and Backus (2011) and Busch (2012), we defined *plurilingual repertoires* as complex repertoires of languages and language varieties (mastered at varying levels), as well as linguistic competencies and practices that individuals use and draw on for different purposes within speech communities and contexts. This article reports on a study that aimed to expand insights into the role linguistic repertoires play in the identity constructions of immigrant adolescents in Sun State[2]. Despite being part of an extremely multilingual population, this group has been subject to limited research.

Theoretically, we draw on Norton and McKinney (2011) who argue that languages and language varieties are associated with identification, as people use languages and language varieties to index belonging to certain linguistic groups (Blommaert, 2006) in different contexts, such as in families, in school and in society. Sharing a language, or using differing language varieties, can therefore denote affiliations, but also affect negotiations of social positioning and hierarchies, including resistance and desire to learn or use languages. Languages have therefore been theorised as part of a person's multiple communicative resources as part of a linguistic repertoire (Blommaert, 2006), or plurilingual repertoire (Blommaert & Backus, 2011).

Methodologically, the study collected data through the analysis of language portraits, which served as visual tools for data collection (Busch, 2012). Additionally, interviews were conducted with 12 adolescent English learners in a Turkish school in the Arabian Gulf region. This context, while constituting a unique socio-linguistic setting, holds implications for other groups in voluntary and forced transit situations, including learners in other parts of the Arab Gulf, and potentially in refugee and economic migration contexts elsewhere.

As is typical in GCC, Sun State also hosts a large foreign population, and, in line with its migration policy, children from expatriate families attend private schools. These are associated with certain nationalities such as American, British, Indian or French. In our case,

[2] A pseudonym for one of the GCC states, to protect the identity of the school and related communities.

this was a Turkish Community School (TCS)[3], which is a Turkish *national* school overseas. In terms of its learner recruitment, TCS differs from some other *international* schools, as Turkish nationality is an admission criterion. This is a K-12 state school, overseen by the Turkish Embassy, where the curriculum, textbooks, and examinations are all based on the national Turkish education system.

TCS attracts young people whose families originated, predominantly but not exclusively, from the Hatay region in the southern part of Turkey, where Arabic is spoken for societal purposes. In the Hatay region people typically have Turkish citizenship, and their schooling is in Turkish, but Hatay – an Arabic dialect – is used and accepted as a societal language (Yıldırım, 2020). Yıldırım (2020) describes the Hatay dialect as an important identity marker for this group. Some job seekers in Hatay, having the advantage of speaking Arabic, have chosen to seek work in Sun State and bring their families.

As language teachers, we assumed that the way languages are taught at school plays an important role in linguistic development in young people's lives, and in their perceptions. In TCS three languages play a formal role. Turkish is used as the medium of instruction, English as a school subject (4-6 hours weekly) as in homeland schools, and Modern Standard Arabic (4-6 hours weekly) is taught as a separate subject. Outside of school, most learners typically encounter Hatay Arabic in their family life, Sun State Arabic as the local language variety, and English as a lingua franca, plus other languages, given the international context. However, our study shows that the linguistic repertoires of TCS learners consist of many more languages and language varieties, while their linguistic identifications are far from simple or predictable.

Literature review and the gap in research

In shaping our research design, we drew on literature concerning plurilingual repertoires and language learner identity, and we incorporated the use of language portraits as a research tool specifically tailored to investigate learner identities. We are thus contributing to research at the intersection of these topics, a relatively new field that has emerged over the past two decades.

Plurilingual repertoires and identity construction

In addition to the definition of plurilingual repertoires introduced above, we took on board Blommaert's (2006) important distinction between *communicative linguistic repertoires* and *communicative practices*, which denotes the difference between language potential (desired, imagined, symbolic) and language uses (social, concrete) in everyday contexts.

Language has been proposed as a tool through which "relationships and identities are defined, negotiated, and resisted" (Norton & McKinney, 2011, p. 77). Thus, relationships and identities are shaped through contacts between speakers and groups of speakers of different languages and language varieties, while linguistic belonging can be desired, imagined and contested (Meier & Smala, 2022). Belonging to language groups has been described as 'layered' (Blommaert, 2006), as this is understood as dynamic, in flux and overlapping with other group allegiances.

[3] Pseudonym to protect identity of school

Plurilingual repertoire not only refers to how and why we use languages, and which varieties we use in which situations (Blommaert & Backus, 2011), but also how we feel about these, and how our linguistic perceptions inform life choices and trajectories (Chen & Hélot, 2018) in complex and unpredictable ways. For instance, the first language in a person's language repertoire is not always central to identity construction (Canagarajah, 2008), and high proficiency in a language does not necessarily mean that there is a strong identification with that language (Oriyama, 2010). Indeed, tensions can occur between plural language competencies and "the coexistence of different competing points of views" (Blackledge & Creese, 2016, p. 274) or ideologies (Meier & Smala, 2022). Research, which enabled adolescent participants to *reflect* on their language use (Bristowe et al., 2014; Prasad, 2014), shows that frequent use of a language may not necessarily index strong identification with that language either. For instance, in Prasad's (2014) study in Canada, a participant with a Korean background identified himself as English and preferred to be interviewed in French. Given this unpredictability, Blackledge and Creese (2016) propose that people's identities should be considered "not in terms of apparent or visible categories, but rather as emic positions which are self-identified" (p. 272). Such emic positions are what we set out to establish through this study.

Plurilingual language learners

Language learners have been conceptualised "as multilingual social practitioners and agents with dynamic and complex biographies and identities who exist in a multilingual ecosystem" (Meier, 2017, p. 153). In today's world, most people experience different languages, dialects or ways of using a language, if not locally, then likely through the media and the internet. This understanding of language learners as people who use their plurilingual repertoires productively or receptively for their social purposes, and to understand their position in the world, was highly relevant to our study. In fact, dynamic and nuanced understandings related to language use and identities of young Turkish people in European migrant contexts are emphasized, above all, in Lytra and Jorgensen's (2008) book, which describes the use of all linguistic resources "to speak, write, and do identity work" (Lytra & Jorgensen, 2008, p. 10). Of particular interest here are the findings related to young people with Turkish backgrounds in Europe, who were found to construct alternative identity options beyond the ones institutionally imposed on them (Lytra & Barac, 2008), or those used for signalling group identity (Jorgensen, 2008). Such findings suggest that there may be some tension between linguistic practices, or what people do, and their potential plurilingual repertoires. Thus, for our study, we adopted a visual data-collection method that we deemed suitable to open "a window into the students' minds" (İnözü, 2018, p. 193) without imposing any preconceived ideas of how languages, language varieties, home and host nations may be linked with identity construction.

Language portrait and identity research with adolescents

Language portrait research, as used by Brigitta Busch, informed our data collection and analysis. This method is designed to explore "heteroglossic linguistic repertoire[s]" and "representations of, attitudes to, and positionings towards particular languages" (Busch, 2018, p. 11), and can uncover a range of identity aspects related to the linguistic repertoire of a person.

The limited language portrait research with adolescents that we identified (Bristowe et al., 2014; Prasad, 2014), encouraged us to use this method with the adolescent cohort in TCS. With research so far limited to North America (Prasad, 2014) and South Africa (Bristowe et al., 2014) we saw an opportunity to expand our knowledge, by contributing relevant insights from the Middle East.

Methodology

We opted for a multi-method qualitative design, guided by an interpretative paradigm. This included language biographies (CoE, 2019), language portraits (Busch, 2018), interviews with learners and teacher-researcher reflections. The language biographies and LPs were used as pedagogical activities in the teacher researchers' regular English classroom in TCS, while interviews were conducted in addition to these with the 12 learners who consented to participate in the research project.

Data collection instruments

There were four elements to our multi-method qualitative research design. The main ones are the LP and the interview. These were complemented by a language biography tool and a researcher journal.

The language biography tool (CoE, 2019) contains self-assessment checklists inviting learners to "state what he/she can do in each language, and to include information on linguistic, cultural and learning experiences gained in and outside formal education contexts" (CoE, 2019). This enabled us to gather background information about the participants (as summarized in Table 1), and enabled the participants to develop some language awareness before engaging in LPs.

LPs have been widely used as a powerful pedagogic tool to help young people visualise their linguistic identities and repertoires (Prasad, 2014). They have also been used in research to collect data (see Peters & Coetzee-van-Rooy, 2020 for a summary). We adopted the body silhouette developed by Busch (2012) and her colleagues, as this seems to be widely used, and piloting showed that it is acceptable to adolescent participants in TCS. For research purposes, LPs are often accompanied by an interview to elicit verbal comments to construct the meaning of the visual representations (Busch, 2012) from an inside perspective.

The first author conducted short semi-structured interviews (approximately 10 minutes) in Turkish, apart from with one student who preferred to be interviewed in English (Harun). The interview questions were designed to find out about participants' interpretations of the colours they used in the LP. Thus, we used language portraits both for initiating interviews and as "a point of reference within the conversation" when necessary (Busch, 2018, p. 6). The main questions were: "Can you briefly describe to me your language portrait: the choice of colours, their arrangements and associations to different body parts and what you use your languages for?" (adapted from Lau, 2016; Prasad, 2014). The interviews were analysed thematically, guided by Maguire and Delahunt (2017), with categories inspired by the literature review, as described in section 4.

In addition, the teacher researcher (insider) generated reflective notes to record observations, decisions, thoughts, potential subjectivities, and discussions held with the second

author (outsider). These enabled reflection on the research process and analysis, and helped contextualise findings.

Recruiting participants

Data was collected in 2018. At that time, TCS had around 300 students in total, from kindergarten (age 5-6) to grade 12 (age 17-18), and the first author had been teaching English to grades 9 to 12. We invited two classes of adolescent learners in Grades 10 and 11 (n = 14); of these 12 consented to participate in our study.

Data collection and analysis

The first author, who worked as an English teacher in TCS at the time, first gathered data during two 40-minute regular English classes. The first session involved activities based on language biography templates adopted from those published by the Council of Europe (CoE, 2019). These activities combined pedagogic and research aims, as they facilitated an initial awareness among the participants of their language repertoire before their engagement in the LPs during the second session. Both the language biographies and LPs enabled classroom discussions about languages more widely. For research purposes, the biographies and LPs were anonymized and digitized, before the originals were returned to the participants. The third step in data collection involved interviews with participants, which were conducted during their lunch breaks. In addition, the teacher researcher generated reflective notes throughout the research process. Our data collection generated 12 language biographies, 12 LPs and 12 interview recordings, with some additional reflective notes. The analysis proceeded as follows:

Initially, the language biographies enabled us to describe the sample, including their first languages used at home (see Table 1). We then consulted the LPs, and reported associated visual data related to placement on the body silhouette and in some cases also on colour choice, guided by Coffey (2015). He suggests that visual representations move "away from purely verbal descriptions of language(s) towards seeing the *experience* of languages as a complex configuration of emotional impressions felt in the body" (Coffey, 2015, p. 504, original emphasis). This stage of the analysis helped us develop preliminary codes and guide our interview questions.

As we progressed into the metaphorical analysis of LPs, we incorporated three elements of Coffey's (2015) metaphorical framework. These are the *core-periphery continuum*, which suggests that emotional intensity is found closer to the core (torso, head, and/or heart), often including "family languages or accents that may not necessarily be well known but have strong affective resonance" (Coffey, 2015, p. 506), and the *language as a colour*, which is expressed through the choice of colour, intensity and patterning. As there is cultural variation in metaphor construction (Coffey, 2015), we kept an open mind as to how participants in our study assigned meaning and feelings to colours. Coffey's (2015) framework also suggests *language as a symbol*, where flags, or colours associated with flags, tend to be associated with languages, including standard and/or accents/dialects.

We analysed the interview transcripts and the LPs together, following Busch's perspective that "meaning is created through both modes [visual and narrative]; one is neither the translation nor simply the illustration of the other" (Busch, 2012, p. 518). The interview transcripts were read multiple times to identify codes for answering our research question.

These codes were added to an Excel spreadsheet, which housed all our raw data, and placed alongside the metaphorical codes that had emerged from the LPs. This datasheet allowed us to examine all three sets of data in relation to each other. Through our thematic analysis of the interview data, we identified deductive themes and several inductive sub-themes, as summarised in Table 2. The reflective notes helped discussions and interpretations during the writing-up process.

Researcher positionality

Arguably there is no such thing as objectivity in social science research (Khatwani & Panhwar, 2019), therefore we make transparent the positionalities of the research team (1st and 2nd author) and how we mitigated potential biases. First, we have conceived and conducted this study as authors whose first languages are Turkish (first author) and German (second author) respectively. At the time of writing, we both lived and worked outside our countries of origin and used various languages in our daily lives. Thus, some of the experiences and feelings the participants describe are not alien to us. While we aimed to take an objective stance guided by theory, we are aware of our own professional and migratory backgrounds, which alongside our academic interest in multilingualism may have informed our interpretation of the findings.

The fact that data was collected by the participants' English teacher (first author) may have influenced the responses. For instance, the researcher's reflection notes indicated that the participants said nothing negative about 'the role of English classes in their plurilingual development'. This bias is perhaps a common drawback of data collected by teacher researchers, and we took this into consideration when interpreting the data. In addition, the teacher researcher is a Turkish national, but not from the Hatay region. Had he shared the Hatay dialect as well as Turkish with the students the interviews may have gone a different way. In addition, conducting the interviews in Sun State, and on school premises, may have further influenced how learners evaluated their languages.

The collaboration between an insider novice researcher (first author), and a more experienced researcher (second author) who had never been to Sun State or Turkey, enabled us to challenge each other's position, develop a more comprehensive understanding and keep some of our biases in check.

Results

We first describe the sample (3.1), and we then report our results from our thematic analysis, supported by visual metaphorical analysis and reflective notes (3.2-4). Guided by Busch's (2018) identity dimensions, we deductively identified four main themes in the combined data (*social/situational*, *symbolic*, *territorial*, and *future/imagined* identities associated with plurilingual repertoires). Sub-themes were developed through our analysis of the interview transcripts and respective LPs largely inductively. Each theme will be presented in a separate section and illustrated with our results from the visual metaphor analysis. The findings are supported by example quotes/extracts from interviews and illustrative LPs.

Introduction to the sample and thematic structure

The participants in our sample attended TCS in Sun State. Based on ethical consideration, we cannot share more details about the context of this school with our readers, as the school might become identifiable. Ten out of twelve participants in our sample had all their schooling in TCS in Sun State. One participant (Burak) reported that he had several terms of his schooling – at different times – in Turkey, whereas Harun had his primary education in Malaysia, elementary (4-8 Grades) in Turkey and Grades 9-10 in TCS.

In Table 1, the participants are introduced by pseudonym, age, gender, parents L1, and languages used at home. There are four males and eight females in this sample, ranging between 15 and 17 years old. Gender distribution is typical of the school population, in which females outnumber males. Parents share the first language of Arabic in the case of seven participants, and Turkish in the case of two participants. In three cases parents have other language backgrounds. Yasemin reported that in her family only Turkish is spoken, whereas all other families used at least two languages at home, according to the language biographies. Table 1 also shows languages included in the LPs. In these, all participants showed greater linguistic complexity than they did in their language biographies. All quotes offered below are translations from Turkish to English, apart from Harun's.

Table 1. *Background Information for participants*

	Pseudonyms	Age	Gender	Parents' L1s	Languages used at home	Languages shown on portraits
1	Burak	17	M	Turkish (both parents)	Arabic (rarely) and Turkish (often)	Turkish, Arabic, English, Japanese, Kurdish
2	Alev	17	F	Arabic (both parents)	Turkish (mostly), English (sometimes), Arabic (rarely)	Turkish, Arabic, English, Tagalog, Romanian
3	Sevgi	17	F	Arabic (both parents)	Arabic (rarely) and Turkish (often)	Turkish, Arabic, English, Japanese
4	Hava	17	F	Arabic (both parents)	Arabic (rarely) and Turkish (often)	Turkish, Arabic, English, German, Spanish
5	Hanifi	16	F	English & Tagalog (mother)	English (mostly), Turkish (mostly, brother), Tagalog (sometimes), Arabic (sometimes)	Turkish, Arabic, English, Tagalog, Spanish, Azeri Turkish
6	Ahmet	16	M	Arabic (both parents)	Turkish (mostly), Arabic (mostly)	Turkish, Arabic, English, Spanish

Table 1 continued

7	Enes	16	M	Arabic (both parents)	Turkish (mostly), Arabic (sometimes)	Turkish, Arabic, English, Indian
8	Yasemin	16	F	Turkish (both parents)	Turkish	Turkish, Arabic, English, French, Norwegian, Azeri Turkish
9	Kezban	16	F	Arabic (father), Tagalog (mother)	Arabic (mostly), Turkish (mostly), English (sometimes)	Turkish, Arabic, English, Tagalog, Azeri Turkish
10	Merve	15	F	Arabic (both parents)	Turkish (often), Arabic (rarely)	Turkish, Arabic, English, Azeri Turkish
11	Hayriye	15	F	Arabic (both parents)	Arabic (sometimes), Turkish (often), parents between them Arabic	Turkish, Arabic, English, Azeri Turkish
12	Harun	16	M	Persian (both parents)	Persian (mostly), English (siblings), Pashto (rarely)	Turkish, Arabic, English, Persian, Japanese, Pashto, Indian

Table 2 summarises the themes and sub-themes we identified, and shows how many participants referred to these in the interviews.

Table 2. *Summary of themes and sub-themes*

Themes (deductive)	Subthemes (inductive) Languages related to:	No of participants who referred to theme
Social identities	school selves	7
	home selves	5
	friendship selves	10
Symbolic identity dimensions	essence of being	8
	social positioning	7
	embodiment	6
Territorial identities	local affiliations	4
	national affiliations	8
	international affiliations	5
Future/imagined identities	future self	6
	shifts towards a future self	5

Languages and social/situational identities

Literature that discusses language repertoires as social resources (Blommaert & Backus, 2011; Meier, 2017) guided the development of this theme. Without prompting beyond "what do you use your languages for?", the participants referred to languages they used in school, in their families and with friends, which constitute the three sub-themes reported in this section.

Languages and school selves

Eight participants referred to the languages they used in the school. Participants mentioned the three languages taught in TCS, which are Turkish (Hanifi, Harun), Arabic (Sevgi) and English (Hanifi, Kezban, Merve, Yasemin, Sevgi, Hava, Alev).

As far as English is concerned, the analysis makes visible certain identity dynamics in the English class. While some report feeling comfortable using English in class (Yasemin), and consider themselves good at it (Hanifi, Sevgi), some not only felt less confident or less comfortable using English in class (Kezban, Merve, Hava, Alev), but seemingly felt intimidated by others or the teacher. Extract 1 demonstrates Yasemin's feelings about English inside and outside of school:

> Extract 1: "I feel even more comfortable [in school] than outside school…because while talking outside I sometimes can't complete my sentences…and misunderstandings happen. But in class when I say something wrong my friends complete my sentence." (Yasemin)

While Yasemin seemed to interpret the English classroom as collaborative, others experienced it differently. For instance, Merve reported: "I feel crushed when I use English in the class. There are friends who are better". In contrast to Yasemin, some felt less comfortable about English at school, but confident about their English use outside of class. Reasons for this discomfort inside the English classroom were perceived inferiority (Merve), and fear of making mistakes in front of the teacher (Hava). Despite these feelings, Hava showed English (intense green) in the middle of her heart, indicating strong positive emotions towards English. Some see English as personally important: Kezban (black) and Yasemin (intense green) gave English prominent places in all limbs and the head, but not the heart. Merve (intense purple) and Alev (intense blue) saw English as a general and important presence in the world, also covering several parts of the body. Interestingly, English is positioned in the heart of those with positive, ambiguous or conflicting identifications with English at school. From this, we infer that feelings related to one language can change in different social contexts, and language affiliations – especially related to high-status languages such as English – and can be desirable and positive even if the school experience is not positive. From this, we infer that feelings related to a particular language can vary depending on the social contexts. For instance, students can construct a positive affiliation with a language – such as English – even if the respective language learning experience at school is perceived as problematic.

In the interview, Hanifi made an observation about English in TCS, namely that "real English" was taught in school, while she seemed to view her mother tongue, which is the Filipino variety of English (light blue), as less "real".

Figure 1. *Sevgi's Language Portrait*

While many saw English as important in and outside of school, some languages were only found to be relevant at school, for Harun this was Turkish (light green), and for Sevgi Arabic (brown).

Languages and home selves

According to the language biography data (see Table 1), all participants, apart from Yasemin, indicated that they use more than one language in their homes. Five students offered insights into the role of languages related to their home selves.

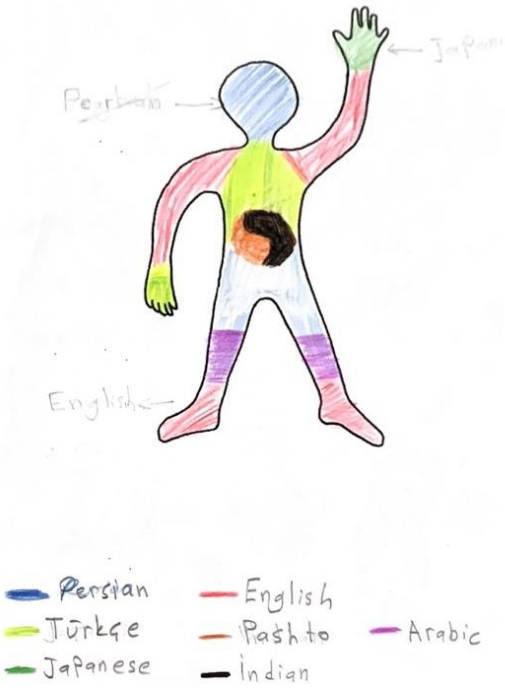
Harun (Fig. 2) mentioned several home languages: Persian (light blue), Pashto (deep orange), and "Indian" (black). Besides Persian, which seems to represent the essence of his identity (see Extract 2), he also mentioned the political and linguistic interconnections between Pashto and "Indian", and represented these as a yin and yang symbol in the stomach area. These two home languages seemed to represent a deeper connection with his mother, and a side of his identity that was very personal, as he could "use" these languages at home but no one else "hears" them outside the home (Extract 2).

> Extract 2: "Pashto and Indian are together because they are close languages…Pakistan and India…a dynamic dual between them…And I put them in my stomach because if I had a stomach ache, no one would feel it but me. Basically, I tried to say only I can speak them, but no one hears me." (Harun)

Pashto connected Harun to his mother, who watches Pashto movies, in a positive way. Similarly, Hayriye whose parents "always speak Arabic" at home "likes this language". In contrast, Sevgi seemed to strongly reject Arabic, one of her family languages. According to her, Arabic should be avoided, including by her parents, as she said: they "can't help using it from time to time". While in Sevgi's case Arabic is coloured in brown symbolised by scratches on

her body, Alev uses two shades of green on her leg to represent standard Arabic (dark green) and Hatay Arabic (lighter green). In Hayriye's case, Arabic is a part of her core self. From our data, we cannot establish the reasons behind these widely varying sentiments associated with Arabic, specifically Hatay Arabic, in this cohort. However, as shown below, the religious association with Arabic may play a role.

Figure 2. *Harun's Language Portrait*



Overall, our analysis suggests a range of feelings related to single and multiple languages used in the home. This means that languages used in the family can mean positive identification with respective languages. It comes to the fore through our analysis that home or family languages can be associated with a range of strong emotions in some students – positive and negative, as well as more neutral ones.

Languages and friendship selves

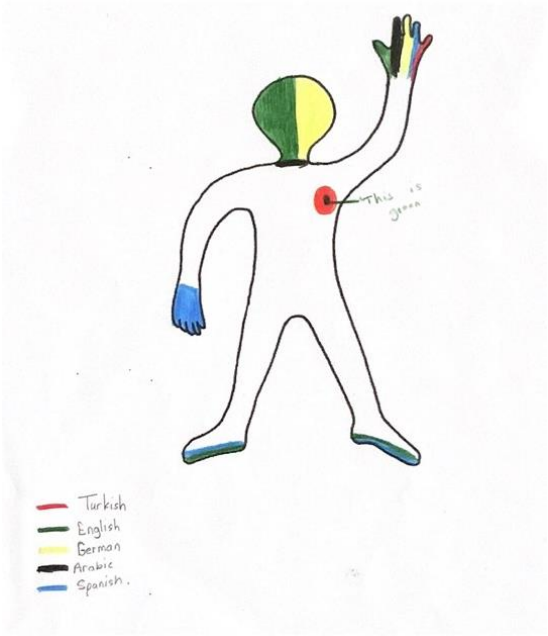
Languages were also used to develop social selves outside of school and at home, namely to meet new people and develop friendships. English was reported as useful to talk to foreign people locally in Sun State (Yasemin, Ahmet), to say hello to people, and to meet people at English-speaking events (Sevgi), "in a way to include everybody" (Sevgi), or to translate for parents and their English friends (Enes). In addition, English was seen as a stepping stone to imagined friendships abroad: "English is the world language. Let's say we went to China or Japan…Everybody speaks English. If we want to make friends there, we start with English and then learn their local language." (Hayriye)

In addition, some participants are aware that their friends use languages they cannot understand and use (well) themselves, such as Azeri (Kezban, Merve) and Tagalog (Kezban). While some expressed a desire to learn their friends' languages, such as Arabic (Hanifi), others did not express this wish. Interestingly though, Merve, Yasemin, Kezban and Alev included

their friends' languages in their LPs. Thus, linguistic identity might be understood broadly including the languages of others, including current and potential friends.

It is important to note that languages can also serve as bonding tools in young people's lives. For instance, Burak reported that he watched Anime videos with a friend in Japanese, which seemed to offer a uniting experience, perhaps similar to Sevgi and Hava's shared love for English.

Figure 3. *Hava's Language Portrait*



Languages as symbolic identity dimensions

This theme and its sub-themes were guided by the ideas that language is central to social identity (Canagarajah, 2008), that languages can be used for social positioning (Busch, 2018) and that symbolic aspects of identities can be identified in LPs (Busch, 2018; Coffey, 2015).

Languages and essence of being

Nine participants referred to languages as related to their core, or essence of, being. Participants used singular languages to represent the self at a deep and what seemed permanent level. For instance, Hanifi referred to Tagalog, the language she shares with her mother, as being red "because it is in my blood". Others described the language most used in the family as being at the centre. This is illustrated by Sevgi (Fig. 1), who confirmed that "my heart will always be red [Turkish], I know this for sure. I will always express my feelings in Turkish". Harun (Fig. 2) illustrates the all-encompassing and life-long affiliation with his mother tongue, Persian, in his LP (Extract 3).

> Extract 3: "Blue is the colour I like most. I painted Persian in blue and in my head because it is my main…mother language. Since I was born, I have had Persian with me. It is in the head because my nose, my mouth, my brain…everything is Persian.

> Everybody speaks Persian at home. […] The center of my body…upper legs…is also blue because Persian holds every language together." (Harun)

Besides language affiliations expressed as deep and permanent, there still seemed to be space for other languages to play a role in the understanding of core selves. One such additional language was English, which can exist alongside others as part of a core identity, as illustrated in Sevgi's LP (Fig. 1) or Alev's quote (Extract 4).

> Extract 4: "I am a Turk and nationalist of course. I like my country and language. If someone insults them, I go crazy of course. But I find English more intimate. [...] I embrace English. [...] My heart and mind are with English." (Alev)

Similarly, Kezban saw her core affiliation as multiple: "Since Turkish is my mother tongue, I painted it in the heart because I am an Arab…Filipino…Turkish!" While strong core identifications were linked to certain languages, none of them was understood as exclusive and all seemed to feel at ease with accommodating several languages in their lives, and as part of their plurilingual core selves.

Social positioning through English

We identified different ways learners positioned themselves in a social hierarchy based on their English competencies. In our study, there were arguably self-identified linguistic leaders in the English classroom (Sevgi, Hanifi), those welcoming help from others (Yasemin), and those who seemed intimidated by those they perceived as linguistically more competent (Kezban, Merve, Hava, Alev). English competence seemed to be viewed as a symbol of distinction (Hanifi, Sevgi). This symbol was deemed of significance in school (Sevgi) and in Turkey (Kezban). Kezban felt being able to speak English in Turkey was "cool", "because there are not many people who speak english in Turkey". Indeed, the lack of competence in English seemed to affect Hayriye's sense of self deeply, as illustrated in a rather visceral way in Extract 5.

> Extract 5: "I drew an intestine to show English. I know I speak English as much to survive... But I feel upset because I am behind my friends. You know…intestine is the second organ after the brain that affects our psychology. When I cannot speak English, it affects my psychology a lot and I feel upset…that is why I have drawn it as the intestine." (Hayriye)

Our analysis also shows the feelings associated with languages in GCC contexts, where English is widely spoken socially. English may facilitate positive affiliations with the language outside of school, even though within the school a competence hierarchy and insecurities might apply. This is powerfully illustrated in Extract 6.

> Extract 6: "Strangely I can't speak English in the school. In the school, I feel like I am learning English for the first time. But outside school, when I need something, I use English very well as if I'd spoken it for ages." (Alev)

Thus, observations regarding competence or engagement made in classrooms may not necessarily be indicative of wider language learning motivation, or identification with a particular language. In our study, physical organs and sensations seemed to play an important role, a point we develop next.

Languages as embodied

Coffey (2015) argues that LPs invite the use of metaphors that are embodied and emotional. In our case, such metaphorical embodiments were indeed often associated with organs. For instance, the mother tongue (Arabic) with lungs, English with intestines, and Turkish with the stomach (Ahmet: Fig. 4, Hayriye: Extract 5) or the oesophagus (Ahmet). The participants used such metaphorical representations of languages to express strong emotions about individual hurt and political perceptions, as well as with affection for national cuisine.

Arabic was associated with injuries by two respondents, as strangling and squeezing (Hava), and as persistent scratches or wounds on the body (Sevgi, Fig. 1), and represented as an undesired language. The languages of Pashto and "Indian" were represented as a yin and yang symbol that appears in the stomach area (Harun, Fig. 2), as they were perceived to be politically intertwined. Also referring to politics, Turkish was represented in the stomach as a metaphor for the "upsetting political situation in Turkey" (Hayriye). The stomach was furthermore associated with Turkish symbolising affection for Turkish food (Hayriye and Ahmet).

The heart, being an organ, as well as a widespread symbol of love, is often seen in LPs (e.g. Busch, 2018; Coffey, 2015). This also features in several portraits in our study (Kezban, Merve, Enes, Ahmet). An interesting use of symbolism can be found in Hanifi's LP, as English and Turkish seem to contain or surround other languages (Tagalog, Spanish, Azeri Arabic) in the heart space. Interestingly, Arabic (presumably standard or Sun-State variety) occupies the feet and hands, symbolising use in the outside world. Similar to Prasad's (2014) findings, blank or white space can have symbolic meaning. Hanifi: "I like learning languages and I feel empty inside of me…I need to learn more languages." In her case, white is the space in the core of her body which can be filled with further languages. Other LPs also feature white space (Enes, Ahmet, Sevgi, Hava) without mentioning this as meaningful (see Fig. 1 and 3). All others filled out their silhouettes with colours, as exemplified in Fig 2 and 4.

Languages and territorial identity constructions

According to Duff (2015), language repertoires are associated with forms of citizenship that may be salient identity markers in migratory contexts. There seemed to be linguistic identity constructions based on local (Alev, Hayriye, Merve, Burak), ancestral and national (Burak, Hayriye, Alev, Kezban, Merve, Sevgi), as well as international orientations (Hayriye, Ahmet, Sevgi, Alev, Burak). As evident from this section, identity constructions based on connecting languages with territorial orientations can be highly complex, overlapping and layered, and there can be multiple local, national, and international orientations that can be expressed through languages as identity markers.

Languages and local identifications

Languages associated with the local environment of Sun State are the Sun State variety of Arabic (Alev), English (Merve) and "all languages" (Hayriye). This is illustrated by Hava's LP (Fig. 3), who represented her languages as locally relevant in the present: "I painted all languages here [upper hand] because we use all of them here in Sun State."

In this group, Alev seemed most closely connected with Sun State and the local version of Arabic. Nevertheless, she had mixed feelings about Arabic as she "can only spare one part of my body [leg] to it". Her affiliation with the local Arabic variety seems a pragmatic one, as a tool for future work. English was considered locally relevant by Merve, whereas Burak "can survive without English" in Sun State. This suggests that participants had different linguistic experiences in the same local context, which seems to be a pronounced feature for participants in our study, and possibly also for other adolescents with transnational backgrounds in transitory contexts.

Languages and national orientations

Languages were also associated with nationalities – and in some cases with ancestral links. Some participants associate Turkish in this way with Turkey (Hayriye, Alev, Hava) and Turkishness (Burak). Turkey is described as "our country" (Hayriye) and "my country" (Alev), a country they would defend against others (Alev). Expressing a similar sentiment, Hava (Fig. 3) represented Turkish in red in her heart, because "red always reminds me of Turkey".

Figure 4. *Hayriye's Language Portrait*

Turkish also seemed to be the basis for Burak's national identity, as he chose to represent Turkish on limbs, trunk and head: "Turkish is my mother tongue. It covers all my body. It is something that Turkishness gives me, you know…we say we are Turks…".

However, Turkishness was evaluated critically by Hayriye (Fig. 4), seemingly informed by national politics. Her religious identity associated with Islam seems to offer an alternative to national affiliation for her.

In contrast, Kezban's mother tongue (Turkish), and the mother tongues of her mother (Tagalog), and father (Arabic) who grew up in Turkey (Turkish), link her to two countries (Philippines, Turkey) through several languages. Similarly, Alev and Merve associated (Hatay) Arabic with ancestral links to Turkey. For instance, Merve said that she spoke Turkish, when in Turkey, and Hatay Arabic, with older people there, "because elderly people do not know Turkish".

It is important to be aware that languages associated with national and ancestral links can take on different meanings in people's lives, as they can, but may not necessarily, serve as strong identity markers.

Languages and international identifications

An international orientation was expressed in complex ways, sometimes alongside national orientations (Burak, Hayriye, Sevgi and Alev). English is seen to connect to the world, as Hayriye's quote above about making friends through English in China or Japan illustrates, or Alev's view that for her "English has a big influence in the whole world". Indeed, Sevgi felt that English allowed her to "embrace everyone with my arms".

Interestingly, both a national language (Turkish for Ahmet) and an international lingua franca (English for Sevgi) were perceived as lenses through which the world can be viewed. Sevgi (Fig. 1) said: "I painted eyes in blue because I see the world through English". For her English seemed to help her escape a "restricted life in a narrow environment", thus the new language offered her new identity options. In contrast, Ahmet stated "my eyes are blue because I see the world as a Turk", rooted in national belonging.

Languages and future/imagined identities

As maintained by Busch (2018), languages are not just important for identity in the present, but also for an understanding of the self chronologically, perhaps in the course of a lifetime. An analysis of the LPs and the interviews indicated that the chronological aspect consists of two sub-themes (See Table 2) related to future selves and language shifts the participants expect. The past and the present dimensions that form part of a wider chronological dimension overlap largely with the topics above, so they were not developed as separate themes.

Languages associated with the future selves

The interviews indicated that English was considered a language of their future selves by 6 participants, as illustrated by Enes: "My right hand (upper hand) is English, and it represents my future.

In terms of metaphorical analysis, the participants who associated English with the future associated this language with all parts of the body, as it was pragmatically deemed useful for work (Kezban) and travel (Burak) in the future. This instrumental motivation to include English was made explicit by Kezban who reserved the heart space for Turkish (intense purple),

one of the languages spoken in his home, but: "English will spread more [on my body]. It may even cover everywhere – except the heart".

Besides English, other languages were considered relevant for the future: Spanish (Hava, Ahmet, Hanifi), German (Hava), Japanese (Sevgi), French (Yasemin) and Azeri Turkish (Hanifi). For instance, Ahmet and Hanifi placed Spanish in the heart, as a language they desired to learn in the future (intense green and red). Sevgi wished Japanese to play a bigger role in the future, based on past experiences. Thus, on the one hand we identified the desire to add new languages in a vision of the future selves; on the other a desire to strengthen or rekindle languages already present in the plurilingual repertoire.

While Coffey's (2015) metaphorical framework associates the core with family languages, our study shows that languages associated with future selves can also be associated with both, pragmatic visions and strong emotional ties.

Language identity shifts expected

Five participants expected some languages to lose and some to gain importance in their future lives: for Alev, Hatay Arabic (intense green) was expected to "shrink to a very small place" in the future. As illustrated in Extract 7, Harun, whose family language is Persian, expected many languages to play a role in the future, but he anticipated a shift to English, potentially severing or weakening ties with some linguistic affiliations, above all Turkish. Given he opted to be interviewed in English, this shift from Turkish to English may have already been in process at the time of data collection.

> Extract 7: **"**Arabic is kind of going to evolve in a meaningful way but not too much. Turkish might fade away a little. English is going to keep going massively. Persian is going to be equal to English but a little down. I do not assume I am going to be speaking Turkish forever…might be… But I am not going to make that as my life goal to always speak Turkish…because eventually, I am going to leave everything that I have kept in Turkey…I might still have friends, like Ibrahim, to speak Turkish with…but eventually, they are going to learn English and I can speak English with them." (Harun)

Arabic constituted one of the main additional languages to gain importance besides English, for Harun, Alev and Merve. Harun, again, expected Arabic (purple in the legs) to become more important in the future to practice Islam, while Alev clarified that the Sun-State variety of Arabic (dark green) rather than the Hatay variety (lighter green) would gain importance in the future, as she intended to return to Sun State after university, presumably for work.

Languages that were expected to decrease in the future were Azeri Turkish (red with a narrow stripe on the neck) for Merve, as she "will probably go away", Arabic (dark green on an arm and a leg) and English (intense purple on head and a leg) will become more important. Whereas Sevgi said that she "will probably get rid of Arabic. It is a burden to me now. I would like to learn different languages" (Arabic is brown, see Extract 8). Interestingly, some seemed to take a pragmatic view, such as Harun, whereas others expressed emotionally fraught views, which strongly suggest that the first language or the family language is not necessarily a preferred language: Sevgi expressed a deep longing to leave Arabic behind and build a new linguistic identity based on Turkish and English:

> Extract 8: "Arabic is brown because I don't like this colour at all. And it is in the ears because I am very familiar with this language…and I put some scratches all over my body in brown because I can't get rid of this language even if I want to a lot. […] This is different in English and Turkish...they are great." (Sevgi)

The strong sentiment about Arabic as a negative presence, and something that was not desired for the future, is reflected in both Sevgi's (Extract 8) and Hava's reports. From the reflective researcher notes, we know that Hava and Sevgi are best friends. There is a possibility that they influenced each other's opinions or the strength of their opinions. Such findings suggest that new languages can offer new identity options, through which family languages and past experiences can be left behind.

Discussion and Conclusion

We presented a unique context in which plurilingual repertoires of young people were shown to play a complex, dynamic and unpredictable role in relation to social, symbolic, territorial, and imagined identities, illustrated through language portraits (see summary in Table 2). Our study contributes to research in three distinct ways. First, it uses sociolinguistic lenses to establish the way adolescents in our context negotiate, resist, imagine and desire certain linguistic identities. This adds to a budding body of research on linguistic identity constructions in GCC contexts more generally (Hillman & Eibenschutz, 2018; Hopkyns & Zoghbor, 2022; ONeill, 2017), and Khondker (2022) in particular. Second, we add to the small body of research that uses LPs internationally to examine identity constructions in adolescents (Bristowe et al., 2014; Prasad, 2014). Thirdly, it reviews the interpretation of the symbolism in LPs, and fourthly, confirms LPs as valuable pedagogic instruments.

Linguistic identity constructions in GCC

Our findings revealed how 12 young people negotiated their identities in the presence of complex tensions that inevitably exist between family, homeland, school, and the local society, all within a wider globalised world and the dominant presence of English as a lingua franca. Given the participants attended the same school and had similar linguistic backgrounds, it was surprising to find the highly diverse and individual links they tended to develop between their linguistic repertoires and the desired, imagined and resisted identities they seemed to construct. Our findings, regarding this seemingly homogenous transnational group, show that English as a local and international lingua franca seemed to play an important role for many of them in the globalised identity constructions as adolescents. However, the findings showed that their relationship with the same language, English, can be perceived differently inside and outside the classroom, and that this again differs between participants. This affiliation with English, especially outside the classroom, as a local and global resource, seems to be a source of confidence and is associated with future aspirations for many. So far so similar, however our study was able to unpack how participants develop dynamic, complex and highly diverse linguistic identities that are largely unpredictable. The way participants constructed their *linguistic identities depended on concrete communicative contexts* in which languages are used (linguistic identities related to society, school, home, and friendships), and on how *languages*

are associated with potential identities (future and imagined linguistic identities). This understanding of languages as means to communicate and potential resources, as established by Blommaert (2006), denotes the present and future relationship that participants may have or aspire to have with their languages, and what those languages might mean in their lives. However, their usages and envisaged trajectories vary greatly, depending on how *languages are understood as positioned* (linguistic identities as related to core identities and social status). Such norms and positionings can be in competition with one another (Blackledge & Creese, 2016), adding to the complexity of this relationship. The way language hierarchies are understood depends to some extent also on how *languages are understood to be territorially relevant* (local, national, international). Some might refer to "glocalisation" (e.g. Khondker, 2022) to account for this, as local, national and global strands can be intertwined, overlapping or contradictory.

As we have shown, languages and language varieties, including in our case English, Arabic and other languages, informed our participants' – sometimes ambivalent – territorial affiliations, social positions, as well as symbolic and imagined identities. Using and developing several languages simultaneously may well offer a resource of strength, as it enables alternative imaginations of oneself and one's future. In this regard, we complement Khondker's (2022) study with young Bangladeshi nationals in the UAE, as well as Hillman and Eibenschutz's (2018) work with adults, by portraying how adolescents with migrant backgrounds construct their identities through their consistently complex and fluid plurilingual repertoires that might be a strength and valuable resource, of which participants are aware, if – as through our research – given a chance to reflect. Such awareness, however, may not be automatic.

Our thematic structure (Table 2) and findings (Chapter 3), together with existing research, offer a valuable starting point for further research on plurilingual identity constructions in GCC contexts. Specifically, research will be necessary to further develop the picture of linguistic identities, and the negotiation of these in so-called transit states for students with transnational Arabic backgrounds, such as young people in our study or other learner groups. We focussed on a small group, using a language identity lens. Future studies may need to take into consideration ethnicity, stereotyping, gender issues as suggested by ONeill (2017), or the relevance of locally used English varieties (see Hillman & Eibenschutz, 2018), and what such additional dimensions might mean for national and incoming groups, as well as what happens at any intersections between the groups.

LP research with adolescents

In our study, all our adolescent participants expressed diverse and complex feelings about languages in their lives, echoing and complementing findings from other studies with similar age groups (Bristowe et al, 2014; Lytra & Jorgensen, 2008; Prasad, 2014). Our work in GCC contexts, characterised by high mobility, indicates that links between identity constructions and plurilingual repertoires may be even less predictable and more individual than, say in South Africa, where some commonalities were found among adolescent participants (Bristowe et al., 2014). Specifically, combined findings strongly call into question the often presumed – and in some contexts documented (Bristowe et al., 2014) – link between national or first languages and core understandings of self; thus underpinning Auer's (2005) warning that "simple and

seemingly straightforward links between language and ethnicity (speaking Turkish-being Turkish) may fail" (p. 409). Moreover, our study along with Khondker (2022) confirms that language practices or language use cannot serve as a reliable indication of emotional affiliation with a language or identification with a language group. Thus, these combined findings from GCC contexts seem to question Lytra and Jorgensen's (2008) conclusion that dual-language practice can be interpreted as dual identity. However, it supports the idea of alternative identities that are constructed outside of school as proposed by Lytra and Barac (2008), which may be a more wide-spread phenomenon among adolescents.

Similarly to Busch (2018) and Bristowe et al. (2014) we used the LPs to gain an understanding of plurilingual identities over time. Based on this, we suggest that adolescents' desires and motivations to learn new languages in the future need to be taken seriously in education, as young people prepare for unpredictable futures in a multilingual and interconnected world. Thus, we recommend the use of LPs as a pedagogic tool to facilitate reflection on languages as a resource that enables diverse life plans. On reflection, our sample may be less unique than it appeared at first sight, as it is not unusual for young people from a minority language region (here Hatay region in Turkey) to have two or more family languages, and to find themselves in transit situations, such as refugee or work migration contexts globally, where they may or may not intend to remain. Therefore, our findings offer a warning applicable to all contexts, namely that we should not jump to conclusions as to what languages might mean to young people without asking them, and LPs are one way of finding out.

Symbolism in LPs

In our study, many participants used graphic anatomy as metaphors to represent languages in their body silhouette, such as intestines to represent English. Similar anatomic detail, albeit to a lesser extent, was also found in Bristowe et al. (2014) study. This seems to be a departure from other contexts where national flags or national emblems were used to symbolise languages (e.g. Coffey, 2015), and potentially a feature of adolescent engagement with LPs. We can only speculate where the inspiration to use such symbols originated, perhaps in recent lessons on anatomy, or through classroom displays. Therefore, wider contextual and semiotic information may be needed, in addition to interviews, to adequately understand and interpret symbolism and metaphors in LPs. Furthermore, we found that languages represented by a certain colour could take on different situational meanings. For instance, participants reported feeling differently about English inside and outside the classroom. Thus, colour or its intensity cannot be interpreted easily, as this might depend on the situation learners have in mind when choosing a colour. To gain deeper insights into this complexity, it might be necessary to ask participants to fill in silhouettes for different social situations.

Pedagogic use of LPs

Educationally, the findings from this study had significant implications for the teacher researcher (first author) engaged in this study. Thus, confirming Coffey's (2015) point that LPs can also expand teachers' language awareness. Engaging in this research project challenged some assumptions that the first author entertained about languages in education more generally,

and about his learners in TCS in particular. Previously, he had been of the opinion that Turkish and Arabic, as heritage or national languages, would be relatively reliable identity markers, as suggested in some of the literature (e.g. Bristowe et al., 2014; Yıldırım, 2020). There is increasing evidence that in many contexts such links cannot be taken for granted.

Incorporating the innovative and multimodal tool of LPs into English language teaching practice proved to offer a profound way to weave the complex concept of linguistic identity into everyday pedagogy in TCS, suggesting that this may be a useful tool in GCC contexts. LPs can foster critical discussions on social/situational identities, encouraging learners to reflect on adolescents' language use in diverse contexts such as school, home, and friendships. Teachers can use real-life scenarios or role-play activities that highlight different social settings where particular language varieties can be used. Expanding on Busch (2018) and Bristowe et al.'s (2014) work, we indicate that LPs also facilitate explorations into symbolic identities, serving as a springboard for conversations about the symbolic resonance of languages and how they might reflect adolescent learners' core being or social positioning. Moreover, our study reveals the significant role of languages in territorial identity constructions, as learners often map their languages onto local, national, and international orientations. By integrating this insight into teaching practices, we can guide learners in their contemplation of how languages intersect with different and overlapping territorial identities. LPs also provide a framework for learners to envision their future or imagined identities, aiding them in understanding their evolving linguistic trajectories. Thus, LP work, such as ours, can complement Hadfield and Dörnyei's book on self-concept and language learning motivation (2014). Taken together, these approaches may help teachers maximize the benefits of reflection, by incorporating goal-setting activities related to language learning into their lesson plans, as suggested by Hadfield and Dörnyei (2014). Students could, thus, reflect on these goals in their LPs, tracking their progress over time and visualizing their future linguistic selves. This may not only enhance their sense of ownership over their learning but also motivate them to work towards their goals in a self-regulated and sustainable way.

Thus, we join other researchers who recommend the use of LPs and follow-up conversations as a pedagogic tool in language classrooms to raise language awareness in learners and teachers, including adolescent groups. This approach may help in-service and prospective teachers reduce the risk of imposing linguistic identities on learners based on unfounded or un-reflected assumptions while giving learners a voice and opening up visions for the future. Ultimately, integrating LPs into the English language classroom leads to a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted role of language in learners' lives, contributing to a more personalized, inclusive, dynamic, and empowering learning environment.

Research and Publication Ethics Statement

Ethics clearance was obtained from the University of Exeter (Ref. M1819-006). The data was collected in the framework of a dissertation in a post-graduate course at the University of Exeter with the same focus. We re-analysed the data for this article.

Statement of Interest

There is no potential competing interest.

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