

## **Translingual Spoken Word Poetry in English for Academic Purposes Online Learning**

Jennifer Burton, PhD

Concordia University

Address for correspondence

1455 de Maisonneuve Blvd

Education Department, FG 6151

Montreal, QC H3G 1M8, Canada

Email: [jennifer.burton@concordia.ca](mailto:jennifer.burton@concordia.ca)

Phone: 647-613-4625

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## **Abstract**

This study explores how translingual spoken word poetry shapes language learning and meaning-making practices in an online English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course during the COVID-19 pandemic. Situated in a Canadian postsecondary institution, the research responds to the persistent dominance of monolingual, form-focused pedagogies that marginalize multilingual students and their affective experiences. Drawing on a framework of translanguaging for critical multilingual language awareness, the study positions language as socially, culturally, and relationally situated, emphasizing emotion as integral to multilingual meaning-making. A qualitative, exploratory design was employed with 15 advanced EAP students, using course artifacts, weekly journals, spoken word poetry collections, and semi-structured interviews. Analysis revealed three interrelated themes: (1) a shift from grammatical correctness toward meaning-making, enabling authentic self-expression; (2) emotional and translingual creativity, where students drew on diverse linguistic and multimodal resources to articulate personal, cultural, and affective experiences; and (3) reciprocal and relational engagement, highlighting students' attention to audience, collaboration, and connection. Findings demonstrate that spoken word poetry curricular activities fosters linguistic flexibility, emotional agency, and critical awareness of metalinguistic difference. The study contributes to EAP pedagogy by illustrating how translingual spoken word poetry practices can humanize language learning, challenge deficit-oriented norms, and cultivate more inclusive, relational, and culturally affirming classrooms.

Key words: spoken word poetry, English for Academic Purposes, translanguaging, critical multilingual language awareness, emotions, arts-based pedagogy

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## Introduction

English-dominant countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia are often framed as “academic superpowers” attracting growing numbers of international students (Altbach, 2013). As Global North higher education expands, academic English instruction has gained importance. In Canada, over 70 university-based English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs serve international students seeking entry into degree programs who have not yet met English proficiency requirements (Douglas & Landry, 2021). However, these programs often operate in the margins of university life (Ding & Bruce, 2017; Marr, 2021) and EAP students are frequently positioned as deficient users of English (Chen, 2020; Chun, 2015), rather than as multilingual individuals with complex linguistic repertoires (Surtees, 2019).

Within this context, a longstanding debate in EAP concerns whether instruction should prioritize general academic competencies or discipline-specific language practices (de Chazal, 2012; Hyland, 2016; Marshall, 2024). Proponents of general competencies note that even within a single discipline, students engage in diverse genres and communicative contexts, making narrow skill-based instruction insufficient (Canagarajah, 2007). While scholars differ on how disciplinary content should be incorporated (Carter, 2023; MacDiarmid & MacDonald, 2021), there is broad agreement that EAP programs aim to prepare students for the linguistic demands of postsecondary education (Van Viegen & Russell, 2019). Since the 2010s, trans-scholarship (e.g., translanguaging, translingualism, translingual practice) has prompted rethinking by challenging entrenched linguistic and cultural boundaries. Translanguaging as theory, pedagogy, and political stance (García & Wei, 2014), aims to dismantle language hierarchies and reposition students’ everyday language practices as assets. Despite its benefits, translanguaging remains underexplored in EAP (Tastanbek, 2024), where monoglossic ideologies and skills-based approaches dominate (Liu et al., 2020; Pomat, 2025).

Responding to a dearth of critical, translingual practice and research, the present study examines spoken word poetry activities implemented in an online EAP classroom in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid shift to online teaching. Spoken word poetry is a multimodal, performance-based art form integrating writing, speaking, emotion, and embodied expression

(Burton & Van Viegen, 2021). Arts-based approaches, such as spoken word poetry, offer promising potential to disrupt dominant academic language norms, legitimize multilingual and affective ways of knowing, and create spaces for students to engage with language as a lived, relational, and emotionally situated practice. Aligning with calls to humanize language teaching by attending to students' linguistic, cultural, and emotional realities (Abdolrezapour et al., 2025) and foregrounding student wellbeing in EAP settings (Marshall, 2024), this study explores how spoken word poetry creates creative, relational spaces for language engagement and meaning-making. The research question is:

How does engaging with translingual spoken word poetry in an online EAP course shape students' language learning and meaning-making practices?

### **Critical Multimodal and Arts-Based Practices**

Arts-based approaches offer a way to enact critical orientations by challenging monolingual, monomodal, and deficit-based practices that limit engagement and creativity. Creativity and translingual playfulness (Dovchin et al., 2024) enable learners to experiment with language, negotiate meaning, and develop linguistic and affective competencies in multimodal, collaborative environments. Research highlights the potential of arts-based practices including drawings (Masson & Van Geel, 2024), literacy maps and narratives (Hillman, 2023; Rajagopal & Shank Lauwo, 2024), photovoice (Ding & Bruce, 2017), and identity texts (Cummins, 2006; Rajendram et al., 2022) to mobilize students' diverse resources often marginalized in traditional classrooms. Digital and multimodal tools further mediate these practices, creating spaces for affective expression, linguistic agency, and resistance to monolingual norms. For example, Yasukawa and Farcus (2023) show how multimodal arts-based activities in tertiary EAP courses supported students' exploration of multilingual identities and critical engagement with academic writing, challenging dominant language ideologies.

Arts-based pedagogy also encourages more flexible, less prescriptive approaches to language teaching (Waterhouse, 2021). Integrating drama, music, visual arts, and spoken word poetry fosters authentic language use, emotional connection, and learner investment (Darvin, 2020; Prasad, 2020; Rajagopal & Kendrick, 2023). Studies demonstrate benefits for vocabulary retention and communicative engagement when language emerges from meaningful artistic

activity (Anderson & Chung, 2011; Galante, 2024). Emotions are thus integral to learning in arts-based practices. While such pedagogies are well established in second language education, spoken word poetry remains underexplored as a pedagogical practice.

### **Empirical Research on Spoken Word Poetry**

Spoken word poetry, as a multimodal, arts-based practice, provides learners with opportunities to engage with language in flexible, expressive, and transformative ways through the creative combination of linguistic and non-linguistic modes like gesture, rhythm, and emotion. Research on spoken word poetry has mainly been conducted in K-12 English Language Arts classrooms, with a lack of focus examining its impact on teaching and learning in second language education contexts. Recently, however, Jussilin and colleagues (2024) argue that spoken word choreographies, which refers to word- and movement-based choreographies, provide a potentially valuable approach to language teaching by moving beyond students' limitations in vocabulary, structure, and grammar, and instead emphasizing playfulness and creative exploration as integral to language-learning processes. Research by Burton and Van Viegan (2021) and Burton (2025) illustrates how spoken word pedagogy promotes embodied meaning-making, identity exploration, and affective engagement, extending learners' communicative repertoires beyond conventional language norms. In the context of this study, the integration of translingual spoken word poetry into an EAP classroom serves two primary purposes: first, to question and disrupt prevailing monolingual and pragmatically oriented pedagogical practices. Second, to facilitate the development of students' linguistic flexibility and self-expression through a modality that balances creative and critical engagement in an academic context. This paper focuses on how learners use language, experience it effectively, and negotiate meaning through their participation in spoken word poetry.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### ***Translanguaging for Critical Multilingual Language Awareness***

This study is grounded in a theoretical framework that engages translanguaging for critical multilingual language awareness (CMLA) (Burton et al., 2024). Translanguaging plays a central role in fostering CMLA, preparing both teachers and learners to engage with language as a

socially, politically, and ideologically situated practice. Translanguaging for CMLA was developed in response to recent criticisms that translanguaging lacks criticality. Rather than treating language as neutral or fixed, this perspective encourages reflection on how language ideologies shape access, power, and legitimacy within classrooms and broader societal contexts. Translanguaging supports teachers and students in critically examining language hierarchies, challenging harmful assumptions, and designing pedagogies that affirm multilingual identities and practices. When teachers validate and mobilize learners' full linguistic repertoires, translanguaging can foster metalinguistic reflection. This critical awareness towards language is a fundamental tenant of CMLA. Another key dimension of CMLA is emotion (Prasad & Lory, 2020), as it shapes how learners experience, value, and negotiate language practices within unequal social and educational contexts. This study assumes that emotions are central to multilingual meaning-making and critical language awareness and considers how students' emotional engagements with language emerge through translanguaging spoken word poetry in an online EAP setting. As a framework, translanguaging for CMLA is underexplored in EAP environments, where institutional pressures to conform to standardized English academic norms remain strong.

## **Research Design**

The qualitative research study in this paper is based on a general inquiry methodology and follows an exploratory approach due to the limited existing research on students' experiences with using spoken word poetry as a pedagogy for language learning in academic settings. This approach was chosen to gain insight into students' perspectives and to explore their personal, in-depth experiences with the spoken word poetry curricular activities. By adopting this methodology, the study aims to uncover nuanced understandings of how spoken word poetry shapes students' engagement with language learning and use in an academic setting.

### ***Design and Implementation of the Spoken Word Poetry Curriculum***

The spoken word curriculum was co-developed through a practitioner–researcher partnership (Tian & Shepard-Carey, 2020; Lau & Stille, 2014) between language instructor Nancy (pseudonym) and me. It was integrated into an Advanced EAP core course delivered in a blended

format during COVID-19 (approximately 40% synchronous and 60% asynchronous). Of 72 synchronous hours, 11 focused on spoken word poetry. Students were informed that the curriculum was part of a research project, with voluntary participation that would not affect grades. The sequence of weekly tasks are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Spoken word poetry curriculum by week

Spoken Word Poetry Curriculum Overview			
By Week	Synchronous Zoom Hours	Class Topic	In-Class Tasks
Week 1	1 hour	Introduction to Spoken Word Poetry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students listen to spoken word performance focussing on the message, performance, language, and their personal connection.</li> <li>- Students collectively define spoken word poetry in their own words.</li> </ul>
Week 2	2 hours	Standing in the Shoes of Another	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students listen to several spoken word performances and write in their journal using any language of choice about the poem's topic on language learning, racism, native speakerism, English and power.</li> </ul>
Week 3	2 hours	Brainstorming & Pre-writing: Awakening Inspiration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students identify feelings words in their diverse language resources in an online multilingual word wall.</li> <li>- In small groups, students discuss assumptions others make about them, how they want others to see them, and what they want others to know about them.</li> </ul>
Week 4	2 hours	Drafting & Shaping Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students write a story and choose an audience for their poem.</li> <li>- Students edit their writing to include rhetorical strategies and voice (humor, repetition, counting, sentence length, alliteration, rhyme, simile)</li> </ul>
Week 5	2 hours	Sharing Spoken Word Poetry: Practicing with/as an Audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In small self-selected groups, students share what their poem is about, how they felt writing it, who the poem is for, and some/all of their poems (optional).</li> <li>- Students actively listen to their peers and respond to the prompt: When I listen (hear) your words... I feel, I think about, I notice, I (don't) understand, I wonder...</li> </ul>
Week 6	1 hour	Final Showcase: Poetry Slam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students sign up to volunteer to perform their spoken word poems.</li> <li>- Students provide multimodal and verbal feedback to their peers</li> </ul>
Week 7	1 hour	Spoken Word Poetry Collection & Reflections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students compile their poems in a book with discussion questions to be used as a pedagogical resource for future classes.</li> <li>- Students suggested titles and later anonymously voted on what became the title of their spoken word poetry collection: <i>Small World, Big Stories: Reflections of Ourselves</i>.</li> </ul>

Alt Text of Table 1:

Overview of the spoken word poetry curriculum, detailing each week's number of hours, class topics, and in-class tasks.

### ***Context and Participants***

This study took place in an Advanced EAP class at a Canadian postsecondary institution with nearly 3,000 international students from almost 100 countries. Our research focused on 17 students with 15 participating in the study (8 men and 7 women, aged 18-32). These participants were proficient in 15 languages other than English (see Table 2). Students either used their real names or self-selected pseudonyms for the study. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, all online classes were conducted via Zoom, which allowed for flexibility across different time zones, making it possible to include one student who relocated from India to Canada mid-semester.

Table 2. Participant background and demographic information.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender (Self-identified)</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>City &amp; Country of origin</b>	<b>Self-Reported Multilingual Competence</b>
Rania	Woman	20	Pakistan	English, Urdu, Arabic (Not fluent)
Dena	Woman	26	Idlib, Syria	Arabic (Native), English (Advanced)
Kaseem	Man	25	Damascus, Syria	Arabic (Mother tongue), Spanish (Beginner), English (Intermediate)
James	Man	20	Padova, Italy	Hindi, Gujarati (Language of State), Italian (Advanced), English (Advanced), French
Kammy	Woman	20	Kotkapura, India	Punjabi (Mother tongue), Hindi, English
Shah	Man	23	Bangladesh	Bangla, English
Marcus	Man	22	Chengdu, China	Chinese, English
Mursal	Woman	32	Afghanistan	Dari (Persian) (Advanced), Pashto (Advanced), English (Very good), Urdu (Very good)
Matix	Man	19	El Koura, Lebanon	Arabic (Native), English (Advanced), French (Beginner)
Bobo	Man	26	Liaoning, China	Chinese, English
L	Woman	18	Shanghai, China	Chinese, Korean (Beginner), English

Masa	Man	23	Hangzhou, China	Chinese, English, Japanese (Learning)
Ry	Woman	22	Jiyuan, China	Chinese, English
Jasmeen	Woman	20	Punjab, India	Punjabi, Hindi (Indian national language), English
Om	Woman	19	Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam	Vietnamese, English

Alt Text for Table 2:

Table showing participants' names, cities, countries they have lived in, and their self-reported multilingual competence.

### ***Instructor Participant***

Nancy, the instructor who co-designed and implemented the spoken word poetry curriculum, holds a bachelor's and master's degree in education. She also completed a TESL certification program, which consisted of 5 classes and a one-semester practicum. Although she has worked with diverse learners in various contexts, most of her experience is in higher education. At the time of the study, she had 17 years of ESL teaching experience—15 of those in the same language program, teaching all levels from beginner to advanced. She had been a tenure-track instructor for three years. While she knows some French, Nancy identified as a monolingual English speaker at the start of the study.

### ***Researcher Positionality***

As both a teacher and a researcher, I prioritize recognizing emotions as a valid form of knowledge in the classroom and view language teaching as deeply connected to emotional experiences. I draw on 20 years of experience teaching English as a Second Language, including 15 years in Canada and 5 in South Korea, which have shaped my approach to language education and informed my ongoing commitment to culturally, linguistically, and affectively responsive teaching. My teaching philosophy embraces students' languages, identities, cultures, emotions, and life stories as essential parts of the learning process. At the same time, I remain critically aware of the unequal power dynamics often present in the EAP classroom. As a cishetero, white, "native" English-speaking woman, I acknowledge the limits of my understanding regarding the marginalization faced by racialized international students. This awareness compels me to foster

inclusive and equitable learning environments and to continuously reflect on my own privilege (King, 2024).

***Data Sources and Analysis***

For my analysis, I employed several data sources, which included course materials, student and instructor interviews, journals, and students’ spoken word poetry book, as detailed in Table 3.

Table 3. Summary of data sources

Type of Data	Details of Data Sources
Whole-class curriculum document.	The curriculum was posted on Google Docs and was worked on simultaneously alone and in groups.
Student/Instructor Post-Semester Interviews	13 out of 15 students joined Zoom interviews lasting 55-80 minutes, except for Dena’s 3-hour interview over two days. I supplemented these interviews with my observations from class and prompts from their weekly journal and classwork. Students reflected on course moments, topics, and incidents. Instructor Nancy’s post-semester interview extended to two meetings: 80 minutes for the first and 75 minutes for the second interview.
Weekly Online Student Journals	Students completed an online journal guided by weekly reflection prompts. The content of students’ weekly journals and the details of their sharings was used to facilitate the semi-structured interviews at the end of the program.
Spoken word poetry collection and pedagogical guide	Compilation of participants’ poems in a book with discussion questions.

Alt Text for Table 3:

Summary table of data sources showing the types of data collected and detailed explanations of each.

I organized the data in NVivo to examine patterns both within individual sources (e.g., journals, interviews, spoken word performances) and across participants’ narratives. This enabled a

multi-perspective analysis, allowing me to compare and cross-verify findings to strengthen credibility. For instance, recurring expressions of linguistic and emotional agency emerged in students' written reflections and spoken word performances and were further confirmed in follow-up interviews, where participants described drawing on their full linguistic repertoires as central to their learning. Using thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017), which is well-suited to this study because it offers a flexible, participant-centered approach that supports critical inquiry, I systematically identified and refined patterns across these data sources iteratively guided by the research question. I present three themes as they relate to how EAP students use, feel about, and negotiate meaning-making with language.

## **Findings**

### ***Shifting Focus from Grammatical Correctness to Meaning Making***

Engaging in spoken word curricular activities marked a shift in learners' understanding of their use of language, specifically as it related to grammar. Based on previous language learning experiences, students bring convictions about the importance of grammatical correctness into the classroom. For example, Marcus remarked:

I still remember during my primary school grade six, if you have more than five grammar problems, your article will get zero. The grammar test decrease my ambition of English study. I really love English, but I always get zero for my article because of the grammar problem.

Rania also commented on the relationship between grammar and grades, "So, I always make sure that I should learn grammar more. And I really think it is bad to learn without grammar, you know, it's gonna negatively affect your grading." Rania associated grammar mistakes with poor grading. This fear of making mistakes permeates students' classroom language practices and may constrain their willingness to experiment with language for personal expression and communication. Nancy stated:

[Students] can write sentences of, like, their family, and say, I have four sisters and a brother, and then you find out they have no siblings. Language teaching can be not authentic at all, but for the sake of grammar, they can go through the motions.

According to Nancy, when producing grammatically correct language is the object of study, learners may be restricted in their ability to communicate authentically.

Spoken word poetry, however, does not necessarily need to follow the conventional grammatical patterns of subject-verb-object that students are familiar with and expect to conform to in essay writing. Nancy told the students that the focus of the spoken word poetry curricular tasks was on conveying meaning. Given that almost all the participants in this study had limited or no experience with spoken word poetry, this was likely the first time they had to think differently about grammar in a language class.

Students had strong feelings about the relationship between grammatical correctness and self-expression, as indicated in Table 4.

Table 4. Student Responses to relationship between grammatical correctness and self-expression

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Quotation</b>
Ry	“Without grammar is freedom, I just express my idea.”
Kassem	“I found myself, I’m free, I’m free from the English restrictions and now I can play with the tone. Like sometimes, if you want to follow the English rule I thought I cannot deliver the tone or the feeling I want to deliver, but for spoken word, I have no restrictions”
Matrix	“It’s my favourite to use a language without worry about the grammar. I feel I can speak comfortably without worrying about if I make a mistake or not.”
Mursal	“It feels better because you don’t feel anxious about it. The grammar is not important here, so who cares? Yeah, [you can] be more creative and think about the ideas more than worrying about the mistakes.”
Dena	“Students are being more able to feel the English language rather than memorize it.”
Kammy	“I feel good because I share my feelings in English without any worry about grammar.”
James	“I think, if we were going to look at the grammar and everything, yeah, I think no one could express themselves [the way they did]. They just write the poem like for an exam, for like, class, proper class. I think without grammar, I was able to express myself more. It was much easier.”
Marcus	“Sometimes, it’s hard to use the normal sentence to express our emotional feeling. And with the different structure of poetry, it’s really a strong, strong expression of your feeling.”

Alt Text for Table 4:

A quotation of eight participant responses related to grammar and self-expression.

For these students, grammar was interconnected with correctness and when relieved of the burden to pay attention to form, they felt less anxious and worried about making mistakes and could focus more easily on creatively expressing ideas and feelings.

However, this uncoupling from language rules was not an indication that learners did not value grammar, as Dena expressed in her post-semester interview:

You don't need to pay attention to small details when you are delivering more powerful and personal things, you know, even though, in my opinion, I see grammar is really important because they can change events. Even you guys didn't like do any pressure on us in terms of grammar. But I tried to write grammar very correctly because, like, if I talked about [something in] the past, and I use present [tense], you'll be confused, you know?

The focus for Dena was on grammatical accuracy for effective communication. Grammar was context-specific and relevant in conveying students' stories accurately, rather than a set of rules that needed to be memorized and applied judiciously. The genre and form of spoken word poetry provided the students with an affordance, however momentarily, to shift the focus from the minutiae of correctness to self-expression, or from form to meaning.

### ***Fostering Emotional Expression Through Translingual Creativity***

This theme describes a student-initiated and instructor-initiated translanguage activity that supports emotional expression mediated through the creative use of multiple modes and languages. In response to the free writing prompts, several students employed a diverse range of linguistic and multimodal resources in their online journals, Zoom chats, and breakout room discussions. Rania, for example, wrote a story about her family in her home language of Urdu. When prompted to write about a picture of something or someone significant, Om chose to describe a photograph of her mother in Vietnamese. These stories were deeply personal, reflecting the learners' cultural identities, emotional connections, and linguistic repertoires. By encouraging students to draw on their diverse linguistic resources, the activity not only validated their multilingual experiences but also fostered a more inclusive and reflective learning environment that positioned their lived experiences and their associated emotions as valuable sources of knowledge.

One student, Bobo, a 26-year-old petroleum engineering doctoral student, who had recently arrived from China, wrote an unprompted poem in his journal titled 北(běi)京(jīng) to “guide [me] in my shortcomings” (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Journal excerpt from Bobo, February 3, 2021

The screenshot shows a Google Docs document with a journal excerpt on the left and a comment thread on the right. The journal excerpt is written in Chinese characters with Pinyin and English translations. The comment thread shows four comments from Jennifer Burton, each with a profile picture, name, timestamp, and a checkmark indicating it has been read.

**Journal Excerpt:**

Nǐ hǎo, Jennifer.  
I wrote a poem improvised, I hope you like it, and I hope you can guide you in the shortcomings.  
I love that you wrote a poem :) I was so happy to receive this. If I read this poem with the English you provided, I can feel the rhyming. I don't know what it means exactly but it is a poem about Beijing. Can you help me understand this poem?  
Reply: It is a great honor to explain this poem for you.

北(bèi)京(jīng)  
千(qiān) 古(gǔ) 帝(dì) 王(wáng) 域(yù),  
**Explanation:** Beijing is an ancient city with a history of the previous year. Many emperors of China chose to live in Beijing.

万(wàn) 千(qiān) 历(lì) 史(shǐ) 情(qíng)。  
**Explanation:** The people living in Beijing now continue some old traditions. For example, listening to Beijing opera, visiting lanterns and so on. People's feelings for this ancient city can be traced back thousands of years.

壮(zhuàng) 美(měi) 山(shān) 河(hé) 在(zài),  
**Explanation:** Beijing is an ancient city, so there are many historical relics here. For example, the Royal Garden, Summer Palace, Great Wall, etc. Although it has gone through thousands of years, the beautiful rivers and mountains of this city still exist.

唯(wéi) 有(yǒu) 北(bèi) 京(jīng) 城(chéng)。  
**Explanation:** Although China is a country with an ancient history and there are many cities in China, Beijing is one of the most representative cities.

**Comment Thread:**

- Jennifer Burton 5:10 PM Feb 3 Beijing
- Jennifer Burton 5:10 PM Feb 3 beautiful
- Jennifer Burton 5:10 PM Feb 3 mountain
- Jennifer Burton 5:10 PM Feb 3 river
- Jennifer Burton 5:10 PM Feb 3 Beijing

Alt Text for Figure 1:









A screenshot of a student’s poem written in Chinese characters, accompanied by an English translation and a personal note to the researcher. The researcher replies using the comments feature, providing an English translation of the Chinese characters’ meaning.

In the online exchange with Bobo in Google Docs shown in Figure 1, I replied in English (green writing) commenting on what I had observed about the rhyming of Pinyin. On the right-hand side of the document, I also included the English translation of some Chinese characters that I was able to translate myself. Part of fostering a translanguaging space was to take on some of the linguistic burden for meaning making by leveraging resources I had access to. The multimodal function in Google Docs allowed me to highlight parts of his text to reply in ‘comment’ to demonstrate my understanding, while the colour change functioned to differentiate speakers within the text. As the text indicates, Bobo responds enthusiastically that he would be honoured

to explain the meaning of his poem when I asked for help. Rather than replying to my comments, he writes his English explanation under each stanza in red and blue. Bobo's poem came as a surprise to Nancy and me, and we were wondering if fostering a translanguaging space by greeting Bobo in his home language prompted him to create his own poem in Chinese.

Among the several translanguaging activities that Nancy and I had planned, we noticed particular excitement and engagement from the students in the multilingual word wall exercise (Figure 2). This chart was shared with them through a Google document, so that they could actively express, share, and edit the vocabulary needed to best communicate their feelings. Digital tools like Google Docs and Zoom expanded communication by enabling collaborative annotation and feedback. The objective of this task was collaborating to build this word wall was one of our strategies but it also became a resource reflected in some of the students' final products. Referring to this activity in our post-semester interview, Masa, who was repeating the EAP course, enthusiastically exclaimed, "in ESL class, we have many students from all around the world and that's the first time I see the many languages." This example of an instructor-initiated translanguaging task provides evidence that teachers do not need to share the languages of their students in order to successfully engage in translanguaging activities (García & Wei, 2014).

Figure 2. Multilingual and Multimodal Online Emotions Word Wall from Class 3 (February 10, 2021)

	English	Italian	French	Chinese	Korean	Vietnamese	Bangla	Punjabi	Dari (Persian)	Pashto	Arabic	Japanese	Urdu
	Happy Joyful Excited content	felice	heureux	兴奋 高兴 牛年大吉	행복	vui	খুশি	ਖੁਸ਼ ਖੁਸ਼ੀ	خوش	خوش	سعيد مبسوط فرحان	楽しめる	خوش
	Sleepy Tired exhausted	stanco	somnolent	晕 想睡觉	피곤함	buồn ngủ	ঘুম	ਨੀਂਦ	خواب آلود	ستری	نعسان نام	退屈	تھکن
	Furious Disappointed Frustrated Angry mad	arrabiato	(not able to remember haha)	愤怒		tức giận	রাগি	ਗੁੱਸੇ	قهر ناخوش	غوسه	غاضب معصب	怒り	مایوس
	Surprised shocked	sciocciato	supris	惊讶 出乎意料		ngỡ ngàng	অবাক	ਵੈਰਾਨ	هيجلى	حيران	مصدوم متفاجى	びっくり	صدمه پہچانا
	Heartbroken upset/ not happy	male di cuore	navrè	沮丧 大哭 伤心		rầu rĩ	অখুশি	ਦਿਲ ਟੁੱਟਿਆ	جگر خون	خپه	محیط متعب	心 こ	غمگین بونا
	Stressed Annoyed	annoiato	annuse/str essè	压力 无语		liếc nhìn ngghi ngờ	বিরক্ত	ਤਲਾਖ	به تشويش	خواشینی	مکتب منزعج	压力	زور
	Sad Sorrowful	triste	triste	大哭 伤心 哭泣		khóc	কান্না	ਉਦਾਸ	خفه	خپه	حزين زعلان متضايق	悲しい	اداس
	Nervous uncomfortable	nervoso	nerveux	尴尬 紧张		lạnh, không chắc	ডুল	ਘਬਰਾਏ	عصبانى	ناراحته	متوتر متضايق	神経質	گھبرایا

Alt Text for Figure 2:

Multilingual word wall arranged as a grid, with eight emoji facial expressions listed in rows and translations across thirteen languages in columns.

The emotions vocabulary task served to highlight our collective linguistic resources and, in doing so, emphasized what students know and can do, rather than reinforcing what they do not or cannot do. This task positioned students as individuals within the group, and they responded with enthusiasm and demands for representation. For example, Arabic was accidentally left off the list, which resulted in a learner exclaiming, “Hey where’s my language?” As well, we learned that one student was informally studying Japanese by watching anime, when he requested that this language should also be added to the chart. During this task students made language the topic of investigation and a source of learning. They made metalinguistic observations and comparisons of text direction, characters and Roman letters, accents as well as pronunciations. They explored similarities and differences in vocabulary and concepts related to emotions and emotional expressions across languages and cultures. Thus, the pedagogical metafunctions for translanguaging included developing metalinguistic awareness and creating affective bonds with and between learners (García & Wei, 2014). Students also acknowledged that non-verbal communication was influenced by social and cultural factors. For example, in some cultures, it is

forbidden to directly point at or look in the eyes of a teacher or authority figure. Collectively, these discussions facilitated deeper awareness of diversity and sociocultural differences for students in the EAP classroom, and facilitated translingual creativity.

### ***Considering Reciprocity and Relational Engagement***

The final theme pertains to the reciprocal and relational engagement between students, emphasizing their careful consideration of others' voices and relationships in collaborative meaning-making processes. Nancy reported on her observations of students' engagement in the breakout room and in sharing and providing feedback more generally:

I really saw an authentic engagement with each other's pieces and engagement as an audience and feedback then that was meaningful to the writers and, you know and that for me, that's been a missing piece to really see that students care and that they have listened. They were willing to share these stories ... They were willing to listen to them, and receive them.

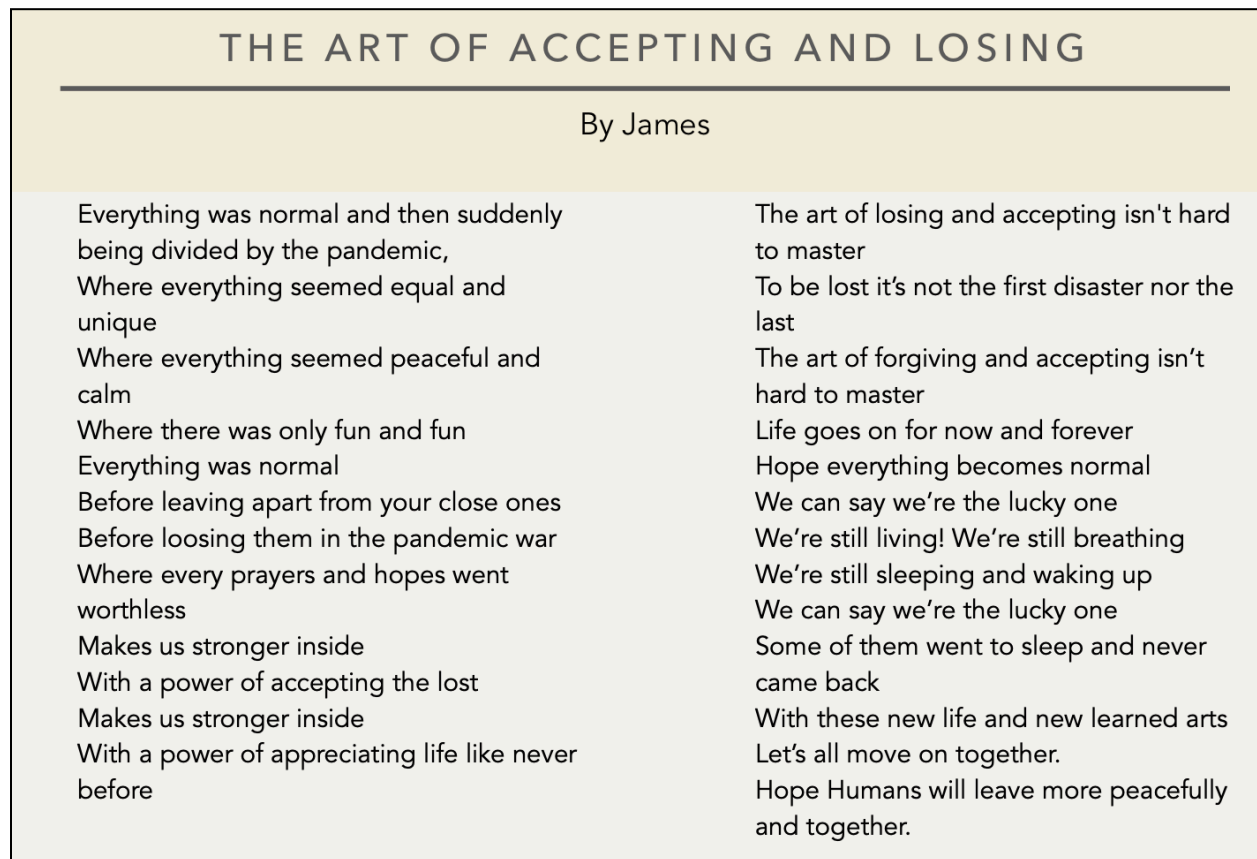
This quotation highlights the reciprocity between the sharer and the receiver, underscoring the relational affordances in connecting the speaker and listener in unique ways, made possible through the genre of spoken word poetry.

This relational aspect was also demonstrated in learners' judicious choosing of their topics. For James, spoken word allowed him to "go deeper with [his] emotions and thoughts", and he wanted to choose a topic that the classmates could relate to,

Every time, when I go for a poem, I just want ... my emotions to go with what we say, like a connection with the audience. I'll choose a topic which is common, like common emotions, share common emotions with the audience.

Enhancing the experience for the audience through shared and common emotions and choosing a topic that impacted everyone mediated a sense of social bonding and connection. It also provided James with an opportunity to gain deeper insights into his emotional self. What I did not know at the time but what James revealed to me in the interview was that he had recently lost a close friend to COVID-19. He contemplated sharing this personal information with the other students in his poem but decided against it because he feared that it would detract from his message of hope.

Figure 3. Spoken word poem by James



Alt Text for Figure 3:

Spoken word poem written by James titled The Art of Accepting and Losing

James seeks a connection with his audience and does so by evoking emotions in line with his words, and by choosing a topic (i.e., the effects of the pandemic on people's lives) that has impacted everyone in the class. Rania carefully chose her topic for reasons similar to James':

You know writing a poem on my late father, I thought about it before sharing ... should I share it? ... I was also worried about how people will react to it. ... So I felt like I'm taking a risk. But I was like, 'no, I have to share it, so many others could relate to me.'

Mursal, who had been living in Canada for seven years, wrote about the challenges immigrants and newcomers face when they come to Canada. Leveraging her knowledge and experience, she offered advice and encouragement to other students in the class in her poem. When asked about the rationale for her decision, she said, "Because most of our classmates were new ... that's why I knew how they were feeling ... I think because that was something that I had feelings about, and I wanted to pass my message through it". Mursal begins her poem with this appeal: "New

immigrants like me. Please dears listen to me” and ends with the reminder: “remember achieving many things is not possible at once...but remember it gets easier over time.” Kammy also wanted the other classmates to “know about [her] story, so they don’t do this mistake in their own life” and when commenting on spoken word, Kassem noted, “the listener would learn lessons from their classmates’ experiences.”

Ry, a student living in China at the time of this study, wrote and recorded an animated spoken word poem which she shared with the instructors only. She was not comfortable performing in front of the class at the poetry slam—a decision we respected as participants’ level of participation was guided by their own judgements. She was, however, willing to communicate the writing process and the content of her poem with a small group of students in a breakout room in Zoom. In her final assessment of the class, she talks about her sharing experiences and making friends:

The subject of my poem is my weight loss experience with my family. For me, it’s a painful experience, I have hardly told anyone about it ... What surprised me was another group member told me they had same experience as me. We shared our own experiences ... That made me very excited and encouraged. We became friends and arranged to meet.

This example demonstrates the potential of spoken word poetry to create connections between students based on shared experiences. Ry’s taking the risk of exposing her painful struggle with weight allowed her to create a connection with another classmate and gave her the confidence to continue sharing. In my post-semester interview, I asked her how she felt when she learned someone else in the group had a similar experience. She responded, “My feeling is just like WOW. I just feel like this (smiles). And I feel happy. And I want to talk about it after I see we have the same topic. I have confidence to continue talking.” Articulating relief and a shared humanity rooted in sisterhood may help Ry realize she is not alone in her struggle. Ry reported that she realized “many other people have the same experience with me” and what she learned from sharing with others was to “be confident and love myself.” Students spent considerable time contemplating the choice of their spoken word topic and the depth of their sharing, revealing what, how much and with whom they would share their poems. Their choices were, indeed, directly motivated by their listeners and showed the deep care and concern they had for others in the class.

## **Discussion & Implications**

This study highlights the pedagogical potential of spoken word poetry to enrich EAP instruction by promoting translingual, multimodal, and emotional engagement. Participants reported a sense of relief and increased freedom to express themselves authentically without the pressure of grammatical accuracy. The incorporation of translingual spoken word poetry in online EAP contexts encouraged students to use language more creatively, engage both critically and emotionally, and negotiate meaning in ways that affirm their multilingual and relational identities. Students, for instance, grappled with representing complex ideas across languages and culturalw, prompting critical reflection on audience, tone, and sociocultural norms. Through these practices, learners developed heightened awareness of the dynamic relationship among language, identity, and power, enabling them to make strategic linguistic choices while contesting monolingual and deficit-oriented assumptions commonly embedded in EAP instruction. However, the findings also indicate that students' engagement in translanguaging remained largely confined to expressive activities, with limited transfer to the critical analysis of academic texts, institutional conventions, or dominant discourses.

Spoken word often elicited personal, political, and emotionally charged content, requiring trust, vulnerability, and co-constructed guidelines to affirm multilingual and hybrid expression (Burton, 2024; Dovchin et al., 2025). Translanguaging exemplifies this pedagogy, enabling fluid engagement with diverse multimodal and multilingual resources. This approach is particularly crucial for EAP students who face unique challenges related to social and academic integration in post-secondary institutions (Jabeen et al., 2019; Van Viegen & Russell, 2019). When rooted in translanguaging for CMLA, spoken word pedagogy challenges dominant power structures and promotes equitable, student-centered classrooms (De Costa et al., 2022; Ponzio & Deroo, 2025). However, integrating spoken word poetry into an EAP program also required institutional advocacy, professional development, and legitimacy-building within conventional curricula, reflecting broader challenges in embedding transformative pedagogies.

Through multimodal tools and inclusive prompts, language learning became dynamic, personal, and culturally affirming, valuing students' diverse linguistic backgrounds and emotional experiences. Although not part of the research design, the online, multimodal context mediated

student engagement. Tools such as Zoom and shared Google documents enabled interactions across languages, as exemplified by a student writing a poem in Pinyin, with key words translated via Google Translate. This example demonstrates that instructors need not be familiar with students' languages to support meaningful translanguaging practices. Online environments may have also facilitated risk-taking and deeper connections among students, highlighting the reciprocal and relational nature of arts-based, translanguaging pedagogy. Future research opens promising avenues for digital multimodal work, particularly in light of recent AI advancements that can support critical engagement in processes of creative language learning.

This study provides empirical evidence for arts-based pedagogical practices in academic settings, highlighting spoken word poetry as a uniquely relational activity. Students demonstrated relationality by carefully considering topics and positioning themselves from the listener's perspective, supporting research that spoken word provides authentic opportunities to speak and listen with peers. Learner autonomy over content also contributed to a sense of ownership and relevance (Kohnke, 2019). Ultimately, spoken word poetry offers an example for EAP and multilingual education that bridges creativity and academic rigor, encouraging students to engage deeply with language, identity, and meaning-making. Conducted with a small group at one Canadian university, the findings may not fully generalize across other institutional, cultural, or linguistic contexts. Future research should examine spoken word poetry in diverse EAP or multilingual settings with varied proficiency levels, investigate long-term outcomes, and explore its impact on skill transfer and learner development across academic and communication contexts. Finally, the findings underscore the importance of designing inclusive, multimodal, and affectively supportive learning environments, whether online or in person, and of integrating institutional support to sustain innovative pedagogies.

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