

# Autobiography and Second Language Self-Talk: Truth, Gender, and Identity

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## Abstract

The process of learning a second language requires that we, as teachers and students, open the discourse in classrooms and practice situations to our lives in ways that we often take for granted in first language (L1) situations. The result of second language (L2) discourse is what I call self-talk, an exchange of ideas about a variety of everyday subjects that implicate the self. Self-talk in the L2 learning context can be understood as a form of personal narrative. Even though there are a number of studies about the role of second languages in eliciting personal accounts, there has been little consideration of how autobiography is related to learning a second language. From a review of the literature, I have noticed that both autobiography and L2 learning are wrapped up in the problems of truth, gender, and identity. Therefore, it is my assumption, based on the literature and my experience as a teacher, that producing self-talk in L2 learning contexts results in identity construction. Furthermore, identity construction is impeded by the problems of truth claims and gender issues. Conceptualizing L2 learning within this framework could prove helpful in transforming gendered power structures and asymmetries.

**Keywords:** ESL, Autobiography, Gender, Identity, Truth, Personal Narrative.

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## Introduction

As an instructor that has worked for 12 years in the English as a second language (ESL) domain in a variety of different learning contexts, I find the connection between second language (L2) learning and autobiography to be strikingly evident. The process of learning a second language requires that we, as teachers and students, open the discourse in classrooms and practice situations to our lives in ways that we often take for granted in first language (L1) situations. The result of these L2 discussion forums is what I call self-talk, an exchange of ideas about a variety of everyday subjects that implicate the self. Self-talk in the L2 learning context can arguably be understood as a form of personal narrative. As well, a number of theorists studying autobiography acknowledge how personal narratives are a particularly important form of autobiography (Anderson, 2001, Bruner, 1995, Long, 1999, to name a few). Furthermore, some theorists acknowledge the importance of often overlooked everyday experiences in the study of autobiography. Jerome Bruner (1995), for example, notes the importance of verbalizing implicit narratives, or as he calls it, that which "goes without saying" (p. 161). Judy Long (1999) underscores the role of personal narratives in revealing gender arrangements in society, and Linda Anderson (2001) looks towards the notion of testimonies about everyday life to inform her understanding of autobiography. Long also notes how the spoken word is the paradigm for the text (Long, 1995, p. 5) arguing against those who would claim the primacy of the written text and the static and closed nature of the genre of autobiography. All of the theorists I reference in this paper support the flexibility of genre, the plurality of truth, and the constructed nature of personal narratives.

If we assume that L2 self-talk is a form of autobiography, we could then analyze it as such. In the last 20 years, literature on autobiography has covered a number of important critical perspectives: feminist work on the deconstruction of gender issues in women's personal narratives, the unraveling of concepts such as authenticity, truth, and genre, and the extension of autobiography from the elite male sphere into the realm of the everyday and personal. These perspectives suggest that autobiography is an important and interdisciplinary study. However, even though there are a number of studies about the role of second languages in eliciting personal accounts, there has been little consideration of how autobiography is related to learning a second language. From a

review of literature, I have noticed that both autobiography and L2 learning are wrapped up in the problems of truth, gender, and identity. Therefore, based on the literature and my experiences as a teacher, I argue that producing self-talk in L2 learning contexts can also produce identity. Furthermore, identity construction is impeded by the problems of truth claims and gender performativity.

To establish the context from which I draw my experience in the L2 classroom, teaching English as a second language is a loaded discourse in the province of Quebec. The historical conflict between the British and the French colonizers, the mid-20th century political reforms during the *revolution tranquille*, the P.E. Trudeau era's contentious bilingualism, and the ongoing discourse over language use, language of schooling, and second language teaching in classrooms are factors that result in an exceptionally complex historical, social, cultural, economic, and political context. I often find it hard to navigate my role as teacher amidst all of the baggage that comes with being an ESL teacher in Quebec—at times an insider because of my bilingualism and connections to Quebec, and at times an outsider because English is my first language and my roots are in the USA.

My experience in the classroom has covered a number of different levels of language proficiency, from beginning learners to fluent second language speakers. I have also worked in a variety of locations (Quebec City, rural Quebec, and rural Alberta), levels of schooling (secondary, college, adult education), and forms of schooling (private ESL companies, private college, and public high school). Despite the variety of my experience, there is one commonality: the majority of my students have been women. In one case, the reason for having a majority of female students was because the school was an administrative college mainly attended by women. In another case, an enriched ESL class in a secondary school had only three boys. It was also the fine arts cohort. Out of the dozens of international students that I taught in Alberta, I worked with at least 75% women, and, in the last 3 years as a private instructor for my own company, the percentage is well above that. Why this imbalance in student population exists is perhaps to be answered in another study, but the important point is recognizing this as informing my perspective.

Also informing my work in the classroom is a consideration for the role I play in students' lives, as I mentioned earlier. Nothing about education is neutral and the teacher is possibly the most influential factor in the education process. Therefore, it is important to be critical of curriculum and pedagogy and examine and analyze my teaching practices and assumptions. In the past, I have been interested in how L2 learning can be transformative and studies by King (2000) and Buttaro and King (2001) offer some insight into the relationship between L2 learners in the USA and perspective transformation. In the course of the current review, I've found a number of scholarly articles and books on the connection between identity and L2 learning. Among the most intriguing is the work by Bonny Norton (2014) and Thomas Ricento (2005), who draw on the repertoire of studies done on identity construction, gender hierarchies, and other social issues to inform his perspective on L2 learning and identity. I found it rather appropriate that there is nearly the same number, if not more, of scholarly works on the connection between autobiography and identity. Kehily (1995) and Eakin (1995, 2004, 2010), for example, have written about the way that self-narration constructs identity. Kehily (1995) is particularly interested in the way personal narratives construct identity and how gender plays an over-determining factor in identity construction. Eakin, respected as one of the foremost scholars on autobiography, has devoted a number of books and articles to the ways that identity is constructed through the telling of personal life stories. In the following sections, I will elaborate on what is implicated in self-talk, support my argument that L2 self-talk produces identity, and address how the problems of truth and gender both relate to autobiography and L2 learning.

## Enunciating the everyday, rethinking the taken-for-granted

It is my assumption that self-talk in L2 learning contexts is autobiographical and represents personal narrative. As I noted in the introduction, I argue that this self-talk is involved in identity construction and is mitigated by the problems of truth claims and gender performativity. I will try now to elaborate on my experience backing this argument and support it with literature from several theorists.

I define self-talk as the enunciation of the everyday aspects of life that refer to the self, combined with a potential for analysis of our taken-for-granted assumptions that often remain latent in L1 discourse. I argue that identity is produced, in part, through self-talk. This perspective differs from a significant number of scholars in mainstream applied linguistics. A commonly held assumption is that language is a reflection of identity and society. However, following critical theorists such as Pennycook (2004) and Norton (2014), I view language as integrally and discursively productive of identity and society. Self-talk in L2 classrooms generally takes place in

small group discussions, normally facilitated by a teacher, and deals with a wide variety of subjects. Depending on the language proficiency of the students in the group, the subjects addressed can vary from very basic accounts of personal preferences, pastimes, family, work experiences, and the weather to very complex discussions concerning student opinions on politics, social issues, culture, the environment, and economics, for example. In many cases, simple and brief responses are desirable such as when the group discussion is intended to practice a particular grammar structure. In other cases, more elaborate answers are required and open discussion is encouraged. It is not unusual to begin an activity with intermediate students addressing the taken-for-granted aspects of our lives (including everyday likes and dislikes, hobbies, habits, and routines) and finish by discussing opinions that reveal students' political orientation and moral compass. Frequently, students pause to reflect when asked simple questions about their everyday lives, such as "how many cups of coffee do you drink?" or "what did you do last weekend?" Even in these simple dialogues, students often become aware that they take for granted much about their daily lives when they are forced to enunciate it in their L2 learning experience.

There can be unexpected consequences as a result of producing self-talk. For example, students practice using the simple present verb tense in ESL classes by preparing questions for fellow students about their favourite foods, hobbies, and personality traits. The answers to these questions, which we rarely vocalize in our L1 experience, become the centre of focus in L2 learning contexts. We dote on them. They even become the points of reference for students' identities. Weeks or months after a discussion of such a nature, students will reflect back on the answers that were offered and hold each other accountable to what was said. Though there is no outright rule that requires students to provide truthful responses to questions such as "how often do you exercise" or "how often do you read the news," students and teachers tend to follow the unwritten rule of offering truthful answers.

Students have the opportunity to frame their identity in such a way as they see fit, which is not always the easiest task in an L2. The difficulty of formulating proper and clear sentences when talking about one-self can prove great, especially at lower and intermediate levels. Sometimes, even though a student has mistakenly offered misinformation about herself, the student neglects to correct the information for fear of being ridiculed for having made a mistake in the L2 and for providing false information about herself. These factors relate to what King (2000) notes as the most important transformative learning activity in L2 learning contexts, discovering one's voice. King also states that, "As classes build forums for open, egalitarian discussions and personal reflection, learners have chances to explore different values, beliefs, and worldviews in a non-threatening manner" (2000, pp. 79-80). Thus, the work students do to produce self-talk has some valuable impact on identity construction. In another study, King collaborates with Buttaro (2001) on the issue of L2 acquisition among women learners. In this study, they reaffirm the notion mentioned above stating that, "modifying the means in which a person interacts with others across time and space, making them literate, will eventually require the person to redefine (or reassess) his or her view of the self in a social context" (Buttaro & King, 2001, p. 42). This reassessment addresses the transformative power of L2 learning and self-narration.

Another connection between self-talk (autobiography) and language learning is offered by Bruner (1995). Bruner remarks on the association between linguistics and autobiography, connecting Greimas' notion of 'landscape of consciousness,' the process of externalizing information about the self, and linguistic proficiency. Using modal verbs is an example of how Bruner's theory, intended for application in L1 autobiography theory, becomes even more significant in the L2 context of self-talk. L2 students must use a complex vocabulary to clearly express themselves, and this is more significant when we consider that self-talk has ramifications in identity construction.

Apart from the technical challenges involved in expressing personal narratives in an L2, learners face a number of problems similar to those faced in L1 autobiography. Concerns over what constitutes the self and identity abound in autobiography studies (Anderson 2001, for example). As well, L2 scholar Thomas Ricento (2005) points to a number of factors that challenge notions of the self and identity in L2 learning contexts. For example, L1 culture attrition or subtractive bilingualism is a major concern. If we lose our L1 culture, what then happens to our selfhood that identified with the L1 culture? Ricento explains, "[i]dentity is theorized as a contingent process involving dialectic relations between learners and the various worlds and experiences they inhabit and which act on them" (2005, p. 895). Kehily (1995), an autobiography theorist, is concerned with very similar issues as she writes, "[i]n self-narration a teller is socially displaying a language that speaks of and constructs identity and which is, simultaneously, creating and presenting a sense of self" (p. 29). The personal narratives produced in an L2 must go through a greater process of "self translation" (Ricento 2005), however, than those produced in the L1. Ricento notes the stages that L2 learners typically go through in

the process of translating their 'self,' which involve a series of losses (identity, subjectivities, frames of reference, and inner voice) and a consequent series of reconstructions involving the appropriation of other voices, the emergence of a new voice, a reconstruction of one's past, and the growth of new subjectivities (2005, p. 904). Bohórquez (2009) also offers a thorough analysis of the complexities of language loss and the ethical and psychic dimensions that are implicated in learning another language.

It is important at this point in the discussion to highlight that in my experience, I observe significant concerns about self-talk's authenticity in terms of identity construction. As I mentioned earlier, there may be some inconsistencies between what the student desires to say about herself, the way that self-talk is expressed linguistically, and the way that others hear the personal narrative. The problem of using an L2 for a personal narrative involves a number of factors: difficulty expressing oneself due to insufficient vocabulary, fear of being ridiculed, the unforeseen and often destabilizing impact of reexamining the taken-for-granted, the issue of authenticity and cohesiveness within your personal narrative (at what point do you acknowledge if you've misled the others as a result of insufficient language skills). Furthermore, students are put in the situation of presenting the self to a public under less than ideal language conditions in which they may feel vulnerable and incapable of hiding or censoring sensitive information. However, the L2 classroom is likely the safest of all possible venues for practicing an L2 because all attendees are in the process of learning. Inevitably, the technical aspects of learning a language inhibit the production of personal narratives in an L2. In addition, many L2 teachers control the types of narratives acceptable in classrooms, as well as the content that is offered. This type of censorship, often with good intentions, impedes freedom of expression in the L2. I should note that many teachers are hesitant to engage with political issues in L2 classrooms even if it directly implicates the learner's cultural investment in the language.

In line with the issues I noted above concerning the limits to self-talk in L2 discussion forums, self-talk often involves how gender is performed. For example, the content of discussions varies greatly when men are present in the conversation compared to when only women are present, in my experience. Methods of discussion and role-taking vary as well, and women will also self-censor in the presence of other women who they don't trust or feel comfortable with. The discourse of men-only groups is particularly different, and men often assume that 'boys club' rules apply. Women are more likely to seek intimate situations (one-on-one or small groups of two to three) for producing self-talk, whereas men will commonly control or lead a group conversation. While studies from sociolinguists such as Tannen (1994) may confirm similar differences between genders in conversation analysis, I believe, following Speer (2005, p.32), that we also need to move past the traditional models of understanding gender that posit men and women as essentially different. To briefly summarize Speer's view, we should be cautious of treating gender as simply an independent variable to be considered when analyzing discourse.

On another note, as a teacher, I often struggle with leaving more control to the students to guide conversations and leaving more space and silence in discussions. This struggle is coupled with my desire to animate fun and interesting classes and to be perceived as having control of my class. I also assume that my behaviour "tells on," to use an expression from Long (1999), gender arrangements in society. The connection between L2 self-talk and gender construction is a less researched area, and I had difficulty finding specifics. However, Bonnie Norton Peirce (1995) performed a qualitative study with women L2 learners in Canada that showed how power structures either limit or allow opportunities for people to speak. More research like this will certainly be invaluable. Some linguistics scholars, such as Pennycook (2004), draw on other disciplines to inform their perspectives concerning gender and its relation to language learning. Pennycook (2001) shares Butler's (1990, 1999) way of understanding gender as "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler, 1990, p.33). Pennycook explains that this "allows us to view language as productive and performative. Language is a doing" (2001, p. 156). The performative characteristic of language makes the L2 learning context a very important stage and by extension, we must be attentive to what type of stage is being established. Furthering the argument made here that L2 self-talk is a particular form of autobiography, in the next two sections I will attempt to show how both autobiography theory and L2 learning theory approach the problems of truth and gender as connected to identity construction.

## Autobiography and the problem of truth

Perhaps the most important term in the study of autobiography, the concept of truth is highly problematic. Especially since the so-called death of truth that arrived with post-structuralism, conceptualizing truth as unitary, universal, and obtainable through

rational discourse and methods is difficult to say the least. I conceive of truth as plural, contingent, non-static, and sometimes remaining hidden or unavailable. Also, our self-talk often 'tells on' (Long, 1999) our identity, beliefs, and assumptions in spite of our conscious or subconscious attempts to hide the truth.

In addition, autobiography is not simply a genre of literature in which individuals recount their true stories in writing. Or at least that is what the majority of contemporary autobiography scholars believe. The consensus in the field is that autobiography is at best a recollection of past experiences presented in many types of media in the form of personal narratives (Kadar, Warley & Perreault, 2005). In a more radical view, Jerome Bruner sees autobiography as no more than an "extension of fiction" (1995, p. 55). Both of these perspectives, including others that fit somewhere in between, are problematic. Even in the case where personal narratives are founded on memories of real experiences, there is much to analyze concerning the nature of memory and the role memories play in constructing truth (Kadar et al., 2005, p. 6). Kadar et al. (2005) hold onto the connection with the original experiential event that took place in the real world despite their acceptance that these memories are subjective accounts. In contrast, Bruner's (1995) prioritizing of imagination over experience loses some of what makes autobiographies so interesting; real people in real places under real circumstances. We should not lose sight of this in the attention Bruner gives to highlighting how narratives are constructed and reconstructed fictions, that "life is created or constructed by the act of autobiography" (Bruner, 1995, p. 161). And, put another way, Bruner claims that, "[a]utobiography is life construction through 'text' construction" (1995, p. 176).

Though I agree somewhat with Bruner, I would argue that Anderson's perspective holds more transformative potential, raising similar yet more nuanced questions of what constitutes truth in personal narratives. Acknowledging a wide range of literature, either directly classified in the genre of autobiography or indirectly relevant to the discourse over truth and knowledge, Anderson (2001) is mainly concerned with the deconstruction of autobiographical texts with a goal to expose power structures and reveal meaning. Though Anderson is less focused on the fictionality of personal narratives than Bruner, she does recognize the constructed nature of personal accounts, or testimonies, and the difficulty of assigning a static and unchanging definition to autobiography. Anderson underlines how autobiography traditionally adhered to a more modern notion of objectivity and truth and that the post-modern skepticism of truth claims involves a number of ideological shifts. One is no longer guaranteed authenticity by one's position, gender, or status in life; autobiography can have a liberating potential. However, we must be critical of our assumptions. As Anderson points out, supposing a unitary "I" as the authentic subject of autobiography can raise questions of privilege and exclusion, and prioritize some voices over others (2001, p. 123). From outside the discipline of autobiography, Pennycook (2001) highlights similar problems that are involved in English language teaching: what power is accorded to teachers that are native speakers of English, and what access to privilege and truth are denied to those who are excluded from the inner circle of English speakers. Both Pennycook and Anderson raise concerns about the role that texts play in power structures, isolating some while empowering others.

Most autobiography scholars adhere to a notion of truth that involves the production of 'facts' about the past that are assembled together to make a personal narrative. The personal narratives that subjects tell inevitably construct the identity of the subject. Even the truth of a subject's identity comes into question at this point. If we assume that memories aren't incontrovertible truth, the identity that memories are constructed upon can be equally as unstable. Thus, truth and identity are contingent, and the extent to which one is viewed as true, the other will be equally considered as true or not. So, in a sense, identity construction in both an L1 and L2 context is impeded by truth construction.

With the contingency of truth and identity construction in mind, I also point to how memory plays a significant factor in L2 performativity. As learners speak (perform) the L2, the threshold of memory is wide open as L2 students go through the mental process of searching for words, expressions, sentence structure, word order, intonation, emphasis, and stress. The words and grammar students remember during language performance sometimes do not reflect the intended or desired result. In other words, their meaning does not reflect their language production. As well, their memory of past events, and their ability to vocalize aspects of their identity may be impeded by their ability to recall the proper words to describe their memory and identity. It is not a far leap to suggest that their identity will be affected as L2 meaning production varies from L1 meaning production. So, the words 'what I tell you may not be true' are very poignant in the L2 context. In L2 classrooms, repetition is a helpful teaching strategy, and if a student finds herself repeating the same self-talk, perfected more and more each time, the story may become more and more real to both the student producing the self-talk and the other students and teacher. All three camps (student talker, student listeners, and teacher) are, thus, making their own judgments of identity all along. Inconsistencies may be held against the student's authenticity

or question the student's truthfulness. Attempting to hide inconsistencies by lying may transform identity for better or worse.

## Autobiography and "telling on gender arrangements"

In connection with the last line of the previous section, repetition in language learning and repetition in gender and identity construction are particularly significant factors to be considered. Butler and Pennycook argue that repetition congeals truth and identity (including gender identity) into having the appearance of something essential and permanent. However, it is the repetitiveness of this performativity of identity, language, and gender that hides the constructed characteristic of truth. I argue that gender should not be conceived of in terms of a heterosexist dichotomy, and I assume that gender arrangements are hierarchical with Western straight white men holding the vast majority of power. Despite modern discourses proclaiming equality between sexes, and the significant amount of work in academia to theorize an empowering feminist framework, there still remains a lot of work to do. Judy Long (1999) breaks from mainstream feminist theory and is insightful for both the study of autobiography and the L2 learning context. Long argues that gender plays a role in shaping the subject's narrative and the narrator's text, as well as in coloring the reading of a narrative. Furthermore, Long claims that "women's personal narratives 'tell on' the gender arrangements of their society" (1999, p. 9). I would also claim that narratives of any kind "tell on" not only gender arrangements, but dominant power structures as well. This 'telling on' may expose social structures through the silent narratives of the subordinate or marginalized and in the verbosity of the dominant groups. Thus, it is not only what women say in their personal narratives that counts, but what women don't say. And the role of the 'hearer' is gendered as well. So much can be gleaned from how other students and teachers hear personal narratives. These gendered narratives will impact identity construction as a result.

In the L2 context, Ricento (2005, pp. 900-901) highlights the work done in second language acquisition (SLA) studies concerning gender noting three focal areas: gendered agency in second language learning and use, gender representation in teaching materials, and gendered access to linguistic resources. Ricento also notes how the studies on gender and language in the 70s and 80s had a tendency to essentialize women and gender, leading to rigid stereotypes (2005, p. 900). To essentialize women and gender means to conceptualize sexuality and gender as something natural, pre-determined, and universally understandable. Essentialization of gender also detracts from the transformative and empowering aspects of a constructed perception of gender and identity.

Anderson (2001), following Miller (1988), also questions the impact of gender in autobiography. Anderson claims that sincerity and authenticity in autobiography are taken-for-granted to be characteristic of a masculine subject. Anderson also notes that, traditionally, autobiography has been, "[i]mplicitly bound up with gender" (2001, p. 3), and has promoted not only masculine centrality but also the centrality of Western, middle-class ideology. Anderson's deconstruction of traditional autobiography and focus on personal narratives and testimonies provides a more nuanced understanding of autobiography. In my view, L2 classrooms should be attentive to the asymmetries present or possible in personal narratives. A critical approach to gender in L2 classrooms enables the potential for more transformative learning and less restrictive contexts for the production of L2 self-talk.

Mullen Sands (1997) also supports the idea that autobiography can reveal gender arrangements and power structures. Sands claims that Native women's autobiographies can reveal embedded ideology and expose it as non-universal, thus serving a counter hegemonic role (1997, p. 44). Though Québécoise women and Native women are far from being homogenous groups, there is a similar point of reference for both groups' discourse: the white male dominant hegemony. The role of men in collecting personal accounts from Native women is also problematic, as Mullen Sands notes. Sands sees dominance present even in what may seem like the most power-neutral scenarios (1997, p. 42). The efforts that male teachers might make in establishing appropriate conditions for women to produce self-talk may be irrelevant, if we follow Mullen Sands' argument. For the sole reason that the teacher is a man, historical and cultural baggage will hinder the expression of self-talk preventing female L2 students from producing "authentic" autobiography. What's more is that this self-talk may have a direct effect on identity, and if women are not comfortable to freely express themselves, the self talk may serve to reinforce dominant male discourses instead of transforming them.

## Truth, Gender, and Identity: Conclusion

The literature on autobiography and L2 learning has significant commonalities. Both fields are concerned with problematizing truth and gender, and both connect truth and gender to identity construction. I have noted above a number of issues that arise within the context of L2 autobiographical self-talk. These are what I call, in the language of law, mitigating factors. Mitigating factors are the

circumstances that make an individual's actions less significant. More research should be performed in L2 contexts as to how those mitigating factors play out in the L2 classroom. For example, I wonder how mixed-gender groups hinder the extent to which female students explore the taken-for-granted, how students' self-talk about the taken-for-granted tells on the gender arrangements of our society, and how women produce self-talk differently than men, which may or may not be a result of the gender of the instructor leading self-talk discussion. I have argued above that these mitigating factors, varying in degree depending on the learning context, can thwart a student's ability to produce meaningful self-talk and, thus, impact identity construction. A consequence of the impact of the mitigating factors is that the self-talk may be presented in such a way that, autobiographically speaking, is more or less true.

While there does not seem to be a connection in the literature between L2 learning and autobiography, there is a clear indirect connection between the two: literature from both fields deals with identity, gender, and truth constructions. From the literature on autobiography, Bruner, Anderson, Kehily, and others discuss the implications of personal narratives and the construction of gender, truth, and identity.

Finally, I realize that this paper, too, is a form of self-talk and as such can be considered as constructing my identity. As a teacher, I hope to be attentive to my role in my students' lives and to work towards more empowering approaches to L2 learning. My identity as an L2 learner of French as well is affected by the present personal narrative. And to close, I will leave with a quote from Ricento (2005). Ricento concludes his chapter with, "[Second language] teachers have a responsibility to consider how their pedagogical practices enable or challenge prevailing social hierarchies" (2005, p. 906). I have tried in this paper to show the ways that truth claims and gender arrangements mitigate identity construction in L2 learners through the production of self-talk. I would hope that I have succeeded in at least responding to Ricento's call to challenge prevailing social hierarchies.

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