

Finding My Voice: How a Mentor-Student Relationship Transformed an International

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Abstract

This article is a personal narrative based on the author's lived experiences. In accordance with ethical guidelines, all names, specific locations, and identifying details of the individuals and institutions portrayed in this work have been anonymized or altered to ensure confidentiality and protect their privacy.

Introduction: The Sound of Silence in a New World

There is a particular kind of quietness that fills the space between a question and an answer. For the first several months of my graduate program in the United States, that was my sound. I would sit in seminars, my mind racing with thoughts, but the words would not come out. The silence was a heavy wall I hid behind to keep myself safe. This is the story of silence—how a wall was built in my childhood, and how my mentor's empathetic and supportive guidance helped me gradually dismantle it and begin the process of constructing a new academic identity.

The Backstory

My journey with English began when I moved from a small town to a city for middle school. It was an overwhelming transition, and the English classroom was a totally

different territory. I struggled with academics and language, and there is a moment that shaped the next decade of my life: my English teacher laughed at my accent in front of the class. The shame and embarrassment were immediate and searing. In that instant, I consciously decided to retreat to the “safe” realm of reading and writing. China’s exam-oriented education system allowed me to succeed academically while simultaneously reinforcing this silence.

Years later, when I came to the U.S. for graduate school, this silence became a burden. The dynamic, discussion-based American classroom felt like a stage for which I had no script. The linguistic and cultural shock was profound, and my old defense mechanism kicked in: I became a passive observer, nervous and quiet. I was stuck in this quiet state.

The Safe Environment

Everything began to change in one of my mentors’ classrooms. The change didn’t happen through a grand gesture, but through a series of small, powerful moments that slowly chipped away at my wall. There was the affirmation in her eyes—a warm glance and a small smile that seemed to say, “I see you, and your thoughts are valued.”

Her care extended beyond the classroom. I was astonished when she would respond to students’ emails in a few minutes. She later explained, “I know students are anxiously waiting for a response, and I don’t want to prolong that feeling.” Her ability to see from our perspective, to understand our anxieties, was a quiet act of empathy. It built a foundation of trust.

Pedagogically, she created scaffolds for participation. Before sharing in our small groups, we were encouraged to write down some keywords. This simple strategy lowered

the stakes of speaking, giving me a lifeline to hold onto as I organized my thoughts. Then came the breakthrough. One day, to begin a discussion on multilingualism, my mentor invited each of us to say “Good morning” in our native language. As the words echoed around the room—Mandarin, Spanish, Arabic—something inside me shifted. In that moment, I realized I was not an isolated “other” with a flawed accent, but part of a vibrant multilingual community. The wall I had hidden behind for so long began to crumble. These small but consistent acts of care were not random; they were part of what Jung (2024) calls a deliberate mentoring practice aimed at building an “emotionally secure foundation”.

A few weeks later, I actively sought the mentor’s guidance after class on a pedagogical problem—how to teach academic vocabulary to elementary school students. It was the first time I had initiated such a conversation, a clear sign that I was beginning to see myself not just as a student, but as an active participant in the learning process.

Reflection & Research-Based Suggestions

My story is personal, but the principles underlying it are applicable to different multilingual education contexts. This journey from silence to agency vividly illustrates the Emotion-Identity-Agency Triangle (Toker-Bradshaw et al., 2024). This framework highlights the interconnected and dynamic relationship between a preservice teacher’s emotions, their evolving professional identity, and their agency, within the practicum experience. My own experience shows how this triangle operated: a negative emotion (shame from being laughed at) led to a constrained identity—that of the silent student—which in turn severely limited my agency in the classroom. This identity was not simply an internal state but was about being recognized as a certain “kind of person” in a given context (Gee, 2000).

The catalyst for reconstructing this identity was my mentor's approach, which combined the principles of Relational Pedagogy and Transpositioning. First, grounded in Relational Pedagogy, she prioritized our human relationship, rebuilding my sense of psychological safety through supportive and empathetic mentoring (Hinsdale & Ljungblad, 2023). This trusting relationship then created the necessary foundation for Transpositioning to occur. As defined by Wei and Lee (2024), transpositioning is a fluid process of releasing oneself from a fixed role to cultivate empathy and see from another's perspective. My mentor's ability to adopt this transpositional stance enabled the reconstruction of a more agentic academic identity.

As an English language learner (ELL) navigating a new and intimidating academic culture, I was in a particularly vulnerable position (Vostal et al., 2019). This approach did more than just offer support; my mentor actively mitigated that vulnerability by establishing a space of psychological safety. From that secure foundation, she could then take a transpositional stance, seeing the classroom from my perspective as an anxious ELL. This profound act of being seen and understood is what allowed me, in turn, to transpose my own self-perception—dismantling the wall I had built and stepping into a new academic identity as a valued, multilingual member of the scholarly community.

This story suggests that for many ELLs, high-quality, trusting teacher-student relationships are not merely beneficial—they are prerequisites for taking the risks necessary for language growth and identity construction. Based on the synthesis of personal experience and academic theory, I offer these suggestions for fellow educators:

- **Adopt a Relational Pedagogy to Build Trust.** Prioritize the relational over the transactional (Hinsdale & Ljungblad, 2023). Consciously adopt a relational

pedagogy by investing time in building trust and creating what Jung (2024) calls an “emotionally secure foundation” (p. 214). This means moving beyond a simple exchange of feedback to engage with students as whole persons. This foundation is built through small, consistent acts of care:

- **Practice empathetic communication.** Being mindful of the anxieties students face. For example, responding to an important email with promptness and care demonstrates that you see and respect them.
- **Value non-verbal affirmation.** A nod, a smile, or sustained eye contact can communicate acceptance and value more powerfully than words, lowering the student's affective filter and making them feel safe.
- **Practice Transpositional Mentoring to Bridge Differences.** A trusting relationship enables teachers to practice what Wei and Lee (2024) call transpositioning—a deliberate effort to release oneself from a fixed role to see the educational experience from the student's viewpoint. This empathetic shift is more than just good practice; it is essential for fostering inclusion and social justice, particularly when working with students from diverse backgrounds (Li, 2024). By taking a transpositional stance, a teacher can better anticipate a student's needs and design supportive scaffolds, such as creating low-stakes opportunities for participation. Strategies like think-pair-share or asking students to jot down keywords before speaking are not just techniques; they are direct outcomes of an empathetic understanding of a hesitant student's perspective.
- **Frame Multilingualism as a Pedagogical Asset.** Create intentional opportunities within the curriculum for students to draw upon their full linguistic repertoires. Activities like the good morning exercise in my story are not merely icebreakers;

they are pedagogically sound practices that validate students' identities, increase their willingness to invest in the community (Norton, 2000), and foster a transformative learning environment.

Conclusion: From Silence to Voice

Finding one's voice is a continuous journey, not a final destination. The wall built by a moment of shame took years to build, and it will not disappear overnight. But the foundation of a new identity has been laid, built on a relationship of trust, empathy, and academic solidarity. Supportive mentors do more than teach their subject; they create spaces where students can discover the voice they had all along.

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