

The Impact of Intersectionality in Teaching English Language and Literature: A Case Study of Michelle Obama's "Becoming"

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Abstract

Teaching and learning English can be a very good setting for teaching and learning about social behaviors and experiences. The main aim of this study was to identify the concepts of intersectionality as one of the social experiences, in one of the famous autobiographies (Becoming). The autobiography Becoming is written by Michelle Obama, former First Lady of the United States. In this book, she portrayed her life experiences with her considerations of the prominent moments. To this end, this study discussed the main issues linked to intersectionality, and then the parts of Becoming in which the author pointed to the experience of intersectionality have been considered and analyzed by the theory of Intersectionality. The contribution of the present study can be linked to the studies on teaching English language and literature with the intersectionality embedded curriculum. In other words, teaching English language and literature can be guided into more social venues and considerations through which learners can be aware of the possible social influences and experiences caused by individuals' and contexts' structures.

Keywords: Autobiography, Becoming, English language and literature teaching, Intersectionality.

Introduction

Despite the existence of an abundance of autobiographies, the autobiography written by Michelle Obama might be the most famous one in recent years. The title of “Becoming” can activate curiosity on the part of audiences to think about becoming who from which point. Although mass communications played a critical role in the popularity of this autobiography, Michelle was a well-known lady who was known and seen by many people. A strong and committed lady who made us mistakenly assume that she was always a successful lady. She was a contemporary active lady and her ideas could influence others. She was wise enough to recognize her power and wrote her story to inform and motivate others that she was a real woman in this real world. The other possible reason for such popularity can be explained by her last situation as the First Lady of the United States. The country was a promising land for hopes and wishes. The flashback to the era of Christopher Columbus’ arrival to the U.S. was the period in which the newcomers tried to set rules for the new land to provide a condition for establishing a better world and life for everyone. This land was supposed to support individuals in reaching their goals and dreams in the real world. Michelle Obama, as the former First Lady narrates her lifelong experiences of intersectionality fearlessly and that’s why this autobiography could get lots of audiences around the world. Another justification for the popularity of this autobiography can be the careful attention to the details of a changing life. Life and attempts in changing one’s status can have also a very good potential for using authentic material in English language education, particularly for the upper-intermediate and advanced levels.

The motivation behind this study was to identify core concepts of intersectionality in an autobiography written in the past decade. The main contribution of this research might be a clear route that might be taken by many unknown individuals. Understanding the challenges and demands of one well-known and successful woman can pave the way for setting tailored policies for supporting minorities and reducing possible problems. Such policies can be specified in educational and vocational aspects of life but the main point might be training a culture that can assist in nurturing talents without problems caused by power or majority groups.

Background

Intersectionality and Identity

The long-established connection of identity in educational research has proven to uncover an ontological approach to learning (Wenger, 1998). Wenger (1998) accounts for the connection of the learning process in identity development as a kind of transfer from our current condition to our potential condition. This metaphor seems to be the same as what was called ZPD by Vygotsky (1978) which emphasized the role of social factors in learning and thus changing and developing. The term identity originates from the Latin word of *identitas*, and the stem of *idem*, which stands for “the same” (Avraamidou, 2020). It is worth reminding that developing identity is related to different levels of stakeholders such as students, instructors, and scientists (Avraamidou, 2020). The definition of identity: “one’s personally held beliefs about the self concerning social groups . . . and the ways one expresses that relationship” (Torres et al., 2009, p. 577; as cited in Duran & Jones, 2019). Identity is a key factor in describing and distinguishing someone from others (Avraamidou, 2020). Identity crystalizes in a social setting and it is not a single entity but it should be considered as a broad concept with multiple layers e.g. “personal identities, national identities, ethnic identities, social identities, cultural identities, gender identities, science identities ...” (p.234). He described identity as a concept through which an individual can be identified. Based on her discussions, recognition, and emotion as the main characteristics of identity in the studies related to intersectionality. These two characteristics can interact with other socio-political variables and determine whether someone might be accepted in the science community. Jones and Abes (2013; as cited in Duran & Jones, 2019) accounted for the concept of identity that this concept which is studied in education has been taken from the fields of psychology, sociology, and social psychology. Identity is a multifaceted concept that interacts with concepts other than race, gender, and socio-economic conditions. Identity can be shaped in different social dynamics and/or different settings of power and oppression (Wyatt, Johnson, & Zaidi, 2022).

Intersectionality and Race

Today, intersectionality does not focus on just black women per se but the social justice discussion might be relevant to other minorities as well. Groups such as immigrants, Asian international students, L2 learners, individuals with disabilities, and minorities related to religious ideas (Kayi-Aydar, Varghese &

Vitanova, 2022). Kayi-Aydar, Varghese, and Vitanova (2022) mentioned that considering the book entitled *The Chronicle of Higher Education* by Bartlett in 2021, considerations on intersectionality and race have been revitalized. According to Kayi-Aydar et al. (2022), scholars can play a leading role in mitigating injustice in the educational context as one of the key social settings. Kayi-Aydar et al. (2022) reported that scholars can negotiate with their associates to cooperate on increasing educational justice.

Intersectionality and Higher Education

The importance of investigating intersectionality in higher education can be clarified by changing graduate students at the higher education level (Harper, 2011). The international students who pursue their educational goals overseas might be just one of the justifications for studying intersectionality (Harper, 2011). Harper (2011) described that researchers have studied identity and intersectionality in both uni and multi-dimensional modes. Of course, the multi-dimensional view can present a more realistic view of the academic community (Harper, 2011).

Intersectionality and Science

According to Avraamidou (2020), one needs a scientific identity to act in the scientific world and this process seems to be both personal and political. She explained that diverse intertwined variables may interact from the very beginning (classroom context) to subsequent levels of scientific activities. The interactions of identity privilege and oppression can lead to different results of acceptance or rejection. Avraamidou (2020) elaborated on the role of cultural norms, values, and stereotypes as influential factors in the recognition of identity in science and thus she discussed these hidden gates of science for newcomers.

Harmfulness of Intersectionality

Although Crenshaw was following prior researchers' ideas on sexism and racism for women of black in science her studies that concentrate on intersectionality have been noted as the foundation for the study of intersectionality at the international level of this line of research (Duran & Jones, 2019). According to

Wyatt, Johnson, and Zaidi (2022), intersectionality can cause ignoring minority's achievements in the science world that may occur intentionally or unintentionally. Intentional intersectionality can happen to those in power. However, intersectionality regardless of (un)intentional factors can contribute to missing and lacking pieces of knowledge and of course unheard voices (Khalili & Adel, 2023a; Wyatt, et al, 2022).

Method

This study checked the autobiography written by Michelle Obama (Becoming), former First Lady of the United States from an intersectionality theory view. This study aimed to identify the points in which the author pointed to the unfairness and intersectionality that she experienced in her life. The identification of the points can be used for teaching and learning social behaviors and experiences in English language and literature courses. To this end, the autobiography was read and marked for the targeted parts. The theory of intersectionality posed by Crenshaw (1989 & 1991) were the framework for this study.

Analysis

In this section, the parts that the author described as intersectionality experiences are summarized and noted based on the related structures of intersectionality.

Table 1.

Summary of the statements pointing to the intersectionality experiences in Becoming

Statement	Page number	Intersectionality structure
Working-class black student	14	Race, class
The only woman, the only African-American, in all sorts of rooms.	14	Gender, race, class
A bride, a stressed-out new mother, a daughter	14	Class, gender
Television attacks (e.g. whether I'm a woman or man)	15	Gender
A U.S. congressman has made fun of my butt. I've been hurt. I've been furious. But mostly, I tried to laugh this stuff off.	15	Gender, class

As noted in Table 1, Michelle Obama described how she experienced unpleasant behaviors and conditions in which she was judged by her race, class, gender, and even her physical appearance.

Discussion

This study can be noted as one of the first studies that considered that Becoming from an intersectional lens can have a prominent role in not only English language and literature but also teaching other fields such as social sciences, political behaviors, and psychology. The main contribution of this study can be the pervasiveness of relevant fields that can benefit from this study.

To provide a comparison and contrast of the present study with the prior studies, it can be concluded that no prior study concentrated on Becoming from an intersectionality perspective, therefore, the significance of the present research might be bringing new views to the published autobiography that can also imply the necessity of employing intersectionality views on other published autobiography or other types of literature genres. In addition, this study could suggest that using authentic material can be a promising step for realizing intersectionality- reducing tasks and curriculum (Khalili & Adel, 2023b). In other words, this line of research can be linked to the educational approaches of the 21st century and provide and rich view to tailoring teaching and educational trends in both research and practice. Another contribution of this study might be attempts to remind us that intersectionality can occur everywhere hence, raising awareness about intersectionality from the educational context seems crucial.

Conclusion

The consideration on autobiography of Becoming can be used for curriculum designers, language and literature courses, and social sciences. This study can be a cornerstone for future studies on diverse fields of social psychology, language and literature education, and humanistic approach to educational sciences. The main limitation of this study might be the lack of empirical focus on the parts of English language and literature students and instructors who could pose their views on the autobiography, their perception, and their possible similar experiences. Hence, further study can be accompanied by surveys and

interviews to examine if the participants were aware of the intersectionality experiences, how to confront them, and how to solve the problem. Thus, as one of the main implications of this intersectionality study, problem-solving as one of the key skills in 21st-century life needs to be added to this line of research, particularly in English language and literature education which can provide a very good setting for facing new experiences of social life.

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