WHY I AM HYPE ABOUT TRANSLINGUALISM

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Within three years of immigrating to Canada, I was fortunate to be hired in a GTA community college teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP). I enjoyed the camaraderie of my colleagues and students as I progressed in my new job, but I also began to experience uncomfortable incidents which propelled me on the journey towards Translingualism.

Having been born and bred in Singapore, the formal English variety I learned in school was Singapore English, which was essentially based on British English, and the informal variety I spoke at home was Singlish, a melange of English, Mandarin, Hokkien, Malay and Tamil. Therefore, I tend to pronounce words differently from Canadian English and rely heavily on the British lexicon. I was surprised one day when a teacher colleague in the staff room commented that my pronunciation of /deɪtə/ (day-tuh) was incorrect and told me that the correct pronunciation was /dætə/ (dah-tuh). This colleague also recommended I use the word *movie* instead of *film* when discussing the Oscar ceremony. I was embarrassed but stayed silent as I was still new to Canada. This incident made me realize that particular varieties of English are privileged over others in Canada and that I needed to make modifications to my English if I wanted to belong in my adopted country. So, I proceeded to "learn" Canadian English and conscientiously used *trunk* instead of *boot* to refer to the storage space in my car, and began to tap the *t* in the word *party* instead of saying /ˈpɑr.ti/. I became paranoid and self-conscious about my pronunciation of words, and made a conscious effort to use the Canadian lexicon. Needless to say, I did not feel a sense of belonging in my workplace and in my adopted country.

I continued in this manner working hard to "Canadianize" my English so I could fit in until I was confronted by a student in my EAP Academic Writing class years later while I was teaching at another GTA college. The student was Arab in origin and was upset at the comments I wrote on her essay. I was shocked by her reaction as I thought I was being helpful with my very detailed comments on her paper providing advice on how her writing could better align with Canadian expectations of an academic essay. She told me that she spoke four languages fluently besides English and couldn't understand why her essay was not acceptable. She also mentioned that my comments on her paper made her feel humiliated and stupid.

Suddenly, I had an epiphany! That day in the staff room many years ago came flooding back to me and I knew how she was feeling. I met the student after class and we spent an hour going over her paper. I listened to her rationale on her choice of words, sentence structure

and organization of content. We made a conscious effort to allow her to keep some non-Canadian structures in the essay ensuring that the essay would still be comprehensible to the reader. After that meeting, the student revised her essay and I was pleasantly surprised by the very creative and cogent essay she produced. I did not know then, but I had adopted a Translingual disposition with this student.

From that day onwards, I knew I had to change the way in which I taught writing. I knew that by expecting my students to conform to a "Standard English" variety, I was marginalizing and silencing their multilingual voices. As Mari Matsuda states, "People in power are perceived as speaking normal, unaccented English. Any speech that is different from that constructed norm is called an accent" (as quoted in Lippi-Green, 2012). We tend to silence those accents especially since our current educational system is based on a monolingual system, not a multilingual system.

In 1985, Braj Kachru, a sociolinguist, conceived the three concentric circles of English to represent "the type of spread, the patterns of acquisition and the functional domains in which English is used across cultures and languages" (Kachru, 1985, p.12).

- **The inner circle or *norm-enforcing*** circle represents the traditional bases of English such as the United Kingdom, Australia, Anglophone Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and the United States.

- **The outer circle or *norm-developing*** circle represents countries where English is not the native tongue but for historical reasons (such as colonization) has become the lingua franca: Jamaica, Singapore, Malaysia, Nigeria, Kenya, the Philippines, India, Tanzania, Bangladesh and non-Anglophone Canada and South Africa.

- **The expanding circle or *norm-dependent*** circle represents countries where English plays no historical or governmental role, but is nevertheless widely used as a foreign language: China, Russia, Japan, Korea, Egypt, most of Europe and Indonesia.

(Kachru, 1985)[1]

According to David Graddol, an applied linguist, "native speakers "lost their majority in the 1970s" (as cited in Canagarajah, 2006, p.588). Another linguist, David Crystal, predicts conservatively that by 2050, the number of English as an additional or second language speakers will be approximately 30 million more than the "native" speakers (Crystal, 1997). Therefore, I rationalize that we should be exploring ways to value and legitimatize our multilingual students' experiences in the classroom by accepting the different Englishes they bring with them to the classroom.

As a result of these personal experiences, I decided to engage in research which eventually

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1   While Kachru's model has been valuable in describing how English has spread throughout the world, it has been criticized for defining the circles by geography not proficiency. There are people in the Inner circle who are not native speakers of English, i.e. Gaelic and Welsh speakers in the UK. Furthermore, Canagarajah (2006) notes that the circles are leaking; the boundaries neither contain nor prevent penetration by other Englishes. Hence, we see an increase in the number of ESL teachers that are not from the Inner Circle, literature in English from authors like Chinua Achebe and Anita Desai, and the production of texts on Indian English.

led me to enrol in a PhD program at the University of Waterloo. My research agenda, which is to develop an anti-racist writing pedagogy in the classroom, has guided me towards the discovery of Translingualism in the form of Translingual Theory, Practice, and Pedagogy.

Translingual Theory

Translingual Theory argues for:

> 1) honoring the power of all language users to shape language to specific ends;

> 2) recognizing the linguistic heterogeneity of all users of language both in the United States and globally;

> 3) directly confronting English monolingualist expectations by researching and teaching how writers can work with and against, not simply within, those expectations.

> (Horner, Lu, Royster, & Trimbur, 2011, p. 305).

Horner, Lu, Royster, and Trimbur claim that Translingual Theory "sees difference in language not as a barrier to overcome or as a problem to manage, but as a resource for producing meaning in writing, speaking, reading, and listening" (p.303). Therefore, the Translingual Approach to language learning promotes equity among language users as no one language variety is privileged over another, but all varieties are equally valued. Moreover, Suresh Canagarajah states that

> the term translingual enables a consideration of communicative competence as not restricted to predefined meanings of individual languages, but the ability to merge different language resources in situated interactions for new meaning construction...the term helps us go beyond the dichotomy mono/multi or uni/pluri. These binaries give the impression that cross language relations and practices matter only to a specific group of people, i.e. those considered multilingual. But translingualism is fundamental to acts of communication and relevant for all of us. Native speakers of English and monolinguals as well.

> (Canagarajah, 2013, p.1–2)

As such, the Translingual Approach is beyond the additive notion of multilingualism because it allows individuals to marshal resources across their rich linguistic repertoires to make meaning, not only for language users but also creators. Importance is not placed solely on text production, but on text processing too.

Translingual Practice

Many of us are engaged in Translingual Practice whether consciously or unconsciously in the form of codemeshing. According to Vershawn Young, codemeshing is "multidialectalism

and pluralingualism in one speech act, in one paper... Codemeshing blends dialects, international languages, local idioms, chat-room lingo, and the rhetorical styles of various ethnic and cultural groups in both formal and informal speech acts" (Young, 2010, p. 67). Young claims that codemeshing empowers our students who come from a plethora of ethnicities and cultures and recognizes their voices. Codemeshing advocates changing the current paradigm of using one standard, monolingual system of language. He demonstrates that even high-profile public figures codemesh: Republican Senator, Chuck Grassley; and Harvard President, Lawrence Summers. Codemeshing is a natural and daily phenomenon of language use and is not confined only to non-native speakers of English because even native speakers codemesh by mixing different language varieties and codes in one speech act. Codemeshing has been a phenomenon in music for centuries. The fusion of ragtime and blues gave birth to jazz music; and blues, rhythm and blues, and country gave rise to rock and roll music. The genesis of new music is possible if we embrace change, are open to differences and are willing to create new sounds. Similarly, if we believe that the nature of language is neither static nor discrete, but dynamic and negotiated, then every interaction creates new meaning through negotiation between the interlocutors.

Translingual Pedagogy

If Translingual Practice is a common occurrence, how do we transform this practice into Translingual Pedagogy in the classroom? First and foremost, teachers should embrace a Translingual Disposition which Jerry Lee and Christopher Jenks propose as

> having a general openness toward language and language differences... [This] allows individuals to move beyond preconceived, limited notions of standardness and correctness, and it therefore facilitates interactions involving different Englishes... [Given] the historical marginalization of 'nonstandard' varieties and dialects of English in various social and institutional contexts, translingual dispositions are essential for all users of English in a globalized society, regardless of whether they are 'native' or 'nonnative' speakers of English. (Lee & Jenks, 2016, p. 319).

If we embrace language differences, it is incumbent on us as teachers to re-evaluate the many dichotomies that exist in language acquisition such as grammar versus pragmatics, determinism versus agency, individual versus community, purity versus hybridity, fixity versus fluidity, cognition versus context, and monolingual versus multilingual (Canagarajah, 2007, pp. 923–924).

In a nutshell, Canagarajah believes that language acquisition should be an adaptive, practice-based and an emergent model, not a theoretical model based on the acquisition of static prefabricated structures. Language acquisition does not only occur individually and cognitively, but within a community where language users can negotiate meanings and co-construct new meanings with other interlocutors within a context. As more and more World

Englishes come into existence, language acquisition should be studied in heterogeneous, multilingual settings from an insider perspective (Canagarajah, 2007).

One concrete way of practising Translingual Pedagogy in the classroom is in error-correction. As teachers, do we read what is on the page or what ought to be on the page? We often look at a piece of writing through the lens of someone who is the expert on grammar rules and conventions. We tend to judge the piece of writing by our own standards, perceptions and ideologies of what is correct. If we adopt a Translingual Approach towards language learning/teaching, which celebrates linguistic differences and values performative competence, we should be prepared to be open to negotiation with the student on words and ideas on the page. Below are two examples of student writing from Aimee Krall-Lanoue (2013).

> Example 1 (verb tense): "I knew I felt bad but I want him to feel worse."

> Example 2 (vocabulary): "The overview of my weak Monday was one of my tired days."

In Example 1, our first instinct is to cross out "want" and replace with "wanted. However, perhaps the student continues to want him to feel bad about it- the feelings she has are not finished. Similarly, in Example 2, our inclination would be to cross out "weak" and replace with "week" and perhaps insert a colon before "Monday" which would indicate that "Monday was one of my tired days" provides an overview of his week. But the student could have meant that Monday was a particularly "puny" day (Krall-Lanoue, 2013, p. 230). The suggestion is not that there may not be any eventual corrections to be made in both these instances, but "the translingual approach is about negotiating language difference and creating shared resources, not editing student writing" (p. 231). If we engaged in discussion with our students prior to marking these as errors, we would have transformed correction into negotiation. According to Krall-Lanoue, "*Error* is not miscommunication; it is not breaking a rule. Instead *error* is those items one or both members of the interaction refuse to negotiate- that is when one or more speakers, writers, readers refuse to engage, participate. This is the only true way an *error* can occur" (2013, p. 233). What we consider as a grammatical or lexical error could be the choice that students make in adapting the underlying linguistic structure of their mother-tongue in writing their second language.

Benefits of a Translingual Approach in the Classroom

> Adopting a Translingual Approach in our classrooms has a positive impact on student engagement and confidence levels. Y'Shanda Young-Rivera conducted a research study in a Grade 4/5 class and a Grade 8 class allowing students to engage in codemeshing and found that the students felt

> free to write and express themselves, using words of their own choosing… had no

inhibitions and weren't fearful that what they wrote would be wrong....and they felt empowered, so much so that I even think some of them were deliberately using their dialect speech patterns, just because they could. (Young, Barrett, Young-Rivera & Lovejoy, 2014, p.111)

I can personally attest to these observations and findings because in the winter 2017 semester I was enrolled in a graduate course at the University of Waterloo in which the Professor adopted a Translingual Approach in his class design and facilitation. I was allowed to codemesh my assignments and give presentations using Singlish, Malay and Academic English. As a result, I felt so empowered that I invested a lot of time and effort in my work. I focused on what I had to say, not how I had to say it which reduced the stress of writing a paper. I felt validated and valued, which rendered me capable of achieving my highest grade in a course ever in my graduate school career. I will never forget what I learned in that course or how the Professor made me feel: respected.

Someone once said that "sometimes it takes a wrong turn to get you to the right path." If I had known then what I know now about Translingualism and its tenets on accepting and celebrating language differences, I would have had the courage and the words to stand up to my colleague in the staff room that day. I would not have made my Arab student feel marginalized through my lack of sensitivity to her "errors" but I would have initiated a conversation to understand the rationale behind her choices before assessing her paper. However, I now know better, which is why I advocate for Translingualism and why I am so hype about it.

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