In search of the "whole" writing experience: on translingualism in theory and practice

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Abstract

This paper looks into how translingualism better prepares English Language Learners (ELLs) transition from the beginning to the advanced phase of their learning process as well as reconceptualize error as an idea. As an international writing consultant, I am interested in looking at how translingualism can help ELL students recognize that writing in English is not so much a passive activity as might fallaciously be assumed. Transcending an "attitude or approach to be adopted," translingualism is a reality that ELLs have been living in, which shows itself "in all language use, not just in writing" (Hall 43). One of the earlier issues ELLs encounter is that they could regard themselves as passive recipients of Standard English, who mostly mimic and memorize the meaning of words as they have been instructed from their beginning phase of learning English. Translingualism helps students address this gap by challenging the idea of the separation of students' first language and second language in their use of English. When ELLs come to recognize that L2 (Standard English) is a rhetorized correctness and not a purely linguistic one, the binary between their L1 and L2 during their writing process could start collapsing. L2, in other words, will not be viewed as the target and the only origin of their ideas. With the collapsing of the border between L1 and L2, students will reach a "rhetorical sensibility" and become more active in negotiating meaning when their different languages as resources become their full communicative repertoire they bring to bear in their writings (Guerra 228). Such assertiveness brought by translingualism, so to speak, highlights the idea that errors, especially those associated with issues of translating L1 to L2 often experienced by ELLs in the early phase of learning, might have the opportunity to be reconceptualized as they can now be seen as the results of the negotiation between languages.

Keywords: *translingualism, language learning, rhetorical sensibility, meaning negotiation.*

1. Introduction

This paper looks at how translingualism – in theory and practice – may shed a new light on what we understand as the process and objective of writing in a second language, in this case English. By realizing translingualism as the reality where English Language Learners (ELL) acquire their second language, the two primary arguments are that (1) there should be no rigid boundary between the first language (L1) and second language (L2), as often dominates language learning processes imagined to be linear. (2) Additionally, with translingualism ELLs should conceive the goal of language acquisition more as a process of becoming more independent and active in terms of negotiating meaning with different languages than a process where they aim to flawlessly duplicate nuances in their English writing and speaking driven by the mythic aura named "native." I will start from the general difficulties ELLs face and move on to why translingualism as an awareness is critically helpful for them to deconstruct the mythic aura of Standard English. For the last part, I will dwell on my experience of learning English both as a writing consultant and an international student in the US to elaborate on the practical side of translingualism.

2. Different Stages in Second Language Acquisition

Roseberry-McKibbin's research (2014) gives us the significant insight that the process of second language acquisition is not a linear one where ELL's English proficiency grows steadily in an accumulating sense. Rather it is a long process composed of different stages, where ELLs grasp a better sense of the language when they become more active and independent with the English language. At the initial stages of their learning, ELLs can be observed to go through processes such as "interference," where they carry the language characteristics from their first language to English, and "fossilization," where their habits of language usage in the first language are carried into English. Such habits may be deemed as "accent" or errors because they slow or even prevent a smooth understanding. At these stages, ELLs learn English by applying what they have memorized to English

as the new context. They are more passive during these stages in the sense that they are expected to remember and mimic more than they might experience the language in its proper context. After these come the transitional moments, where learners go through stages such as "silent period," "interlanguage" and "language loss." During these stages, learners start internalizing the language by removing traces of their first language. In the silent period, they spend more time listening and comprehending, while developing "interlanguage" when their English changes over time with more immersive experience in the second language. As if compensating one for the other, learners may experience "language loss" as their English becomes more proficient and witness a decreased proficiency in their first language. Eventually, after they gain a fuller understanding of English, learners will use it intermittently in their first language, which Roseberry-McKibbin terms "code-switching." (pp. 216-219)

The latter stages apparently indicate ELLs move beyond the basic learning approach of mimicking, memorizing and gaining more ability to negotiate between languages as they learn the second language. The degree of learners' independence, however slowly, will grow through time in their process of language acquisition. Nonetheless, the translingual perspective that I am discussing in the following section is questioning this seemingly linear progress of language acquisition. While the learning objectives in the early stage of language acquisition tend to focus on imitation and memorization, translingualism can provide a perspective where early learners can start to develop an independent awareness that usually only becomes apparent in the latter stage of language learning.

3. Translingualism in theory: beyond the monolingual approach

Translingualism encourages individual agents such as ELLs to play a part to change the seemingly static theoretical boundaries of learning theories. From the perspective of translingualism, existent disciplinary boundaries can be like "standardized rules as historical codifications of language that inevitably change" (Horner et. al. p. 305). These boundaries are meant to "change through dynamic processes of use" and "writers can, do, and must negotiate standardized rules in light of the contexts of specific instances of writing" (p. 305). Translingualism, therefore, highlights the agency of individual learners in various rhetorical situations, which are counted as part of the process (Lu & Horner, 2013).

To situate oneself with malleable repetitions and deviation in the matrix of linguistic differences is thus the practice of translingualism. Writing from this viewpoint is therefore a broad idea or, more precisely speaking, a metonym for a larger set of literacy skills. From this viewpoint we can also see that translingualism questions the separation of languages. When writers are active negotiators that respond to various rhetorical situations, those skills - as social actions that solve problems - are beyond the boundary of language. It is from this perspective that translingualism calls into question the conventional binary relationship between a "first language" (L1) and a "second language" (L2). Strictly divided by distinct cognitive needs, the two different languages can pose great difficulty for learners because L1 can easily become the central role in terms of the "narrative of origin and of essence" given learners' familiarity with it, while L2 can become a stringent set of rules that learners have to satisfy in order to voice their needs (Hall, 2018, p. 42). Conceived as "target," L2 leads learners to project the road to perfect L2 as a linear process extending on a timeline. Nevertheless, such divisive, linear thinking can clash with the active needs of voicing one's needs freely. These contradictory directions of thinking with different languages, so to speak, poses the challenge for ELLs.

Granted, memorizing a minimum level of language rules is required to express one's basic needs, just as a baby cannot speak her needs from the beginning. However, what I would like to suggest here is that translingualism sets to disrupt the idea that the road between L1 and L2 is a linear process. With the understanding that L2 can be expanded with malleable deviations that might conventionally be regarded as "errors," ELLs as individual writers should be able to understand that even the idea of "correctness" in L2 is a rhetorical one rather than a purely linguistic one. In other words, as Canagarajah (2015) suggests "what translingual pedagogies favor is deconstructing Standard English to make students aware that it is a social construct" (p. 425). To practice such pedagogies, the first step is thus to lead students out of the mindset with which they see themselves as "passive recipients of a language" (Hall, 2018, p. 43). With translingualism, it is thus crucial for ELLs to realize that the goal of learning a language lies much less in envisioning an additive concept of building up a toolbox than establishing an active approach of negotiating meaning with their multiple languages in their communicative repertoire. This shift would have a bearing on their literary skills.

4. Translingualism in Action: Find the Incentive while Learning English

As an international writing consultant, the most intuitive and immediate method for me to practice translingual pedagogy is using the native language I share with ELL writer rather than using English. This is especially more efficient when it comes to collaborating with international graduate students on their writings, as their work usually presents challenges on two levels. Beginning the consultation, we have to first gain a basic overview of the concepts and jargons related to their professional field before digging into specific technical language issues. From the perspective of translingualism, implementing the native language of writer and consultant allows both sides to communicate global issues in writings, such as structure and logic, more easily by temporarily bypassing the needs of treating the local issues such as grammar and word choices. The efficiency of such method is in proportion to the difficulty of topic in students' writings.

The more complicated the writing is, the more efficient the consultation will usually be. Graduate-level writing involves complex and vibrant academic conversations which are significantly more challenging to tease out compared to other genres or rhetorical situations. From the student writers' perspective, therefore, they have to more or less teach consultants the professional part of their writings before both sides can start working on the global and local issues. From the perspective of a writing consultant that always aims to provide a comfortable space for students to share their concerns in writing, whenever I perceive the quasi-teaching experience is too much a burden for their motivation or spoken English, I would implement such translingual practice upon their consent. Coming back from the solid communication in their native language to their English writing also incentivizes students to learn related literary skills more seriously.

While the perspective of translingualism can give ELLs a fresh perspective on English by prefacing the consultation session in their native language, such practice can also work the other way around. As mentioned earlier, intensive memorization and mimicking L2 can account for most of the learning content during the early stages of language acquisition for ELLs. Passively memorizing words and rules can encourage ELLs to conceive their learning goal as a cumulative process because L2 is a target with an idea of "correctness." This process can formulate a monolingual mindset, with which they can treat words in different languages as interchangeable units. In practice, this habit can significantly decrease the comprehensibility of their writings as their works can read like L1 written in L2. Put differently, this habit, without their even realizing it, could hurt even ELLs with abundant L2 vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. The smooth communication in native language can thus help mutual understanding between the consultant and ELLs by paying attention to specific traits or "accents" in their writings left by the monolingual habits.

Through the two cases, we can thus observe that the practice of translingualism – the implementation of native language in this case – works for both ELLs with general and advanced proficiency. For the former, suspending temporarily the anxious needs to present correct grammatical knowledge grants them a more active sense in their composition, which helps concentrate on their own voice. In the case of advanced ELLs, translingualism helps them realize that language proficiency is not merely a cumulative idea. To negotiate meaning with all the languages they own means to observe how words and phrases in their original linguistic contexts are deployed before spelling out words that meet the expressive needs while fit into the L2 context. Cramming words in L2 in the hope to make them semantic equivalents in L1 is a disregard to the linguistic context of L2, which is therefore not negotiation.

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