Obstacles in Multilingual/Translingual Approaches
to Teaching Writing at a "Monolingual" American University

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Abstract

A number of scholars have touted the advantages granted to language learners when the learning environment gives them the opportunity to draw on all their linguistic resources as appropriate (as opposed to confining them to one "target" linguistic code). Additive multilingualism and translingualism are two approaches that seek to mitigate or reverse the harms of a strictly monolingual language education, particularly in second language writing classrooms. However, many classroom teachers find it difficult to employ these approaches meaningfully in the classroom.

The authors have both taught college composition courses dedicated to multilingual students, and the goal of this project is to illustrate some of the ideological and practical obstacles to teaching a multilingual or translingual writing course at a university where one language (English) dominates. A variety of artifacts from both the classroom (e.g. syllabi, assignment prompts, instructor feedback, etc.) and from the institution (e.g. student fees, mission statements, course requirements, etc.) will be analyzed and based on these analyses, practical suggestions will be made as to how teachers may move further away from a monolingual standard.

Keywords: *Translingualism, multilingualism, monolingualism, second-language writing, higher education;*

1. Introduction

We can identify three distinct ideologies to language, each with a different attitude towards multilingual writing: monolingualism as dominant, multilingualism as residual, and translingualism as emergent [1]. These ideologies correspond to what has been referred to, respectively, as code-segregation, code-switching, and code-meshing [2], or as the "inference" model, the "correlationist" model, and the "negotiation" model [3]. The models in question differ considerably in dealing with linguistic and cultural differences of multilingual writers. Specifically, they view "difference" as, respectively, a deficit, an estrangement, and as a resource [4]. Drawing on contrastive rhetoric, the first model attributes all errors made by multilingual writers to their L1. The second model, while an improvement over the first, acknowledges the existence of difference, but does not engage with it critically enough, thus stopping short of crediting agency to the writing choices made by those writers. The third model treats writers "as agentive, shuttling creatively between discourses to achieve their communicative objectives" [3]. What this means is that translingualism extends the previous efforts made in an attempt to accommodate different varieties of English, but goes further to encourage user's agency, promote linguistic heterogeneity, and fight monolingual policies that do not reflect the nature of language use and language relation. In other words, translingualism assumes that languages are dynamic and interactive rather than static and discrete, and, as such, the presence of language differences is considered normal and desirable. Now, while the term "translingualism" itself might be relatively new and was only recently adopted into composition studies [5], as a practice it has always been present in the real world, and it has been in use in several other academic disciplines including applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, new literacy studies, comparative literature, and translation studies [6].

2. Translingualism and Equitable Language Teaching

Among the basic tenets of translingualism is the belief in the naturalness of variation, which puts all varieties in relation to standard English (or, indeed, all languages in relation to English) on the same equal footing and contributes to more equal power-sharing between various linguistic codes. Not only is a translingual approach seen as a better model for the way langauge is actually used, but a major goal of its adoption is to mitigate the linguistic inequalities that are built into language teaching, and

particularly English language teaching, in a world shaped by imperial conquest [7]. Yet, a misconception about translingualism is that it ignores standard English and, therefore, prevents students access to a variety that is realistically needed in the academy and beyond. But the reality is that translingualism does not advocate for such a position at all. What it does is that it tries to deconstruct the ideology informing standard English, informing students that it is a social construct that was historically privileged [6].

3. Obstacles to Taking a Translingual Approach

3.1 Globalized Obstacles to a Translingual Approach

Both authors work as composition instructors, and a recent examination of our international students' introductory essays shows the global influence of monolingual hegemony. For example, in a recent quarter, several students expressed a lack of confidence about their English abilities, particularly because they learned varieties of English that they feel have become adulterated by the surrounding country in some way, such as "Chinglish" (China) or "Singlish" (Singapore). Instead of finding ways to resist the monolingual ideology exhibited by our students, our own responses to their writing reveal a tacit acceptance that one language is the norm of human linguistic behavior and a continued privileging of the "native" varieties of English over other varieties (See Figure 1.)

> "I am impressed that you are taking English, Spanish, and French classes all at once--make sure that your brain doesn't explode with all of those languages in their [sic] at once!"
>
> "Thank you for your initial essay! I also hope that I can teach you some nifty and native idioms this quarter."

Fig. 1 A Writing Instructor's Tacit Acceptance of Monolingual Ideology

It seems that our desire to build rapport with our students has conflicted with our desire to challenge monolingualism.
Our students' attitudes (and ours) have, moreover, been influenced by global-level language policies that subordinate other linguistic codes to prestige dialects of English. The active promotion of the English language by the governments of English-dominant countries [7] and the economic hegemony of English-speaking corporations [8], have devalued other linguistic resources and contributed to larger and larger numbers of international students seeking degrees from US and UK institutions of higher learning.

3.2 Institutional Obstacles to Taking a Translingual Approach
At many universities, including the University of Washington, international students are required to pay fees above and beyond those required of domestic students [9]. These fees are justified, in part, by the "need" to provide extra language support to these students and thus the considerable linguistic resources of these students are framed as a burden. Indeed, in a recent survey of teaching assistants and faculty at the University of Washington, only 29% of the teaching assistants and 33% of the faculty felt that international and multi-lingual students' ability to read and write in other languages was a benefit that such students brought to their classes [10]. In such an environment, it isn't difficult to see how multilingualism is devalued (we even had a student write an essay arguing that it is better to be monolingual at the University of Washington). In such circumstances, even efforts to give support to students by offering them designated multilingual sections of composition can end up re-inscribing monolingualism as normal and making multilingual a marked and othered category [11].

3.3 Classroom Obstacles to Taking a Translingual Approach

While its proponents argue that a translingual approach to student writing requires extra time and patience [5] and a willingness to take deviations from a putative norm as meaningful choices rather than simply errors [12], the monolingual traditions of the academy, and the need to assign a grade in

limited time are obstacles for teachers who wish to take a translingual approach in their comments on student writing. When we examined the assignments, we give our students and our feedback on their writing, we found that our prompts regularly excluded the non-English linguistic resources they might use while writing and our feedback, despite our efforts to emphasize content and meaning, often fell into traditional patterns of error correction (see figure 2). We are by no means unique in these monolingual tendencies [13].
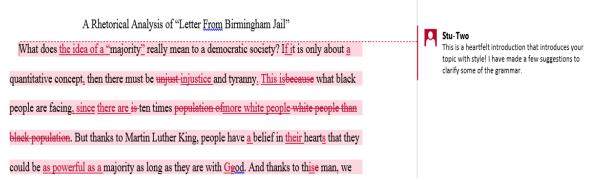
Fig. 2 A few grammar "suggestions" are clearly intended as corrections

4. Implications and Suggestions

The main implication from this brief look at our composition classes at the University of Washington is that teachers who wish to adopt a more translingual approach must immediately contend with a variety of inherited obstacles. While individual teachers have a very limited control over the global monolingual hegemony, the impact of this hegemony on students' attitudes towards English writing can immediately be mitigated through an explicit acknowledgment that monolingualism is ideological, not "natural" or "normal." An early statement to this effect, in class and in the course syllabus would better enable writing instructors to build rapport with their students while still calling attention to problematic monolingual ideology in their early writing.

Institutional circumstances may also be difficult to control, but resistance is possible once discriminatory policies have been identified. The presenters participated in coordinating resistance to their university's international student fee and this fee was recently ended. Labels like "multilingual" that are used to categorize large numbers of diverse students will always be problematic, but their harmful discursive effects can likewise be mitigated through a more transparent acknowledgment that they are problematic.

While grades are firmly entrenched in most universities' bureaucracies, the problems discussed above can be reduced through curricular changes. For example, the curriculum for the course we teach deflects some of the temptation to grade in the quick and easy monolingual style by postponing all assignment grading until the very end of the course, when the bulk of a student's grade will be determined by a holistic evaluation of a writing portfolio. The presenters have also participated in efforts to change the writing program's goals to further deemphasize the role of uncritical grammatical conformity.

Composition instructors can likewise offer assignments that invite students to take their "non-English" language resources as a topic and allow students to write parts of their essays in another language and then to translate and annotate their own writing, as well as to reflect on the differences in writing in English and the other language. Introducing assignments of this sort can help students' harness more of their linguistic resources.

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