Special issue: multilingualism and English teaching

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To cite this article: Rachael Gilmour (2020) Special issue: multilingualism and English teaching, English in Education, 54:1, 1-5, DOI: 10.1080/04250494.2019.1706878

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/04250494.2019.1706878

Published online: 23 Jan 2020.
INTRODUCTION

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You could argue that the title of this special issue is simply a statement of fact, insofar as “English teaching” has never in reality taken place in the absence of other forms of language, even when it has been imagined that way. The majority of the world’s English speakers speak it as an additional language; and even in supposedly monolingual teaching environments, like the UK education system, the “standard language” has always operated alongside other languages and other varieties of English – now more than ever, in our superdiverse present. Yet, whether as a language of national belonging or international communication, “English”, imagined as a discrete, stable, bounded entity, represents powerful cultural capital. Moreover, as the global market for English continues to grow (British Council 2013), it persists in privileging “native speaker” teaching, and indeed investing in monocultural, racialised models of “correctness” that presume linguistic authority to reside in white English-speakers from Britain and the US (see for example Bonfiglio 2013; Jenks 2017; Jenks and Won Lee 2019; Ramjattan 2019). In the British context, three and a half years after the Brexit referendum, monolingualist assertions about English as a primary guarantor of cultural unity and national cohesion underpin popular and political as well as mainstream educational discourse, and antipathy to other languages is on the rise (Wright and Brooks 2018). Articles in this special issue explore some of these dynamics, as well as the ways in which enhanced creativity and new forms of interpretation and cultural understanding, and certain kinds of social justice, can be served by approaching English as one among many systems of meaning. Taking an international perspective, the authors here explore how English operates in teaching settings in South Africa, Japan, and the United Arab Emirates, as well as in contemporary multilingual British classrooms.

It is inescapably the case that the foundations of English as a discipline lie in linguistic and cultural prescriptivism at home in Britain (Crawford 1992; Mugglestone 1995) and the establishment of imperial authority abroad (Viswanathan 1992). On both fronts, the development of English pedagogy was animated by a belief in the English language and its literature as the product of a unique and superior history and culture, and a vehicle of reason and enlightenment. As Aamir Mufti argues persuasively in Forget English! (2016), these histories still underpin the contemporary position of English as a “global” language, literary and otherwise. They also inflect attitudes to English such as that which animates the current iteration of the British National Curriculum (Yandell and Brady 2016). But at the same time, radical approaches to multilingualism in English teaching also have long histories. Although the focus of this special issue lies on the present, there is more scholarly work to be done on how teachers of English have in the past sought creative pedagogies to bridge the gap between monolingualist ideas about English and the diverse language experiences of students in their classrooms. Pioneering work like that of the Inner London Education Authority’s Afro-Caribbean Language and Literacy Project
(1984–1992), or the California Association for Bilingual Education (1976-), is of the greatest relevance for our multilingual present.

A number of articles in this special issue draw on applied linguistics, in which multilingualism has been an object of scrutiny for decades, in thinking about English teaching. As applied linguistics makes clear, for all the ideological work to make them appear so, “languages” are not stable unitary entities, and never have been (Makoni and Pennycook 2020; Blommaert 2010, 2015). Work in this field aims to grasp the dynamics of linguistically complex, “superdiverse” environments (Vertovec 2007), in which speakers are surrounded by and use symbolic resources of all kinds; which, in an increasingly digitally-connected, mediatised world, include forms of communication that broach the supposed divide between language and other kinds of meaning-making, or “multimodality” (Kress 2010). Of equal significance are critical theorists’ insights into the relationship between language and power. Christina Fashanu, Elizabeth Wood and Mark Payne in this issue use Michel Foucault’s theory of dominant discourses (2010) to think about how conceptions of language become naturalised in a British early-years setting. Belinda Mendelowitz and Karen Lazar draw on Bourdieu’s theory of cultural, linguistic, and educational capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1994), and Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of multivocality, to think about the resources education students bring to a South African English classroom and the importance of including multiple voices and perspectives within that teaching space.

There is a strong emphasis in this special issue on creativity: both on multilingualism as a creative resource, and on the importance of creativity for marking interpretative connections between different languages and cultural forms. In “Los pájaros are feliz and are dreaming about gwiazdy: Facilitating translingual creative writing in the primary classroom”, Karina Lickorish Quinn and Catherine Barbour discuss a translingual creative writing project with lower Key Stage 2 children in a London school. Framing this work in relation to contemporary monolingualist language ideologies in Britain, they argue for creative writing in particular as a ready space in which to implement a “translanguaging pedagogy” (Li 2018, qtd. in Lickorish Quinn and Barbour 2020) that accesses, mobilises and valorises the diverse linguistic resources at multilingual children’s disposal. They demonstrate the collaborative pleasures and benefits such a pedagogy offers, including for supposedly “monolingual” children. Turning to consider the linguistic and cultural identities of trainee teachers, Mendelowitz and Lazar’s “Even if it’s my story it can have your touch” addresses the use of culturally responsive writing pedagogy (CRWP) in a creative writing course for English education students in South Africa. Emphasising the dialogic, just as do Lickorish Quinn and Barbour, they discuss both the challenges and the discoveries experienced by student teachers working together in a creative writing project for the popular FunDza digital reading and writing platform. Having to work collectively across boundaries of language, class, age, race and gender, they suggest how the collaborative impetus of CRWP, alongside the need to write for a FunDza readership with linguistic and cultural frameworks often very different to their own, opened up access to “other voices and new cultural lenses” for the student teachers involved.

In “The art of belonging”, Sara Hirsh and Vicky Macleroy share the process and outcomes of a spoken word and multilingual digital storytelling project involving students in a multilingual London secondary school. Both spoken word education and digital storytelling are practices that, Hirsh and Macleroy argue, have the capacity to breach norms of
linguistic and cultural propriety in order to bring students’ diverse languages, voices and ideas to the fore. Emphasising the need to begin from students’ own linguistic and social worlds, they also discuss the difficulties they encountered, including in understanding the distance between their own linguistic, social and cultural perspectives and those of their students. They perceptively observe the problems with asking students to write about belonging, without first understanding “how I belonged in their world” and “how they belonged in mine” (Hirsh and Macleroy 2020). In “Physical Poetry: Using Japanese Butō in an EFL Poetry Performance Project”, Meghan Kuckelman and Sylwia Dobkowska turn to EFL teaching, showing how English poetry can be taught in Japan through the interpretive practices of Butō, a contemporary Japanese form of dance and visual art. In Notational Butō the acts of poetry memorisation and recall, often treated as isolated linguistic practices, become something somatic and interpretative, enacted through bodily movement and voice in tandem. In this article, alongside that by Hirsh and Macleroy, we see the pedagogical value of treating meaning-making as a multimodal practice combining the linguistic with the non-linguistic. As both articles suggest, whereas word-based language is conventionally conceived of as bounded and bordered, intersemiotic communication through gesture, image, sound and touch is able to transcend such boundaries while also adding new layers of meaning (Campbell and Vidal 2019).

Kuckelman and Dobkowska argue for ways of teaching English poetry through other cultural competencies, deviating creatively from models of “native speaker” competence and linguistic immersion. Meanwhile Keith Kennetz, David Litz, Julie Riddlebarger, Lilly Tennant, Martina Dickson and Patricia Stringer’s article “Placing elementary-school teachers at the vanguard of modernisation: language use and emergent identity among English-medium teachers in the UAE” examines the linguistic identities and language choices made by Arabic-speaking Emirati elementary school teachers of English. Though working in a mandated English-medium system which has historically relied strongly on the import of Western-born and trained educators, Kennetz et al. find a new generation of Emirati-born Arabic-speaking English teachers working pragmatically to support students’ learning and emotional needs by using their own L1 in the L2 English classroom. As the authors conclude, and in spite of prevailing orthodoxies about English-medium teaching, this is in line with research from the Middle East, Asia, Latin America and North America which demonstrates among bilingual English teachers “a general preference for bi/multi-lingualism, translanguaging, and utilising the L1 when contextually necessary” (Kennetz et al. 2020).

As Kennetz et al. among others make clear, teachers may serve either as mediators or resistant adaptors of the linguistic ideologies which govern their classrooms. So too, argue Christina Fashanu, Elizabeth Wood and Mark Payne, may the students they teach. In their article, “Multilingual communication under the radar”, they show how young children in a primary school in the north of England both resist and reproduce dominant ideologies about language use in the classroom. Considering the English classroom as a form of Foucauldian Panopticon, in which linguistic behaviour is observed and regulated, they explore how its peripheral spaces and thresholds are the setting for switches in language use, where children experiment with their own agency to employ different kinds of language, but also where they learn – notably, from one another – about the rules and stakes of monolingualist linguistic conformity. Finally, John Hodgson’s review of Evelyn Arizpe and Gabrielle Cliff Hodges’ Young People Reading: Empirical Research
Across international Contexts (2018) highlights the voices and views of young people reading in multilingual contexts across the world, whose idiosyncratic perspectives nevertheless underline the importance of reading as a practice that shapes us even in the most extreme circumstances; and of finding oneself, in whatever way, in literature.

“Wherever English is or goes in the world”, as Aamir Mufti puts it, it is always accompanied by “its various others” (2016, 18–19, emphasis in original). This special issue stresses the importance of this fact for understanding English as an object of study, and attests to both the challenges and creative possibilities it presents in English classrooms worldwide. Its recognition can bring anxiety: in Britain, as previous research by Vicky Macleroy suggests, trainee English teachers find particular difficulty in “teaching EAL learners and developing intercultural practices” (Macleroy and Obed 2013, 145, cited in Hirsh and Macleroy 2020). Understanding English as always being in relation to its various others demands new ways of teaching and thinking – which, as this special issue suggests, can be radical and productive, in making English teaching a space of encounter and dialogue between different languages and different kinds of cultural knowledge. It is our hope that these articles will provide resources and stimulation to new research and teaching practices in this area, opening up the linguistic and creative dimensions of what we think of as “English teaching”.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Rachael Gilmour is Reader in Postcolonial and World Literature and Head of English at Queen Mary University of London, and her current research focuses on the intersections between language politics and literary form, most particularly in Britain from the postwar period to the present. Her publications include Grammars of Colonialism: Representing Languages in Colonial South Africa, (with Bill Schwarz) End of Empire & the English Novel since 1945, (with Tamar Steinitz) Multilingual Currents in Literature, Language & Culture, and Bad English: Literature, Multilingualism, and the Politics of Language in Contemporary Britain (forthcoming). She is also co-editor, with Claire Chambers, of the Journal of Commonwealth Literature, and on the editorial boards of the international contemporary literature journal Wasafiri and Bloomsbury’s New Horizons in Contemporary Writing series.

References


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