Translanguaging as a political stance: implications for English language education

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Following the multilingual trend in language education, translanguaging advocates active use of multiple languages and other meaning-making resources in a dynamic and integrated way in teaching and learning. When it comes to foreign language education, translanguaging advocates a view that the languages the learners already have should and can play a very positive role in learning additional languages. Moreover, the knowledge already acquired through the learners' first and/or prior learned languages also plays an important role in foreign-language-medium education. This view is more than a pedagogic or theoretical perspective; it is a political stance, a decolonizing stance, that this article explores. It discusses the implications of the political naming of languages and critiques notions such as academic English.

Key words: Translanguaging, ELT, EAL, politics, decolonisation

Introduction

My work on bilingual education has taken me to many places in East (China, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau), Southeast (Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, India), and Central (Kazakhstan) Asia, where, in the last two decades in particular, English medium education is synonymous with internationalization and globalization. Education establishments openly admit that they can charge higher fees if they say that their programmes are taught through the medium of English, using textbooks imported from English-speaking countries, and better still, with native-English speakers as teachers. They like the idea of 'additive bilingualism' as adding English to the learner's linguistic repertoire and often assume that bilingual education is teaching English to people whose first language is not English. When I tell them about translanguaging, many look perplexed because they are completely sold on the idea that one-language-only or one-language-at-a-time is the best way to maximize the input of English in learning and to avoid transfer from their first languages, which can only be negative and trigger errors in the target language. They

are also told that English speakers have a different way of thinking and argumentation, which learners of English must learn to adopt in order to claim to be proficient in the language.

These assumptions, triggered by nationalist and raciolinguistic ideologies of monolingualism, are precisely what translanguaging aims to challenge, although translanguaging originated in the education of bilingual learners, especially minoritized and racialized bilingual learners, not in foreign language education. Over the years, translanguaging has developed in at least three ways. First, as a pedagogic philosophy and practice, translanguaging encourages bilingual learners to use their entire linguistic repertoire in learning, irrespective of how much explicit structural knowledge they have of the different, specific named languages. Second, as a theory of human cognition and communication, translanguaging postulates that named languages are political constructs and historico-ideological products of the nation-state boundaries and have no neuropsychological correspondence and that human beings have a natural instinct to go beyond narrowly defined linguistic resources in meaning- and sense-making, as well as an ability, acquired through socialization and social participation, to manipulate the symbolic values of the named languages such as identity positioning (Li 2018). And third, as an analytical perspective, translanguaging shifts the fixation on language as an abstractable coded system to the language user, rooted in socioculturally specific timespace, and focuses on their capacity for communicative practices and activities that are purposeful and meaningful in particular contexts. When it comes to foreign language education, translanguaging advocates a view that the languages the learners already have, either as first languages or prior learned languages, should and can play a very positive role in learning additional languages. Moreover, the knowledge already acquired through the learners' first and/or prior learned languages also plays an important role in foreign-language-medium education. This view is more than a pedagogic or theoretical perspective; it is a political stance, a decolonizing stance, that I will explore in this article.

The political naming and labelling of languages and their users

Translanguaging as a political stance begins with an emphasis on language as a political construct. In my class on bilingualism and multilingualism, I normally start by asking the students what languages they know and then ask them to define those languages. They immediately realize that one cannot define a named language entirely in structural terms without making reference to its users. And the users of the same named language may belong to different nation-states, come from a variety of backgrounds, and be in very different social positions. The idea that human languages are abstractable codes that can be discovered, documented, saved, or revived is part of the linguistic orthodoxy with its own inherent logical muddle (García and Li 2014: 6–7). Human languages as we know them do not simply exist as neutral, abstractable objects, but rather are brought into being through sociopolitical forces that are part of the broader social processes such as nation-state-building and geopolitical (re)configuration of the world that serves dominant interests. The naming of languages is a political act, as ample examples across the world show—the naming of Bosnian, Croatian,

Montenegrin, and Serbian in the former republics of Yugoslavia, Farsi in Iran, Dari in Afghanistan, and Tajiki in Tajikistan, and the mutually unintelligible 'dialects' of Chinese in China.

Similarly, the labelling of a language as 'native', 'foreign', 'immigrant', or 'heritage' language is also a political act and one that is more about the sociopolitical categorization of its users than about the language itself. English speakers from England, the United States, and Australia are often regarded as 'native' speakers of the language. But English originated from Anglo-Frisian dialects and was brought to the British Isles and Ireland in the mid fifth to seventh centuries AD by Anglo-Saxon migrants from what is now northwest Germany, southern Denmark, and the Netherlands, gradually displacing the previously dominating Celtic languages. The exporting of English to other parts of the world, including North America and Australia, has been closely associated with British colonization, and in the twentieth century, globalization. Yet, how often do we hear anyone calling English as an 'immigrant language' in Britain, Ireland, the United States, or Australia, and the younger generations of English speakers in these countries 'heritage language speakers'? These labels—immigrant and heritage languages and speakers—are typically associated with minoritized, racialized, and/or socially stigmatized languages and speakers.

The consequences of the political naming and labelling of languages

What are the consequences of the political naming and labelling of languages? First of all, language becomes nationalized and racialized. As mentioned above, the ideology and policy of monolingualism has been part and parcel of nation-state building across the world over history, where one language becomes the symbol of a nation-state and dominating the societal structures and institutions as well as people's everyday life in a specific country. In multilingual countries where several languages are accorded national language status, the differently named languages become highly racialized, e.g. Canada, India, Singapore, Switzerland, and many countries in Africa and Latin America. As a result, raciolinguistic ideologies emerge, not just about the different languages but also, and more, about the users of the racialized languages. This point will be explored further in the context of language education below.

Another consequence of the political naming and labelling of languages is that different languages are assigned different sociopolitical status, and by extension, the users of the different languages are put into different social categories with status specific to their category. Languages that have been designated as 'immigrant language' have little chance of being used as the language of instruction in formal education contexts in any country. In the 2021 UK census, only one language can be identified as the 'main language' at home. We expect that hundreds of British-born children in the education system whose home language is not English will be identified as EAL—English as an additional language—learners even though they may be using English as their primary language of communication outside the family domain. Will they be supported or discriminated against as a consequence? Speakers of languages such as Arabic, Chinese, and Spanish are constantly bemused by the designation

of their languages as 'minority' languages in countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States when these languages are clearly global languages with native-speaking (*sic*) populations much larger than that of the so-called majority language of English. 'Minority' and 'majority' are of course relative terms and context specific. But the social consequences of the labelling is serious. Whilst national, majority languages enjoy a great deal of privilege and prestige as they are the languages of law, business, health, and education, the designation of minority or immigrant language can bring disadvantage, even discrimination, to their users. There have been numerous reports on the linguistic xenophobia targeted at speakers of European languages after Brexit. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many users of minority and immigrant languages in the United Kingdom had problems with access to health services in languages other than English.

The translanguaging stance

As García has argued, translanguaging as a political stance has 'the potential to decolonize our conception of language' (García 2019: 162). This is not simply about respecting the existence of different named languages or paying more attention to the fluid and dynamic multilingual practices that characterize all aspects of our life in the twenty-first century; it is about challenging the nationalistic assumptions of named languages and raciolinguistic ideologies that contribute to the institutionalization of linguistic and social inequalities. In other words, translanguaging is not intended to be another purely descriptive label that can document how different named languages are used and understood in communities, although more systematic descriptions of such kind are an important progress already. Translanguaging seeks, in addition, to interrogate and critique the normative framing of language and language practices of minoritized and racialized bilingual and multilingual language users, especially in the education systems, and promote policies and practices that bring forth the experiences, subjectivities, and agencies of these language users (see examples of such policies and practices in Garcia and Li 2014; Garcia 2019).

Translanguaging therefore is not addictive; it is not about allowing different named languages to be used in contexts where the norm is monolingual as in many ELT cases. Translanguaging is fundamentally reconstitutive in at least three senses: (1) reconstitutive of language structures, through dynamic mixing of features and styles that linguists have classified as different named languages, language varieties, or genres; (2) reconstitutive of language status imposed by the nation-state and by raciolinguistic ideologies; and (3) reconstitutive of power relations between groups of language users with differentiated access to symbolic capital through entitlement/non-entitlement to claims of native-speakership of colonizing languages. These senses apply to language-in-education policies and practices whose implementation needs the teachers and the learners working together.

The racialization of (academic) English

The following exchange occurred during a focus group discussion about university choices between two seventeen-year-old British-born Chinese young men T and M, with me as the researcher, L, in 2011 as

part of a linguistic ethnography of Chinese complementary schools in London, where the young men were studying Chinese. T is responding to a question about what subjects he was doing at school—in England, students are expected to pass Advanced level (A-level) or equivalent examinations in three subjects in order to get a place to study at university:[1]

T: 我学maths, further maths, physics, 和Latin.
(I study maths, further maths, physics and Latin.)
M: Latin?
L: 拉丁文啊?
(Latin.)
T: 对.
(Correct.)
M: 为什么拉丁文?
(Why Latin?)
L: 很好呀.
(Very good.)
T: I've always been interested in it.
M: Are you good at it?
T: Yeah?
M: Do you do essays?
T: A bit. Lots of translation.
L: (To M) 你呢?
(How about you?)
M: 和他一样, but no Latin.
(Same as him, but no Latin.)
L: 数学和物理.
(Maths and physics.)
M: Mm. Typical Chinese isn't it?
L: Why do you say that?
M: Well, even when I was a kid, the teachers at school say 'Oh Chinese kids are good at maths and science', so always encouraged me to do maths and science subjects.
T: Yeah. And they think we are not good at writing essays. So they don't want us to do English or history.
L: Really? They said no you can't do English, English literature, right, and history?
T: Yeah, because maths doesn't need a lot of language.
L: So did they think you are no good at languages, or just English?
T: I don't know. I think I'm pretty good at languages. But they never encouraged me.
L: You are doing Latin though.
T: Yes, but it's a little different. It's not so like English literature.
L: But Latin is literature.
T: Yes, but it's different.
M: It's true though, teachers think we are good at science and not good at English stuff.
L: 你们学校也一样?
(Your school is the same?)
T: We are EAL, aren't we?

L: So what do you think of the term, EAL?
T: Don't know. Makes you feel secondary I suppose.
M: I hate it. English is my main language. I'm actually struggling with Chinese. That's why I'm here, doing weekend Chinese class. I've no problem with English.
T: But you only do maths and science at school.
M: I was always afraid that they don't think my English is good enough to do an essay-based subject.
L: 如果你自己选择你会选择学什么?
(If you can choose yourself, what subject do you want to study?)
M: 上大学?历史啦or law.
(At university? History or law).

The two young men have clearly experienced the well-documented stereotypical assumptions of Chinese students that they are good at maths and science (Archer and Francis 2006). They are British-born and 'have no problem with English'. Yet because of their race, they are categorized as EAL (English as an additional language) learners by the school, whose English is not expected to be 'good enough to do an essay-based subject' at school or university. The language that they have 'problems' with is in fact Chinese, the language that they have been ascribed to as their first language by virtue of their race, and that is why they were attending the weekend Chinese complementary school in order to improve their Chinese reading and writing abilities (Li and Wu 2009). Yet society does not seem to recognize the efforts young people like T and M have to make in learning and maintaining their so-called home language in the face of English dominance in British society. There are still universities in the United Kingdom that do not accept A-levels in 'community languages' as part of the entry qualification if they categorize the student as belonging to a specific community. The raciolinguistic ideologies are all too obvious to tell here: one's claim of proficiency in, and therefore ownership of, a language depends on one's racial identity; a British-born Chinese cannot claim to be a native-speaker of English because English is owned by a different race. And Chinese must be their native language irrespective of their proficiency or use. There are similar cases in Singapore and India where people who grow up in an English-speaking environment and are educated in English-medium schools are still regarded as non-native speakers of English because they have other languages in their linguistic repertoire and use their other languages interchangeably with English. Indeed, both these countries are regarded as 'outer circles' of the English-speaking world (Kachru 1992) and the people there only speak hyphenated English, e.g. Singaporean-English or Indian-English, which often get called, pejoratively, Singlish or Hinglish.

As Flores and Rosa (2015) point out, raciolinguistic ideologies perpetuate stigmatization of the language practices of racialized bilinguals and multilinguals. And nowhere else is this stigmatization seen more acutely than in the schools and universities of major English-speaking countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom with specific regard to the notion of 'academic English'. Racialized bilingual or EAL learners are portrayed as incapable of mastering academic English, leading to education achievement gaps. It has to be said that the idea of poor

academic English as the cause for poor school attainment does not apply only to minoritized bilingual and multilingual learners—it is often linked to working-class students from deprived backgrounds too—but it is more commonly assumed when race and socioeconomic class intersect. What the above example shows, however, is that even amongst the seemingly successful pupils of Chinese and Indian descent in British schools, a higher proportion of whom are more likely to go on to higher education, academic English remains a barrier for them to get into certain subjects and disciplines, restricting their future employment opportunities. The problem with the notion of academic English is that it is not a set of empirically and objectively verifiable linguistic features, but, as Flores and Rosa (2015) point out, a category and a categorizing device that emerges as part of broader raciolinguistic ideologies that position racialized and minoritized learners as illegitimate language users, linguistically deficient and unacademic. The framing of academic English itself is prejudiced against racialized and minoritized bilingual and multilingual language users as well as socioeconomically disadvantaged students, who, by nature of their race and/or social position, will always struggle to achieve the imagined and elusive standards set by those of the dominant race with institutional power. Evidence is provided by Flores and Rosa (2015) as well as in their other publications.

Following the argument that named languages are political and ideological constructs, the translanguaging stance considers the concept of academic English a political construct too, framed by a raciolinguistic ideology that grants an elite group of English speakers the authority and ownership of this peculiar variety of the language. This elite group is typically people of the dominant racial group and with institutional power through which they can determine the ways in which language is used by people of minoritized social groups and in positions of no social influence. What is more, this elite group feels a natural entitlement to setting the standard of academic English because of its members own racial background and social position. Translanguaging challenges the raciolingusitc framing of language and the socially constructed educational systems, structures, and practices by engaging diverse students' existing, multiple, and dynamic meaning-making systems, knowledge, and subjectivities, thus destabilizing the hegemonic power relation between the so-called monolingual native speakers and the othered users of othered languages.

Translanguaging English medium education

The translanguaging stance on language as a sociopolitic construct has serious implications for English medium education, which is increasingly popular in certain parts of the world, especially Asia. Education is a value-forming process, i.e. a conditioned experience where knowledge is produced and reproduced in specific ways that have a lasting impact on the learners' worldview, including value judgement, as well as their social behaviour.[2] If it is accepted that languages are political constructs, then the choice of the medium cannot be value neutral. In fact, the institutions that promote English medium education do not claim that their choice of language of instruction is value neutral because they typically promote the benefits of English medium education in terms of better employment

prospect, financial gains, and social and global mobility. In this context, the translanguaging stance urges all of us to resist neocolonialism through the soft power of English. Specifically, it wants us to reject the raciolinguistic framing of language norms and standards. The two commonly held assumptions that I mention in the opening paragraph of this article—that 'native' English speakers have a different way of thinking and argumentation that learners of English must learn to adopt, and that transfer from the learners' first languages to English is the cause of errors—are, from a translanguaging perspective, predicated on raciolinguistic ideologies.

Despite a considerable amount of critical applied and sociolinguistic work on intercultural communication, many English language teachers still believe in the so-called 'cultural differences' in rhetorical patterns and ways of making an argument that were identified in some earlier work by Kaplan (1966) and Connor (1996). A rather unfortunate consequence has been that the linear discourse organization of English expository writing, characterized by directness and deductive reasoning, therefore coherent and persuasive, that Kaplan (1966) attributed to the Platonic–Aristotelian tradition and Anglo-European culture, is held as the model that all English-as-a-second/foreign/additional-language learners must learn to follow. Other cultural styles are regarded as digressive, indirect, or circular, and therefore inscrutable and unconvincing. This kind of stereotyping and overgeneralizing not only discriminates against non-English-L1 learners, but also privileges an elite group of English users over others of different regional, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds and status. Moreover, there is ample research evidence that linguistic, and conceptual, transfers are multidirectional (Jarvis 2017). To regard certain ways of expressing one's thought as errors and attribute them to negative transfers from the L1 is to create a strawman for raciolinguistic ideologies.

As Chen (2010) reminds us, knowledge production is one of the major sites in which the historical processes of imperialization, colonization, and the Cold War have become mutually entangled and exercise their power. Language, as a political construct, in which knowledge is produced and reproduced, therefore matters. The choice of language as medium of education is a political act. English in English medium education, to paraphrase Hall (1992: 277), is 'a structure of knowledge', 'a framework used to categorize' people and societies, and 'a series of images that form a system of representation that connects with other concepts', e.g. English speakers—metropolitan, educated, knowledgeable, desirable, and progressive, versus the non- or poor-English-speakers—uneducated and underdeveloped whose existing knowledge acquired through other languages is backward and disposable. The translanguaging stance advocates that the linguistic and cultural knowledge learners of English as a second, foreign, or additional language already have is legitimate on its own terms, and therefore must be taken seriously as a necessary component in ensuring these learners' success in education (Flores 2020). The rich and diverse and social experiences and practices of the English language learners should be mobilized to provide alternative points of reference, horizons, and perspective for knowledge production and at the same time to transform the subjectivities of the learners. The

transformation of the learners' subjectivity is about an appreciation of the value and power of their existing knowledge and an ability to articulate one's thoughts in one's own ways without worrying about transfers, digressions, deviations, and errors. Again, translanguaging is not simply about allowing languages other than English into the classroom context; it is not additive, but fundamentally reconstitutive of the power structures between named languages, knowledge systems, and pedagogic practices.

ELT and English medium education are now a multibillion-dollar global industry involving millions of institutions and people with competing interests. The concept of translanguaging was not explicitly intended to address any issues in ELT or English medium education. It does nevertheless act as a timely reminder that these policies and practices are not value-neutral because the English language itself, like all named languages, is a political construct. To promote English as the language of science, knowledge, and internationalization is an ideological act. It should be recognized that plurilingualism is increasingly celebrated in the European CLIL context and in the British primary and secondary school context for EAL pupils, where attempts are also made to present academic, or a more formal form of, English in more culturally appropriate ways. However, real progress in decolonizing ELT and English medium education cannot be made simply by allowing different named languages to be used in teaching and learning; we need to raise critical awareness of the raciolinguistic ideologies underlying the framing of the medium of instruction and the norms of language use, bring forth the learners' own experiences and subjectivities, and promote equity between different cultural traditions and knowledge systems, as suggested by Kubota (2021) in her work on the critical antiracist pedagogy in ELT.

Translanguaging English medium education: practical challenges

There are practical challenges in implementing a translanguaging approach to English medium education that cannot be underestimated. For instance, teachers may ask: students have different home languages that I as the teacher do not understand. How do I manage? The answer is that education, even in the so-called English medium instruction context, is not about language alone. It is about knowledge construction, and translanguaging urges us to think about how knowledge is constructed in particular. Do the multilingual learners know the concept, fact, method, or reasoning already in their L1s? If yes, do they think what they know is different from what the English textbook tells them? Can we make good use of the knowledge they already have in their L1s in learning through the English medium?

Teachers may also say: I need to maximize input of the target language (in a language classroom) within a fixed and limited period of time. Time does not allow too many different languages to be used in class. We should remind ourselves that learning, especially of language, requires practice in context. Classroom learning is by definition limited and superficial. A great deal of learning takes place outside the classroom, in the community, at home, where translanguaging is common practice. The translanguaging stance is not about allowing multiple languages in the classroom, but about respecting and valuing diverse and dynamic linguistic practices as key resources in knowledge construction.

In Britain since the turn of the millennium, school education has been dominated by the 'what works' agenda under the evidence-based discourse through the various agencies set up by the government. Many sceptics of the translanguaging stance ask: where is the evidence that translanguaging works for bilingual and multilingual learners. I do not hear them ever asking: where is the evidence that the monolingual approach has worked, even though the evidence that it has not benefited minoritized and racialized bilingual learners is ample and clear. Educators and policymakers need to be aware of the long-term consequences of suppressing the minoritized languages of the bilingual learners in terms of stigmatized attitudes, register loss, and emotional detriment. Translanguaging offers a holistic and equitable view of multilingualism: all languages matter! The translanguaging approach to language learning aims to maximize learners' multilingual potential by fostering creativity through novel ways of combining, mixing linguistic structures, and creating new expressions with elements of different named languages and other social semiotic resources, and encouraging criticality by exposing the learner to different ways of thinking and doing, different traditions, practices and values, and different ideologies. Both creativity and criticality are key to education.

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Notes

1 A shorter version of this example is discussed in García et al. (2021). The writing of this article coincided with and benefited from the writing of García et al. (2021).

2 I am not talking about so-called 'values education', which has a specific definition.

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