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COMMENTARY

Translanguaging, multimodality, southern theory, and pedagogical possibilities

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Last year, I observed an after-school Mandarin club in north west London where I serve as a member of the governing council. The teacher was teaching some basic Chinese characters. She was using an interactive white board on the wall, but was also holding an iPad. The pupils all had iPads, which were synced with the teacher's. When a target character appeared on the interactive white board, the teacher first explained the meaning, pronounced it out loud, and then asked the pupils to write it on the iPad. The target character was already on the iPad screen, but shaded. What the teacher wanted the pupils to do was to write it in the right stroke order. If a pupil did it in the right stroke order, the character would become clear and bold. The meaning(s) of the target character appeared on the screen in English, and the pupils could press the speaker icon to hear the pronunciation if they wanted to. When any pupil got the stroke order wrong, the teacher would ask the whole class to write together, but not on the iPad but with the index finger in the air. The pupils seemed quite used to it.

I noticed this moment because I have a long-term interest in finger-writing, sometimes called finger spelling, or air writing/spelling. In my earlier work in the Chinese complementary school classrooms in various parts of England in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I witnessed numerous occasions where teachers would lead the students to write out Chinese characters in the air with the index finger, just like the teacher in this after-school club did. As we were doing team ethnography, the Chinese heritage researchers took it for granted because it was a fairly common phenomenon. At the same time, some of the non-Chinese heritage researchers did not notice it, whilst others asked what it was all about. This is not the place to go into further details of this practice. Suffice to say that finger spelling is not at all unique to the Chinese; it is in fact a common phenomenon in many different language cultures. Young children learn to read and write through it. It is an important and integral part of multimodal learning. And with the exponential expansion of touch technologies in the last two decades, finger spelling, albeit in a different form with a different medium, is playing an even more significant role in learning to read and write, both in first language learning by young children and in second language learning.

I am recalling these because they are good examples of multimodal learning. In fact, learning is multimodal in its very nature. But when we study language learning, there has been a tendency to focus primarily on languages as coded systems. The translanguaging

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scholarship that has grown substantially in recent years emphasizes that human languages are a highly multimodal complex dynamic semiotic system. A key objective of the translanguaging project is to build a new way of thinking and talking about languages, not as sets of abstractable codes but as multimodal semiotic systems for meaning- and sense-making. As I have recently stated (2022b: 2), we want to, and need to, shift our analytical attention away from language as abstract codes to focus on meaning- and sense-making through trans-languag-ing. And we want to, and need to, attend to a wider range of multi-semiotic resources, as studies in this special issue do, whilst refusing to privilege particular modes and methods of meaning-making over others. For me, translanguaging is not simply transcending the boundaries between named languages, but also the boundaries between language and other semiotic and modal systems for meaning- and sense-making. Translanguaging in that sense embraces multimodality. The empirical evidence provided by the contributors to the present special issue demonstrates transmodal translanguaging very vividly.

This volume brings translanguaging and multimodalities together in investigating language and literacy experiences of multilingual learners in very different sociocultural and educational contexts. It is particularly good to see studies that focus not on the conventional classroom but in digital spaces and communities. There is a great deal of emphasis on the spatial repertoire. But all the studies focus on agentive deployment of diverse semiotic resources in an integrated repertoire to construct meaning. For me, though, a very significant contribution of the present special issue as a whole is the Global South perspective and the very obvious and deliberate effort to reject "abyssal thinking" – "hegemonic thinking creates a line establishing that which is considered 'civil society', and declares as nonexistent those colonized knowledges and lifeways positioned on the other side of the line, thus relegating them to an existential abyss" (García et al., 2021, p. 203). All the authors are speaking "from the inside out", approaching translanguaging as "an expansively integrated experience" (Li, 2022b: 2) itself, as well as rejecting the theory versus data divide by integrating empirical and conceptual knowledge. The latter point is a crucial one and one that the Global South perspective and the so-called Southern Theory (Connell, 2007) is all about, i.e. interrogating the hegemony of conceptual frameworks that were produced in the imperial centre of the European empire and exported to the rest of the world and finding an alternative way of constructing and articulating knowledge with rich and diverse ideas indigenous to post-colonial societies. The conceptual questions the studies in this special issue address include, for example, cultural flow, civic and professional identities, entanglements, materiality and "first-order languaging", and raciolinguistic ideology. They are dealt with through integrated, and innovative, analyses of empirical evidence in Chinese word instruction, teacher development, multimodal composition, online language tutoring, online teaching videos, in Global South societies or transnational interactions. Together, they push against conceptual and empirical boundaries, as the editors rightly point out, to help us envisage these intersections as pedagogical and learning possibilities in today's classrooms and societies.

So what are the pedagogical and learning possibilities that translanguaging and multimodality afford? This is a question that readers of this particular journal will no doubt be especially interested in, and one that has been asked in various forms by many people. The standard search for answers tends to go for very practical suggestions of classroom teaching methods – there is of course the term "pedagogical translanguaging" for example, – or evidence of the effectiveness of translanguaging and multimodal pedagogy and learning but measured with conventional and never translanguaging or

multimodal measures. Many practitioners can be very disappointed because translanguaging and multimodal pedagogy is a lot of (extra) work for them and if the results do not show any specific benefits clearly, then why bother? But translanguaging as a decolonizing project wants to question the way evidence for effectiveness of pedagogy and learning is gathered and measured. As I said in Wei, 2022a), translanguaging is not about allowing more named languages to be used in teaching and learning or simply using different means (e.g. digital, physical, spatial) of interactions.

"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." (p. 175) (see also Li and Garcia, 2022)

To be reconstitutive in the three senses entails, in practical terms, Co-Learning, a concept I first wrote about in 2013 in the context of heritage language education in complementary schools in the UK (Li, 2013). It was inspired by Brantmeier's work on what he calls Pedagogy of Vulnerability (Brantmeier, 2020), but the concept itself came not from education but from other disciplines ranging from artificial intelligence and computer simulation to global security systems and business information management. In essence, co-learning is a process in which several agents simultaneously try to adapt to one another's behaviour so as to produce desirable global outcomes that would be shared by the contributing agents. In the classroom context, co-learning changes the role sets of teachers and learners from what Brantmeier (2020, p. 97) calls "dispensers and receptacles of knowledge" to "joint sojourners" on the quest for knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. In particular, the teacher versus learner dichotomy would be broken and the teacher would become a learning facilitator, a scaffolder, and a critical reflection enhancer, while the learner becomes an empowered explorer, a meaning maker, and a responsible knowledge constructor. A facilitator "guides the process of student learning" and "does not get in the way of learning by imposing information". A scaffolder "assesses the learner's knowledge and builds scaffolding to extend that knowledge to a broader and deeper understanding". And a critical reflection enhancer asks the learner to "reflect on what is being learned and the process of learning (meta-reflection about process)" (Brantmeier, n.d., n.p.). At the same time, an empowered explorer is "an independent or collective explorer of knowledge". And a meaning maker and responsible knowledge constructor is "one who engages in meaningful knowledge construction that promotes relevancy to her/his own life" (Brantmeier, n.d., n.p.). In co-learning, mutual adaptation of behaviour is the key. In order to achieve desirable learning outcomes, all co-participants need to constantly monitor and adapt their actions and learn from each other. The studies in the present special issue provide a range of examples of good practice of co-learning.

It is very important to emphasize that co-learning in the classroom does not simply involve the teacher in developing strategies to allow equitable participation for all; co-learning requires much unlearning of cultural conditioning because, as Brantmeier points

out, "it challenges the traditional authoritative, dominant and subordinate role sets in schooling environments and the unequal power relationships in wider spheres of our world" (Brantmeier, n.d., n.p.). It empowers the learner, and "builds a more genuine community of practice" (Brantmeier, n.d., n.p.). It moves the teacher and the learner towards a more "dynamic and participatory engagement" (Brantmeier, n.d., n.p.) in knowledge construction. According to Brantmeier (2020), the characteristics of a co-learning relationship include:

- all knowledge is valued;
- reciprocal value of knowledge sharers;
- care for each other as people and co-learners;
- trust; and
- learning from one another.

And the characteristics of a co-learning classroom environment include:

- shared power among co-learners;
- social and individualized learning;
- collective and individual meaning making and identity exploration;
- community of practice with situated learning; and
- real-world engagement and action.

Translanguaging and co-learning share a great deal of common values. In particular, both Translanguaging and co-learning emphasize that all knowledge, acquired through all languages and in all cultural contexts, should be valued. In the classroom, this will be shown through reciprocal value of knowledge sharers, who care for each other as people and co-learners. Their mutual trust is essential in order to learn from one another. In what he describes as Pedagogy of Vulnerability, Brantmeier (2020) urges the instructors to open themself and contextualize that self in societal constructs and systems. For him, co-learning entails admitting one does not know everything in? Being human. It also entails taking risks: risks of self-disclosure, of change, of not knowing, of failing. Whilst Translanguaging focuses on valuing all languages and promotes the learning of each other's languages and perspectives on the world, co-learning advocates valuing the knowledge, values, and insights of all involved. Both advocate creating opportunities of different ways of learning and talking about learning, and both point to the need to unlearn cultural conditioning and to dismantle asymmetrical power relationships.

As the studies in this special issue show, it is commonplace in the present-day world for language classes to have learners with very different linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds, as those in the above example exemplify, some having very complex migration and language-learning experiences. They bring with them "funds of knowledge" – "the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for households and individual functioning and well-being" (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133, see, also Moll & Gonzalez, 1994). Such funds of knowledge contain rich cultural and cognitive resources that can be used in the classroom in providing culturally responsive, meaningful, and effective teaching. Teachers, as well as the learners, have much to gain from using these funds of knowledge in the classroom, not only to make the classrooms more inclusive but also to

engage in real-world meaning making and identity exploration, which are crucial yet often neglected aspects of learning.

The pedagogical and learning opportunities afforded by translanguaging and multi-modality through co-learning are very different from how pedagogical and learning opportunities are conventionally conceptualized and assessed. They position both the teachers and the students as co-learners, joint sojourners, and holders of different funds of knowledge. We need to use a different language to frame our conceptualization and articulation of pedagogy and learning – an additional sense of "trans" in translanguaging!

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