The plurilingual teacher: moving beyond the native / non-native speaker debate

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Plurilingualism

• "Plurilingualism' refers to the repertoire of varieties of language which many individuals use, and is therefore the opposite of monolingualism; it includes the language variety referred to as 'mother tongue' or 'first language' and any number of other languages or varieties”.

• Distinguished from multilingualism – the co-existence of languages in a community

• Council of Europe Common Framework of Reference for Languages

• http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/division_EN.asp
A plurilingual person has:
- a repertoire of languages and language varieties
- competences of different kinds and levels within the repertoire

Plurilingual education promotes:
- an awareness of why and how one learns the languages one has chosen
- an awareness of and the ability to use transferable skills in language learning
- a respect for the plurilingualism of others and the value of languages and varieties irrespective of their perceived status in society
- a respect for the cultures embodied in languages and the cultural identities of others
- an ability to perceive and mediate the relationships which exist among languages and cultures
- a global integrated approach to language education in the curriculum

Council of Europe Common Framework of Reference for Languages

http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/division_EN.asp
Plurilingualism in the context of Australian ESOL

- Reimagining the TESOL classroom as a plurilingual rather than monolingual space

- Explain the contention that TESOL has tended to have an English-only focus and ignore other languages, both Ts’ and Ss’

- Present a conceptualisation of teacher plurilingualism that recognizes the complexity, richness and variety of experiences

- Present data showing the value of teacher plurilingualism at all levels

- Challenge thinking about how languages figure in the ESOL classroom
Development of TESOL as English-only in Australia

- A confluence of 4 historical factors contributed to the development of our approach to ESOL in Australia
Large scale immigration after World War II
Language teachers largely qualified in French, German, Latin and Greek

(Martin 1998)
Behaviourist approaches to learning: L1 = bad habit
The appearance of the "Direct Method" thus coincided with a new school of thinking that dictated that all foreign language teaching should occur in the target language only, with no translation and an emphasis on linking meaning to the language being learned. The method became very popular during the first quarter of the 20th century, especially in private language schools in Europe where highly motivated students could study new languages and not need to travel far in order to try them out and apply them communicatively. One of the most famous advocates of the Direct Method was the German Charles Berlitz, whose schools and Berlitz Method are now world-renowned.

Renewed interest in the Direct Method (teaching in the target language)
Despite much progress in LL theory and pedagogy over the last 60 years, it is still the norm that...

- English is taught through English by a monolingual teacher or a teacher who is supposed to act as if s/he is monolingual

- It is axiomatic that instruction is only in English – can only be imagined in English

- It has become unnecessary, even undesirable for the teacher to speak any other language than English

- Teachers’ languages are ignored

- An L2 is not required to become an ESOL teacher
Contestation: TESOL has grown as English-only, monolingual in focus

- The ‘monolingual mindset’ constitutes a ‘naturalised discourse’ (Clyne 2005, Fairclough 1992)
- taken for granted
- assumed to be the natural order of things (Ellis 2006, 2008, Phillipson 1992, 1997)

Pre-Columbus – this was normal, right?
TESOL as a profession and TESOL teacher preparation

- We need to reconceptualise our view of teacher language background

❌ Is the teacher a native speaker or non-native speaker?

✔ Does the teacher have the kind of knowledge, experience and skills that are best for the job?

**Proposition:**

- That ALL ESOL teachers, NS and NNS can benefit from being plurilingual
Traditional view:

- An ESOL teacher needs to be:
  - A proficient speaker of English
  - A skilled analyst of English
  (Wright and Bolitho 1997)

- Much of the debate has focussed on whether NNS meet the first criterion, and more recently, on defending their skills as bilinguals (Braine 1999, Moussu and Llurda 2007)

- Re-naming NNS as ‘bilingual Ts’ transfers the stigma and obscures a much more important question

- What kind of L2 learning/using experience is important?
In ESL, are we teaching....

• **ENGLISH** as a second language

  • If so, teachers only need proficiency in English and the ability to analyse English

  Or

  English **as a second language**

  • If so, teachers need to understand bilingual language use, code-switching, identity in a second language, bilingual family language use and

  • *Language learning awareness*
What kind of knowledge about language and culture do we want ESOL teachers to have?

- Know how language and culture function in spoken, written and multimodal texts
- Understand the linguistic, cultural and contextual factors and processes involved in development of English as an additional language
- (ACTA standards for TESOL practitioners 2006)
- http://tesol.org.au
So the question becomes…..

- What kinds of insights about language and about language learning, arising from what kinds of experiences (formal or informal) are useful to ESOL teachers in the development of the professional understandings which we have defined in Standards documents?
Increasing attention paid to plurilingualism in TESOL (Cutler, Ellis et al 2012) TQ Special Issue 2013 (Taylor and Snodden)

- TESOL as a global enterprise
- A broader ecological view of L2 learning
- Learners may already be plurilingual
- Native speaker is not necessarily the model or the goal for L2 learning
- The learner as ‘L2 user’
  - ‘somebody who is actively using a language other than their first, whatever their level of proficiency’(Cook 2011)
- The L1 has a role to play in the learning of L2
- All key aspects of an ecological, equitable and ethical approach to TESOL
Recognition and inclusion of the L1(s) of the learner in the ESL class is desirable:

- As a pedagogical resource for meaning-making and for accessing the L2
- As an important locus of identity
- Because learners are becoming bilingual

The ability to use learners’ L1 in the classroom is only one reason for the desirability of teacher plurilingualism: the other is to better understand the process of L2 learning
• Little research on the language background of Ts

• For all Ts – NS NNS, other languages have significance and usefulness

• How we think about Ts languages has been influenced by the largely English-only focus in TESOL profession

• Characterized by dichotomies
  • NS/NNS
  • Bilingual / monolingual

• Whereas in fact language repertoires and language biographies are complex, constantly in a state of flux and intertwined with identity and cognition (Tasker 2012)

• - who we are and how we think about the world, our learners and the way we teach
Common conflation of terms in ESOL

- All monolingual teachers are native speakers (NS) but not all NS are monolinguals
- All non-native English speaker teachers are bilingual by definition, but not all bilingual teachers are non-native speakers
- Yet there is a persistent and erroneous conflation of
  - “Native speaker teacher = monolingual”
  - “Bilingual teacher = non-native speaker”
How do teachers’ different language learning backgrounds affect their knowledge and beliefs about teaching ESL?

How can we best investigate this?
Important caveats

- There are excellent ML and BL teachers of ESL: teaching is a complex nuanced activity which cannot be reduced to simplistic generalizations.

- Our aim should not be to criticise or vilify individual monolinguals, but to question the discourses and policies which lead to acceptance of monolingualism as the norm and/or actively discriminate against bilinguals.
Language teacher cognition

- Teachers’ theories and beliefs

- “... the rich store of knowledge teachers have which derives from a variety of sources and which forms the basis of their internal resources for planning and conducting their teaching”

- Clark and Peterson 1986:258

( emphasis added)
• “teachers’ mental lives” (Walberg 1977)
• “conceptions of practice” (Freeman 1996)
• “teachers’ theories” (Borg 2006)
• “personal, biographical and historical aspects of ... teachers’ lives (Goodson 1992)
• “... complex and interrelated processes of personal experiences, beliefs and practices” (Fang 1996)
• **experiential vs received knowledge** (Wallace 1991)
“… how teachers operate as educational linguists must reflect their views of language in learning that have received virtually no empirical investigation” (Brumfit 1997:170)

Key point: reflection on experience is essential for that experience to become accessible and useful in professional practice
Methods

- Class observation followed by in-depth interviews to elicit views on language and learning based on teacher-identified critical incidents in class.
- Language learning biographies and narratives of teachers.
- Further in-depth interviews to explore links between language learning experience and teachers’ professional beliefs.
- Qualitative analysis of rich data with categories emerging.
- THIS PAPER
- Data from an online questionnaire of NSW TESOL teachers: less rich data but larger numbers.
Mapping language biographies

- proficiency at highest achievement
- how a language was learned
- at what age a language was learned
- reason for learning a language
- affect towards the language
- frequency of current use of each language
- total number of languages each teacher had learned, or had the potential to learn.
Categorising teacher language background

• Circumstantial and elective bilinguals (Valdés and Figueroa 1994)

• But: complexity of language biographies led to the concept of:

• Circumstantial BL experiences
  • Migration/ being a refugee / spouse working OS

• Elective BL experiences
  • Classroom study, self-directed study, OS study

• ‘Monolingual’ experiences
  • Limited or ‘unsuccessful’ language learning
Findings from earlier work

- Ts with plurilingual experience
  - Saw language learning as possible
  - Had rich insights into language and language learning
  - Frequently extrapolated from own LL experience

- Ts without plurilingual experience
  - Saw language learning as fraught with difficulty, learners to be pitied
  - Fewer insights into how languages work
  - Little opportunity to see English from another perspective
  - (Ellis 2004, 2006, 2007)
Data from survey
55 respondents NSW

- Demographic – age, gender, NS/NNS, sector, languages spoken

- 2 Qs from survey:
  - My knowledge of another language contributes to my effectiveness as an ESL/EFL teacher
  - In your opinion, is it valuable for a teacher of ESL/EFL to be a speaker of another language?
GENDER

- Female
- Male
SECTOR

- Adult: 21
- High school: 24
- Primary school: 12
Native or non-native English speaker

- 85% a native speaker of English
- 9% a non-native speaker of English
- 4% neither
- 2% no response
- 24 languages
- 110 instances of languages learned

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Languages learned by 55 Ts

- Auslan
- Bahasa Indonesia
- Cantonese
- French
- German
- Greek
- Hindi
- Indonesian
- Italian
- Japanese
- Kikuyu
- Korean
- Latin
- Latvian
- Malay
- Mandarin
- Polish
- Portuguese
- Punjabi
- Russian
- Spanish
- Swahili
- Tamil
- Thai
- Tok Pisin
- Thai
My knowledge of other languages contributes to my effectiveness as an ESL/EFL teacher.

- I don't have any languages other than English
- No (please tell us why not)
- Yes (please tell us why)
My knowledge of another language contributes to my effectiveness as an ESL/EFL teacher

Knowledge about how different languages are structured

- “I can better understand the problems my students have with language ....... in terms of grammar and sentence structure in my first language”

- “I am very aware of different linguistic structures in languages, as well as the inability to actually hear where words begin and end”

- “I think having studied a range of languages helps me to understand English better, and to recognise that different languages have different ways of doing things”
Empathy

- “I have experience of living in another country and learning the language as I lived there. It means I have empathy for my students as I understand what they are going through”

- “My students seem to appreciate that ...I have been through the same learning experiences and can empathise with them and their problems”

- “I know the pains of learning a second language as an older child or adult, and have seen my own children become bilingual. All these experiences and observations give me great empathy for my students”
Language learning awareness

- “I remember the learning process”
- “I know what’s involved in learning another language”
- “[I can] better understand the difficulties in acquiring a language other than one’s mother tongue”
- “Understanding the difficulties learners face”
- “I can draw on my own experiences as a learner – what strategies I used and what worked best for me”
Is it valuable for an ESOL T to be a speaker of another language?

- “Yes... so you appreciate what it’s like to sit in a language classroom, learn alien sounds, learn grammar and absorb culture”

- “The main reasons are that to speak another language involves understanding of the thought processes and emotional hardships (and joys!) of language acquisition. This understanding, insight and empathy is invaluable in one’s interaction with students, the choice of teaching resources as well as efficient facilitation of students’ learning”.

- When one has more than one language, one is better positioned to appreciate the complexities of learning another language.”
Monolinguals on whether the T needs another lang.

- “As long as the teacher is an excellent model for the English language. They will probably be able to empathise with the new language learners”

- No. The student needs to know that they have to learn to communicate with me and then the rest of the school, so learning English for them is more important”

- “I just focus on English. I do not teach it as a foreign language but as an emerging first language. That is I prepare my students to learn and live in English”
Do you use a language other than English in your teaching? If so how?

- 16 out of 55 YES - 29%. Of BLs 36%
- 15 self-described as NS
- 3 were early childhood bilinguals
- “occasionally to explain difficult concepts” NS Cantonese/English BL, French AL
- “I promote the use of L1.... I provide dual language texts and dictionaries” NS English L1. Japanese, French ALs
- “pointing out the syntax and pronunciation differences of students’ L1”
- NS English L1. Malay, Chinese, French ALs
Key points re use of Ls

- Both NS and NNS are plurilingual
- Teachers have principles about when to use Ls and make conscious decisions
- We see both external and internal use of Ls
- Teachers see such use as valuable
- Teachers report that students tell them it’s valuable
• **External uses of Ls**
  • To point out etymology and patterns
  • To translate vocabulary, idioms
  • Explain difficult concepts
  • Explain/point out differences in grammar, pronunciation
  • Active promotion, use of L1 dictionaries and texts
  • Overt classroom comparison
  • Explain an error
  • Using a lingua franca shared by students
  • Humour
  • Ease students’ anxieties
• Internal uses of L2

• Personal reflection on L1/L2 differences

• Anticipation of learners’ problems
Summary

- Teacher plurilingualism provides the basis for important insights into languages and language learning

- It is erroneous to think that because English is taught through English, other languages are irrelevant

- Inclusion of learners’ L1 can only be meaningful if the teacher is also an L2 learner/user
Implications for teacher education

- Recruitment of plurilingual teachers
- Mainstream inclusion of reflection on LL in teacher education programs
- Imagining the ESOL classroom as plurilingual
  - Dictionaries, grammars and texts in L1s
  - Dual-language clinics with T of that language
- As migrants and refugees arrive from new source countries, supporting those with tertiary education to become ESOL teachers – rather than throwing up our hands and saying ‘too many languages!’
Thank you!

- And if you are working with plurilingual approaches in an ESOL context, do please get in touch!

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