On Global Englishes, Translanguaging, and the Educational Challenge of Celebrating Students’ Capacity for Communication

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Until very recently, much of the educational and applied linguistics discourse about students and their learning was based on a deficit view (e.g., “low proficiency.” “they should know this,” “they need to improve their command of English”). Such a view justifies the traditional role of teachers imparting knowledge and students passively absorbing it. In fact, John Dewey, writing over a century ago, highlighted this sad state of affairs in education:

Why is it, in spite of the fact that teaching by pouring in, learning by a passive absorption, are universally condemned, that they are still so entrenched in practice? That education is not an affair of “telling” and being told but an active and constructive process, is a principle almost as generally violated in practice as conceded in theory. (Dewey, 1916/2001, pp. 43-44)

In this short contribution, we share our views on how inclusive language education may be promoted based on Global Englishes and translanguaging through a reconceptualization of who students really are. But before that, we must emphasize that inclusive education is about valuing all cultures and all languages. It encourages
students and teachers to use all the cultures and languages they can draw upon in order to understand and master their world, and to act upon that world for their own benefit and the benefit of all.

Global Englishes, Translanguaging, and a Community of Communication Partners

In line with this emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion, perspectives based on Global Englishes and translanguaging value all the communicative resources students have at their disposal, rather than privileging only certain language varieties or resources, especially those associated with dominant cultures. Communicative resources include dialects, registers, and idiolects, not to mention the use of visuals from a variety of contexts, as well as online resources. Approaches based on Global Englishes and translanguaging contrast with what has been a long-dominant trend in much of education in many countries: English language learning with a strong priority given to the prestige varieties of the English of native speaker countries, particularly the U.K. and U.S. Similarly, the cultural content (e.g., literature, history, geography, and popular culture) is often from the same countries. In contrast, Global Englishes and translanguaging see multilingualism and multiculturalism as an advantage, not a deficit.

Our concern is especially with the extreme form of a view based on competing varieties or languages which favors subtractive bilingualism, where, in learning a new language, people lose their previous language(s), somewhat similar to cultural assimilation. In that view, privileged people use privileged languages and similarly enjoy privileged access to vaccines, sanitation, clean water, and adequate food (cf. Chau et al., 2022). This is similar to Bourdieu’s (1979) work on cultural capital and Sandel’s (2020) work on meritocracy. The irony is that in some societies, a negative correlation exists between the income, power, and status people possess, on the one hand, and the number of language varieties in which people possess some proficiency, on the other hand.

We can see real excitement about promoting (versions of) Global Englishes and translanguaging in the professional discourse, as reflected in, for example, the recent three journal special issues on translanguaging of Applied Linguistics Review, the Journal of Language, Identity, and Education, and the RELC Journal (see Fang et al., 2022; Fu & Hadjioannou, 2022; Pontier & Tian, 2022), which were all scheduled to be published around the same time the current special issue was in 2022. The challenge of putting these perspectives into practice in educational contexts is, however, enormous. For one thing, the existing educational practices are hugely driven by political and economic considerations based on individualistic, utilitarian grounds: those who speak “good English” get good jobs, and those who score 7.0 and above in IELTS are admitted to good universities. In most countries in the Global South, the national assessment system for primary and secondary schools is also still almost exclusively based on standard language or monolingual/monoglossic ideologies: bilingual and multilingual students are often perceived as two or more monolinguals in one (Grosjean, 1982) and are expected to demonstrate “equal” proficiency in these languages or “full” proficiency in the target language, which ignores the complex fluid language practices of these students (García & Tupas, 2019). In short, we are facing a labyrinth which, for scholars such as García (this issue) and Pennycook and Makoni (2019), serves the maintenance and reinforcement of a colonial and nation-building history in which many current notions, such as language speakers, languages, competence, and proficiency, are embedded.

Our response to this challenge is necessarily a bottom-up one: Start with ourselves as...
language educators, challenge and question our (old) beliefs, listen, unlearn, relearn, encourage collective efforts, and repeat the cycle, again and again (Chau & Shunmugam, 2021). Like García, Pennycook, and Makoni, we view Global Englishes and translanguaging as part of a larger decolonizing project. More importantly, we urge a shift in language education from a habitual focus on English or language to a focus on person. That is, it is time we as a profession treat our students not as imperfect speakers of English but celebrate them wholistically as people or fellow communication partners with a wealth of embodied life experiences comprising linguistic, cultural, and other resources. Students, we believe, should be encouraged and supported to see themselves as multilingual and multicultural English speakers, rather than as non-native English speakers, thereby emphasizing what they bring to the table, rather than what they come to the table without. When the focus is on students as fellow communicators, we almost instantly come to the realization that their English resources are merely part of their much larger trans-lingual, -cultural, -sensory, and -modal repertoires.

**Conclusion**

Appreciating and celebrating students as who they communicatively already are and at the same time deconstructing a reduced identity of students as passive learners from a deficit perspective is, for us, a truly empowering student-centered project: it opens up opportunities for reflection and renewal in language education and brings about changes on different levels. It demands a new way of imagining our relationship with our students and requires a different way of doing language education. As we explore more deeply the debates and discussions around Global Englishes and translanguaging, we may all come to realize that we are, after all, not dealing so much with language issues; we are confronting issues of unequal power and privilege (Bourdieu, 1982/1991; Canagarajah, 2021; García, this issue; Kramsch, 2021; Li, 2022; Nieto, 2001; Ortega, 2019; Pennycook & Makoni, 2019; Rose & Galloway, 2019; Smidt et al., 2021). Challenges aside, promoting a paradigm of thinking and action based on Global Englishes and translanguaging, with a focus on students as fellow communication partners, lights the path toward an educationally more just and sustainable world, one which values and nurtures diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as collective human responsibilities.

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