Post-communicative pedagogies: revisiting the translation method of teaching English in East Asia

Leo Tak-hung CHAN
Lingnan University, Hong Kong
chanleo@ln.edu.hk

Abstract: In the course of the development of EFL instruction, the so-called grammar-translation method was one of the earliest ones used. Later, EFL pedagogies evolved and other approaches were enunciated as alternatives to the old method. The most remarkable of these is the communicative (or direct) approach, built on the rationale that L1 stands in the way of L2 acquisition. It has been propagated with fervour in East Asian communities, especially in Hong Kong, as in many countries in the Third World. This article begins by contrasting Hadzantonis' Transition Model, aimed to eradicate all traces of local culture through English language instruction, as exemplified in the case of South Korea, with Canagarajah's resistance pedagogies, as used in Sri Lanka, and then uses this as the basis for a proposal to reintroduce, or reinvigorate, the Translation Method, which is not only pedagogically effective but also conducive to the formation of intercultural identities (rather than allowing East Asian values to be replaced by Western ones). The practicalities of EFL classroom instruction are related to the development of national policies in various parts of East Asia in which English learning is related to an urgent social need to nurture not only competent bilingual experts but also translation professionals.

Keywords: communicative approach; teaching English as a second language; translation method; pedagogies; ideology.

Introduction

Along with postcolonialism, postmodernism, poststructuralism and a host of other 'posts', in the area of foreign language pedagogy we have also reached the post-method, post-communicative era, a new phase in its history. In the early development of EFL instruction, the traditional grammar-translation method had reigned. It originated in the teaching of Greek and Latin, in which the word-for-word translation of classical texts was combined with the memorisation of grammatical rules, and it was characterised by the modest attempts at teaching English by the missionaries who ventured into newly colonised places with a civilising mission. The story of how the use of translation (as well as grammar) in EFL teaching became ostracised in subsequent times falls into several stages, though it reached a peak at the turn of the twentieth century (see Cook, 2010, pp. 3-19) as a consequence of the enormous success of the Reform Movement in the 1880s, which started in Northern Europe, heralded by William Viëtor, Paul Passy, Otto Jespersen, among others.[1] Especially after such teaching became incorporated into

---

[1] The publications on the history of EFL teaching being so voluminous, there is no

applied linguistics as an object of study, a plethora of EFL pedagogies evolved and other approaches were enunciated as alternatives. The most remarkable of these, which emerged sometime in the late 1960s, is the communicative approach.

Joann Crandall's definition of communicative language teaching should perhaps be quoted here: in it,

> […] discourse (particularly oral discourse) replaces the sentence as the major focus of instruction and the structural syllabus is either replaced or subsumed in a syllabus which specifies language functions (e.g., requesting, apologizing, describing), notions (e.g., quantity, quality, space, time), or contexts of language use (e.g., social, academic, professional). (1997, p. 77).

While these communicative goals can be arrived at through a variety of strategies, central to the approach is the belief that the learner should be released completely from the old habits of language use associated with the mother tongue through full immersion in an English environment – mostly the classroom. The underlying rationale, put simply, is that L1 will stand in the way of L2 acquisition. One justification given is that even long-time learners of English, while comprehending the language (especially when it is read), often cannot even communicate orally with the native speaker in real-life situations; the language they have acquired is far from authentic. Of course, as the communicative approach spread and prospered, other approaches were also introduced, including the task-based and audiolingual methods, though one feature shared by all is that the use of L1 in class is forbidden. This shows, in effect, how communicative pedagogies have risen to prominence and dominated the scene.[2] Much recent work on EFL instruction actually constitutes little more than elaborations of this mainstream method, as is the case, for example, for Hadzantonis' transition model for East Asian countries (2013). Many are no more than efforts to tease out its implications or refashion it to suit the needs of particular locales or communities. Is there nothing beyond 'communication' for EFL teaching? How can East Asian scholars, relatively reticent in comparison to their Western counterparts, contribute to the theoretical discussion?

World Englishes, Global English, and 'Communication'

A brief summary of the ideological background to EFL pedagogies, the major phases of which have been the subject of book-length studies, is in order. The project of promoting EFL overseas carried with it a political agenda, as early agents of Western colonisers had put it rather blandly. Besides the famed Thomas B. Macaulay, with his belief in the superiority of Western culture, John Naysmith also said that English language teaching is "part of the process whereby one part of the world has become politically, economically and culturally dominated by another" (1987, p. 21). The mission of the British Council, according to R.V. Routh, was to create "a new career service… to lay the foundation of a world-language and culture based on our own [with] an

---

attempt to give even the briefest of summaries here. The reader is referred to Howatt (1984), Richards and Rodgers (2001) and Stern (1992) for broad coverage of the basic approaches. Howatt's book also includes the English translation of Viëtor's *Der Sprachunterricht muss umkehren!* (Language Teaching Must Start Afresh), which marks a crucial turning point in foreign language instruction.

[2] There is also the Direct (or Natural) Method, which in fact antedated the Communicative Approach. As its name suggests, it advocates the complete elimination of L1 use in the classroom.

army of linguistic missionaries" (1941, pp. 12-13). Since the time of these early proponents of linguistic neo-imperialism, a slightly different version related to the growth of the United States as a global power has gained momentum. David Rothkopf, Director of the Kissinger Institute, said in 1997:

> It is in the economic and political interest of the United States to ensure that if the world is moving toward a common language, it be English; that if the world is moving toward common telecommunications, safety, and quality standards, they be American; and that if common values are being developed, they be values with which Americans are comfortable. . . English is linking the world. (Cited in Phillipson, 2009, p. 60).

The current scenario, however, can best be understood in the context of two movements: World Englishes and Global English. In what is presented as an objective account of historical facts, the applied linguist Mario Saraceni expresses his view on the development of World Englishes: it is conducive to linguistic equality because users wielding non-American and non-British varieties of English, with their eccentric grammars and phonologies, will not be discriminated against. Such non-discrimination, according to him, ushers in true democratisation. In further elaborating the benefits of such a reconceptualisation, Saraceni denounces the use of terms like Indian English, Singaporean English, Chinese English, and so on, since they "perpetuate the fallacious one-language—one-nation—one-country construct" (2010, p. 70). He also impugns the erroneous thinking embodied in Braj B. Kachru's famous three-circles theory, in which English – of British, American and Australian provenance – is given primary status by its being located at the centre, the 'inner circle'. Standard English is not to be hierarchically placed above newly emergent varieties. His line of argument is simply that the earlier imperialistic model can now effectively be demolished as English is accorded the status of a universal language.

Saraceni's belief that English as a *lingua franca* can serve to advance not just inter-national but also intra-national communication in the Expanding Circle is even more infelicitous. By dissociating form from function in discussing language, Saraceni dodges the problem of 'imperfect' English characterising speakers in the 'expanding circle'. 'Chinglish', for example, had previously been viewed not as just a variety, but negatively as an inter-language spoken by Chinese learners of English who have not adequately mastered it. With the shift of focus to functionality, Saraceni highlights English as a useful international language of communication between speakers of different first languages, to be deployed by people who do not speak the same language in varying forms, depending on the particular geographical location (2010, pp. 90-91) – however poorly.[3] This emphasis on the communicative function of English is made, of course, at the expense of other uses in which a language can be deployed. For applied linguists of Saraceni's ilk, the conceptualisation of English as a *lingua franca* can be merged with the vision of World Englishes, to prove nothing less than the universality of English. ELF research is to be conducted, therefore, in the following manner:

> This role [i.e., that of English as the world's *lingua franca*] need not involve distinctions between "first" and "second" languages. As it is typical for most people's linguistic repertoire to include more than one language, most human communication will involve, to some degree, the use of a "lingua franca." It is in

---

[3] There is a remarkable number of citations from other scholars in his book. While this has presumably been done to lend support to his theorisation, it also shows the extent to which his views of English and EFL are widely shared.

this way that, again, "lingua franca" merges with "language," and it is not coincidental that the paradigm shift with ELF research is going precisely in this direction. (2010, p. 98).

Despite what Saraceni asserts, not all EFL researchers have moved in the same direction. The different, diametrically opposed, approaches to EFL teaching that we will see below reflect fundamentally different ideologies that underline the powerful tensions. These cannot be evaluated without reference to the power differentials of centre vs. periphery, linguistic equity vs. inequality (linguicism), and dominance vs. resistance.

While the majority of recent discourses on EFL pedagogies are linked to the idea of English as the global *lingua franca* and to the World Englishes movement, a much smaller oppositional discourse has nevertheless been attempted by a handful of opponents to linguistic imperialism. To highlight the key points of the unbalanced debate, in the next two sections we will look at the contrasting positions of an Anglophone theorist who had ample experience teaching South Koreans English (Dimitrois Hadzantonis) and a Sri Lankan who was for years an English teacher in his home country before moving to the United States (A. Suresh Canagarajah). Both are distinguished by their sensitivity to the cultural and ideological implications of EFL teaching, and by an interest in the theoretical underpinnings of practical work as carried out in Asian communities facing changes brought about by modernisation, globalisation and internationalisation. Though often camouflaged by references to interaction and interculturality, their theoretical arguments revolve basically around communicative competence. The re-emergence of the keyword *communication*, already signalled in learner-centred models based on the meaningful learning approach (see O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), should alert us to the fact that the ongoing battle over EFL pedagogies must be seen as a new phase in the history of EFL methodology. The translation method makes, in this context, a powerful comeback.

Contesting ideologies (I): Hadzantonis

In his transition model, Hadzantonis emphasises that learning English will make possible a sociocultural transition. In the process Northeast Asians (as exemplified by South Koreans) will transgress their old cultural dispositions, transform their identities, and become accepted as members of a multiple global community. Most symptomatically, Hadzantonis makes no mention of comparable benefits derivable from the acquisition of foreign languages other than English. To achieve such a transition, he avers, alternative EFL pedagogies must replace traditional teaching methods in South Korea, which are repeatedly condemned by EFL teachers' colleagues (2013, pp. 93-96). In advocating new pedagogies to deal with the South Korean learner of English, Hadzantonis is actually advancing recent EFL strategies that aim to liberate learners from their ethnic (Korean) and regional (East Asian) affiliations so that they can be socialised into another (i.e. global) culture, or at least acquire intercultural competence.

The situation as described by Handzantonis should first be understood against a wider context. For some time in the field of education, there has been widespread negative stereotyping of Asian students. In innumerable accounts they have been characterised as overly obedient, passive, reticent, and weak in critical thinking. These have somehow given the rationale for – even if they did not encourage – using teaching methods in which written compositions, oral repetition, rote memorisation and translation work are excessively deployed. The well-known stereotype of an East Asian learner, according to

William Littlewood (1999), exhibits a number of features: s/he has a strong inclination to form in-groups, has an eagerness to engage in group activities, is concerned to maintain harmony with peers, and is reluctant to "stand out" by expressing personal views. Also s/he views the teacher as an authority figure, sees knowledge as something to be transmitted by the teacher, and expects teachers to be responsible for assessment. As well, s/he follows through learning tasks if they are practical, is motivated when success contributes to the prestige of the in-group, and performs well when enhanced by achievement motivation and group expectations. Although Littlewood admits that this list of characteristics is hypothetical and needs to be further verified, the superficial nature of some of these points, reflecting a derogatory view of the impact of Confucian cultural values on Asian youths, has been lambasted by Chinese and Japanese EFL scholars– among them Gan Zhengdong (2009, p. 50-52) and Yoko Kobayashi (2011, p. 566).

Hadzantonis' line of argument is that the inescapable demands of our global era make it imperative that EFL be given a new role to play. A word that repeatedly appears in his monograph is *enculturation*, but it is more appropriate to see his proposal as a call for *re-culturation*. He confronts those who view English as a tool of imperialism by noting that, through teaching English to South Korean learners, the perception of English as "a vehicle of cultural encroachment" can be reduced. Yet he lays the main emphasis on the need for decentring students from their traditional enculturations, since learning English can facilitate "early socialization into another culture" (2013, p. 186). Even though once or twice he does express his disagreement with the stereotyping of East Asian students as passive, conformist, having low self-esteem, given to normative thinking, unable to express emotions and lacking in critical ability (2013, p. 98), he points out that classroom learning has been strongly shaped by what he calls NCHC (Neo-Confucian Heritage Culture), which has a formative influence on students' character and identity.

The worth of learning a language like English thus assumes new significance. More than just the acquisition of a different tongue, it becomes a means for forging new behaviour, cultural values and identities: students will turn out to be less reticent, less inhibited, more responsive to the efforts of their educators, and more 'multicultural'. In this way, Hadzantonis takes a step beyond that of his EFL predecessors: communicative competence is replaced by interactive competence, from which it is not differentiable (e.g. 2013, p. 121), and without which one cannot function properly in an age of trans-nationalisation and globalisation (2013, p. 101). Two catchwords – *interculturality* and *communicativeness* – provide the cornerstones for his transition model. What is more, Hadzantonis castigates the South Korean practice of "appropriating" English in EFL textbooks, in which Korean subject matter is incorporated while authentic English texts are not used (see 2013, pp. 48-52). Interestingly, the inclusion of indigenous materials in these textbooks is symptomatic of one aspect of 'traditional' East Asian EFL pedagogy; a similar scenario is described, for instance, for Japan by Hashimoto (2007, 2013). To Hadzantonis, such a practice is nothing less than misappropriation, and is an indirect form of L1 intervention in the teaching of L2.[4]

That Hadzantonis' position reflects a general trend in the theorising of English-language teaching overseas is substantiated by a proliferation of recent research on the subject. Jane Jackson – in her discussion of a transformation model that can be traced through ethnographic studies of the personal testimonies of EFL learners from a university in Hong Kong who went on study programs to Canada and the United Kingdom (Jackson, 2013;

---

[4] Ironically, in Canagarajah's system, the appropriation of English in EFL teaching is a masterful strategy of resistance.

2010) – gives a brief survey of interculturalists (like J.M. Bennett and Jack Mezirow) who consider learning a second language not just as an eye-opening experience of the foreign but also, theoretically, a means toward identity reconstruction (Jackson, 2013, p. 181). Bennett, in fact, entitled a key essay "Transformative Training" (2009), while Mezirow named his book *Learning as Transformation* (2000). This group of scholars share a concern with the transformation taking place in the learner of English as a second language, dramatically intensified through the immersion in a foreign culture. Justifying this theoretical camp with reference to the poststructuralists' conceptualisation of the self as constituted socially and culturally, Jackson portrays how EFL becomes a crucial means for shaping hybrid, intercultural and international identities. For her, this will enable learners to live in a world dominated by forces of globalisation, which she views with unreserved approbation (2010, chap.1). Hadzantonis' transition model is, therefore, hardly an isolated instance.

Contesting ideologies (II): Canagarajah

A. Suresh Canagarajah proceeds from the other end. He contests the commonplace view, prevalent in EFL discussions, that ideal acquisition of a second language is hindered by interference from the learner's mother tongue, leading to the conclusion that the less there is of the latter, the better. A most recent expression of this opinion came from an educationalist in Hong Kong, who, after the release of the EE-EPI (Education First: English Proficiency Index)[5] in late 2013, opined that "mother-tongue teaching had had a 'very negative influence' on the efficiency of English learning" (Zhao, 2013). The fallacious rationale is that, as EFL teachers, native speakers are invariably better than non-natives who have acquired the language, while English should be the sole medium of instruction in EFL classrooms. This, as we have seen, has formed the bedrock of the communicative approach, which eclipsed the grammar-translation approach and has for decades dominated EFL teaching at all levels, from beginning to advanced classes, even those offered at the university level.

One thing that the advocates of communicative pedagogies have stood strongly against is code-switching between two languages. This, ironically, is ubiquitous in everyday conversations of speakers in bilingual communities (like Hong Kong) or multilingual communities (like Singapore). As classroom practice, such cross-lingual mixing may have generally fallen out of favour, but it is still found in some EFL classrooms, for which Canagarajah has provided concrete field-trip evidence from Sri Lanka (see Chapter 6 of Canagarajah, 1999). As his examples show, students and teachers appear to have agreed, subconsciously as it were, to use English formally, when carrying out specific exercises in that language, and Tamil informally, in classroom talk or student group work. Teachers switch over to Tamil, for instance, on finding that students do not readily respond to directives given in English. Students are not penalised, or even reprimanded, for slipping into their L1, sometimes by accident. Canagarajah applauds this as an "additive" or "integrational" model that considers English "as embedded in the rich repertoire of codes of the [learner]" (1999, p. 129), and contrasts it with the "substitutionary" model which aims at the replacement of the native tongue by English – and, one may add, characterises the much-lauded communicative method. In the next section, however, I discuss a third model, which posits L2 as a separate code

---

[5] This is a ranking of the English competence of speakers in non-Anglophone countries, published annually.

that will facilitate EFL teachers' deployment of the Translation Method in their attainment of specific learning objectives. It enables them, in effect, to teach between two languages, rather than in just one.

This 'critical' EFL pedagogy, naturally, has ideological implications, and Canagarajah spells them out in the final chapter to his book, *Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching*. Obviously, he moves in the opposite direction to that of Hadzantonis. On one dimension, the incorporation of L1 in the EFL classroom is justified not merely because it enhances language acquisition and takes away some of the pressure associated with trying to master an alien tongue, but also because it reproduces sociolinguistic practices followed by the bilingual community at large, in which the blending of two languages is the rule rather than the exception. But on another dimension, this pedagogy represents a form of resistance to the linguistic imperialism spearheaded by EFL teaching, which scholars like Alastair Pennycook (1994) and Robert Phillipson (2009) have continuously impugned. It resists not by rejecting it outright but by appropriating it, forcing the universal and global to blend in with the local and parochial (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 174). The English language becomes accommodated to the Sri Lankan environment as teachers and students engage with it on their own terms. According to Canagarajah:

> Rather than slavishly parroting the language and accepting the typical values it embodies with the unfavorable representations it provides, periphery students will become insiders and use the language in their own terms according to their aspirations, needs, and values. They will reposition themselves in English language and discourse to use these not as slaves, but as agents. (1999, p. 16)

Ironically, despite the strong anti-establishment position championed by Canagarajah, his radicalism has sometimes been sidelined, as seen for instance in Jackson's citing him among EFL theorists who support the use of English teaching to serve a globalised world (Jackson, 2010). The relative silencing of EFL theorists from the Third World is perhaps very much already an accepted fact of life, especially given the preponderance of academic publications in English and the dominance of the publishing companies in the Anglophone world.[6] With the present situation being what it is, scholarly work on what may be called a bilingual pedagogy is limited to scholarly communities in regions where the problem is politicised. In a recent workshop titled "Teaching between Languages", held at Lingnan University, Hong Kong, in March 2004, speakers represented the local voices reacting against the priority position occupied by English as well as the enforcement of the immersion method and the English-only classroom. Not surprisingly, the participants in the workshop dealt with the language-teaching issues in South and East Asia: Hong Kong, India, Malaysia, China and other countries. Most prominent is the call issued by the Translation Studies scholar Tejaswini Niranjana for "research that will steer between simple indigenism and aggressive globalism even as it provides a critique of both these options".

---

[6] A noteworthy study of the European situation has recently been published as a joint research project between Translation Studies experts and applied linguists (Pym, et.al., 2013). Similar work on East Asia (and other parts of the world) would be most welcome.

Case study: Hong Kong

The new translation method is 'new', in particular, in the sense that translation is more than just a means of consolidating grammatical points or vocabulary items learnt: it allows the L1 and L2 to mutually illuminate each other. But in enunciating this new method, we must of necessity begin with the 'old'. From the second half of the last century up to the present, the attack on the grammar-translation method has accelerated. The imperative of 'forcing the learner to think native' was upheld as the golden rule, beginning roughly from the avowed success of the immersion program in Quebec, Canada, in the 1960s. Experimentally developed for English-speaking students of French, and utilising the exclusive use of French in the classroom from an early stage, the program became the epitome of success in foreign-language learning. Subsequently, other immersion programs of a similar nature were launched elsewhere, and against this background the attack on the use of translation in teaching a foreign language gathered momentum. Kirsten Malmkjaer (1998, pp. 2-6) and Carl James (1989, p. 15-26) thus summed up three main arguments against the translation method, an outdated pedagogy with a long history and becoming irrelevant:

1. It encourages the erroneous belief that there is exact formal and semantic correspondence between L1 and L2;
2. It downplays the element of communication and is grounded on misconceptions concerning how a foreign language can be acquired; and
3. It presupposes competence in both languages to begin with, whereas the ability to translate should be viewed as the goal, not the prerequisite of the learning process.

In fact, the denigration of the translation method is serious: Guy Cook noted how it never appeared in standard introductions to second language pedagogy (2007, p. 396) and David Atkinson mentioned the plain lack of attention to it in various textbooks for teachers (1987, p. 241).[7] Yet, paradoxically, during the period in question, research on studies of translation itself as a (sub)discipline has undergone revolutionary changes; it has taken great leaps and strides, with scholars seeking to delve deeply into its functions and nature while discarding worn-out concepts (like equivalence and correspondence). Now there are few who would consider translation a simple semantic exercise involving the search for verbal equivalents. Under the influence of the dominant Descriptive Studies School, originating in the Netherlands and Israel in the 1970s and impacting later research in Europe and Canada, there grew an awareness of differences, rather than similarities, in translation. This creates the conditions for the advent of a 'new' translation method in EFL teaching. Effective use of the method, for one, should entail alerting students to the differences, as much as the similarities, between their L1 and L2.

As re-conceptualised in our post-era, the old translation method, in spite of its history of notoriety, thus forms the basis of a new pedagogy. While it is important not to ignore the mother tongue altogether, translation needs to be assigned a special role. In contrast to the simple mixing of two languages, the translation method is a separatist approach that takes into consideration the

---

[7] Fiona Copland and Georgios Neokleous noted several efforts in the past decade to make the case for L1 teaching, but these have not successfully filtered down to the level of practice, since teachers feel "guilty" about using the mother tongue in their classes (2011, p. 279).

specific cultural and sociolinguistic framework in which EFL teaching takes place – in East Asia, for instance – and many of the theoretical ruminations in the present article have arisen from the author's practical experience in EFL teaching in Hong Kong over several decades. The case of Hong Kong may remind one, at times, of post-colonial situations in the Third World in general, yet it has its own unique features. The two basic stances on the teaching of English in these places are: the 'nationalist' approach that seeks to ward off completely any possible influence from English, and the 'universalist' approach that welcomes English as a neutral, malleable tool capable of representing whatever is represented by the indigenous languages (Canagarajah 1999, pp. 176-179). But there should also be a third possibility – of a mode of EFL learning in which non-English-speaking students negotiate with English, using the foreign tongue to express what is indigenous and find out new things about their mother tongue. What happens in the classroom should mirror the wider world outside, in which the native language interacts with English via translation. In considering the East Asian situation, it must be emphasised that different interlingual processes have been at work than those in, say, post-colonial Africa.

Though not totally exemplary and hardly a part of the Third World, Hong Kong presents itself as a case-study with special implications for East Asia. Being a part of China, where Chinese is used by over 90% of the population, and where it meets (and vies) with English, the former colonial language and presently the worldwide *lingua franca*, Hong Kong can hardly be described with reference to simplistic post-colonial models, nor can its language situation be summed up as one of linguistic hybridity. Most remarkably, the emergence of a substandard English (or Creole), as seen in some formerly colonised nations, has not taken place in Hong Kong because of the way in which Hong Kong people still cling to the Chinese language. Partial evidence for this is provided by the enormous popularity of university programs taught in Chinese, as opposed to those taught purely in English. In an attempt to 'internationalise', a number of the universities have adopted English as the sole medium of instruction in the past decade or so. The 2004-2005 student protests at the Chinese University of Hong Kong – and subsequent legal action– against the Vice-Chancellor's policy of strengthening the use of English as the language of instruction were telling in this regard. The policy was attacked as "pseudo-internationalization" (Li, 2013, pp. 68-75).

Although Hong Kong is a predominantly monolingual (Cantonese) and ethnically Chinese community,[8] English plays a disproportionately important role in it due to its historical origins as a British colony: 90% of students are taught almost exclusively in English, the medium of instruction in the popular Anglo-Chinese schools. This being the case, the relative failure of EFL education over the course of almost two centuries is nothing less than astounding. Alastair Pennycook, having taught there, notes the negative impact of English on students, especially those not fortunate enough to secure a place in the elite schools. He quotes statistics to show students' learning ability is not the problem; rather, the problem is with mastering a foreign language taught in all subjects except Chinese and Chinese history in these schools (Pennycook, 1994, p.12).

The translation model is not only separatist, as mentioned above, but also parallelistic. This means, in brief, that the two languages involved (L1 and L2) remain distinct even though two-way traffic does occur, as in the transfer of vocabulary from English to Cantonese. Just as in Sri Lanka, where Caragarajah's critical pedagogy presupposes that what happens in the classroom should replicate the sociolinguistic milieu outside, in the Hong

---

[8] For relevant statistics, see Li and Li (2013).

Kong EFL classroom one should capitalise on the parallel use of the two official written languages (Chinese and English) and two major spoken varieties (Cantonese and English).[9] While there is also a great deal of code-mixing among the educated population, with English words and phrases randomly interspersed in conversations carried out primarily in Cantonese – it somehow signals social status as well as bilingual facility – the two languages lead separate lives. Of course the ability to speak English with native-like fluency and without an accent carries the highest prestige, but that belongs essentially to the expatriates or those Hong Kong natives raised in Anglophone countries like the States, Canada, the UK and Australia.

The strategies for accommodating or appropriating English in the Tamil community in Sri Lanka, as discussed above, are therefore not entirely relevant to the Hong Kong context. Evidently EFL learners there do not aim to become perfect English speakers; rather, their goal is to attain a degree of bilingual facility, shown perhaps in the adeptness at code-switching in formal and informal situations.[10] Most of them may be characterised as "partial bilingual", as opposed to "unilingual" and "full bilingual" speakers (Du-Babcock, 2007, p. 156). In Hong Kong, one does not have to totally surrender to English because it is the privileged alternative, since the Chinese language retains its long-held status and utility.[11] Guy Cook rightly stresses the importance of factors such as historical and cultural environment that are implicated in the acquisition of a foreign language like English, showing that EFL methodology cannot be discussed in a context-free manner. To suppose that what works in some post-colonial contexts can be transferred to China, Japan and Korea, whilst ignoring local language use, is proof of how wish/believe is preferred to first-hand experience. Cook attacks this by pointing out how the nurturing of a bilingual identity has been neglected in monoglot second-language acquisition theorists who "made of the classroom a microcosm of the monolingual state, often legislating within its boundaries against any use of students' L1, and therefore *de facto* against translation" (2007, p. 339).

Reviewing the translation method

Concessions have at times been made to the translation method by theorists of the communicative school. One such is a somewhat reluctant acceptance of the fact that the mother tongue can be used judiciously in the EFL classroom, as a means but not an end. David Atkinson (1987, pp. 243-246), for instance, lists how the mother tongue can be useful in:

(a) eliciting responses from students (all levels);
(b) checking comprehension (all levels);
(c) giving instructions (early levels);
(d) ensuring co-operation among learners;
(e) discussing classroom methodology (all levels);
(f) reinforcing items already learnt (mainly early levels);

---

[9] There is a third, officially recognised, spoken language: Putonghua. But it remains to be seen how widespread it will become in the community before it can be considered a major player in the EFL classroom.

[10] This article also gives a comprehensive illustration of how their competencies in Cantonese, Mandarin and English are turned to good use in the specific business environment in which "linchpin translations" and intermixed conversations are often a part of their everyday working lives (Du-Babcock, 2007, pp. 163-166).

[11] To a great extent, the two cultures are also separate (despite some merging), just like the two languages.

(g) checking for sense;

(h) testing; and

(i) developing useful skills (like circumlocution, paraphrase, explanation and simplification).

Atkinson does make observations concerning the worth of translation assignments in reinforcing students' understanding of structural, conceptual and sociolinguistic differences between L1 and L2 (1987, p. 244), and in expanding their vocabulary (especially in the case of L2s which contain cognates of English, such as French). But on the whole he regards the translation method as unsatisfactory: one disadvantage is that it may cause students to forget that it is after all crucial for them to use English for many classroom activities. Above all, he emphatically states that "the mother tongue is not a suitable basis for a methodology" (p. 247).

So far there have been few opponents to this anti-translation position. Opposed to most applied linguists, the Translation Studies scholar Guy Cook has come up with the strongest rebuttals. He points out, for instance, that adults learning a foreign language in particular need not repeat the stages gone through by children in acquiring a first language (Cook, 1998, p. 119). On a more extensive scale, he defends bilingualism by refuting wrongheaded philosophical arguments (see Cook 2010, pp. 105-124), noting in particular how it has "the potential to reconcile competing interests and competing criteria" of stakeholders including students, teachers, governments, academics and society at large (p. 123). Reversing the verdict that was cast on the baleful use of translation in EFL for the greater part of the twentieth century, his valorisation of the translation method must be read in historical terms. Having its roots in the concerted effort made by a generation of scholars to develop Translation Studies into an independent field of study, his position reflects new insights into an important linguistic activity, and is hence distinguishable from those of many applied linguists with an interest in the practical aspects of EFL instruction (see, for instance, Dagilienè, 2012).

The many facets of the denigration of the translation method have to be closely reconsidered with a view to breathing new life into it. One oft-held misconception is that this method can be deployed to advantage only at the initial stages of EFL instruction, although empirical evidence for that is almost non-existent. The teacher can encourage advanced students to consult bilingual dictionaries and reference tools in addition to monolingual ones, allow students to express themselves in their preferred medium of thought in the tutorials, give them group work that can be completed in their L1, hand out written assignments in which students can use either their mother tongue or the English they have learnt, and so on. These strategies work because, almost invariably, students find it harder to come up with original ideas, or say what they really feel, when they have to struggle with a foreign language. Creativity and subject mastery are enhanced by learning through one's L1. At the same time, the teacher finds it easier to ensure that his directives (concerning submission dates of assignments, etc.) are understood, whereas the students are more willing to raise queries with their teacher in their native tongue.

What is more, the translation method is particularly effective with the teaching of reading (decoding) skills as compared to speaking (recoding) skills: comprehension problems are solved without great complication when recourse is made expediently to the native language. It also appears to be more useful for the fostering of writing skills. In the 1970s, G.A.C. Scherer and his team at the University of Colorado did a psycho-linguistic experiment with two groups of foreign language learners – one taught in the traditional grammar-translation method, and the other in the audiolingual oral-immersion method. Judging from the progress of the students after several semesters,

there was no noticeable difference between the performances of the two groups. The only significant discovery was that "the audiolingual group was superior in the 'active' skill of speaking the foreign language, and the traditional group was superior in the 'active' skill of writing" (Hendrickx, 1972, p. 18). On the other hand, there are further proofs of the value of the translation method in teaching writing. Success has been reported on the use of translation in teaching English composition to Korean and Japanese students at the university level, by Kim Eun-young (2011) and Hiroe Kobayashi and Carol Rinnert (1992) respectively.

One may ask: What is really 'new' about this method? Essentially, it enhances learning through, initially, the identification of equivalents, but this is coupled with attuning students to differences. It is perhaps best described as a way of seeing another culture through one's own eyes and knowing more about oneself through the language of the Other. Thus it is a mutually benefitting process that enables the discovery of meaning as a dialogic (rather than monologic) process. It operates on certain principles that are corroborated by recent research on multilingualism and translation: the diversity of meanings across cultures is something to be enjoyed; heteroglossia is the norm rather than the exception in our societies; languages are not abstract systems, but are realised in concrete circumstances. The recent interest of Translation Studies scholars in ELF teaching (as distinct from translator training) is evinced by a special issue devoted to "Translation in the Language Classroom: Theory, Research and Practice" in *The Interpreter and Translator Trainer* (Laviosa, 2014). Sara Laviosa believes that the recent readmission of translation into the language classroom provides the opportunity to consider 'pedagogic translation' as a tool to be deployed in interdisciplinary settings, especially in undergraduate degree programs. She is hopeful that:

> […] educational translation [can] open the field to more interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks and to a greater variety of linguistic, cultural and teaching contexts in which novel practices form an integral part of syllabus design and have proven effective in developing interlinguistic and intercultural competences. (2014, p. 2).

For a Japanese example, Sayuki Machida reported on her attempt to incorporate English-Japanese translation in both in-class activities and a semester-long project for a group of fifth-year EFL students (2008). The results are revealing. Vocabulary and syntactical errors did show up in abundance in her students' translations, but they allowed her to see readily the interlinguistic and intercultural problems that were an impediment to foreign language acquisition. And she also noticed that translation into the mother tongue forced students to tap into their background (Japanese) knowledge, and negotiate the meanings expressed in the two languages. For her, two of the potential strengths of the method are in "developing information networking in the brain" and "widening the scope of language learning [through] the inclusion of [one's] own cultural context and the sociological nature of the original text" (2008, slide no. 18). This aligns brilliantly with the theoretical conceptualisation of translation as playing a mediatory role, well beyond simply facilitating the mechanical transfer of verbal (or non-verbal) signs. In this model of foreign language learning, the students' own culture intervenes and boosts their effort to appreciate foreign cultural differences (1999, p. 188). Ultimately, such an EFL method makes possible identity preservation in East Asia: it reconsolidates an Asian identity that Hadzantonis takes pains to eradicate. It is thus an oppositional strategy, much as translation itself can be oppositional.

Finally, the new translation method is educationally sound: given that all learning involves relating what is new to what is known, foreign language

acquisition will not differ from other fields of learning (Thomas, 1989, p. 82). The mother tongue, therefore, should and can become the foundation for learning English. This works especially well for active learners, who can make intelligent use of the repertoire of skills already acquired in the comprehension and expression of his first language in order to learn a second language. Admittedly, there is some truth in the view that the use of translation skills in EFL teaching can be counter-productive – inappropriate transfer of L1 features to L2 can yield grammatical errors of all sorts – but that is grounded on a pedagogy which focuses only on similarities and ignores differences. The former are, naturally, more obvious. In translational terms, where there are equivalents between the two languages, the English teacher can utilise the corresponding term in the mother tongue for convenience of instruction. This is also true of cases where parallel structures in one language can be transferred to the other. Yet what the discipline of Translation Studies has taught us in the past few decades is that difference deserves more attention than identity. In EFL teaching, in the same manner, dissimilarities should be highlighted and explicated by the teachers, and queried and explored by the learners. As far as the learners are concerned, ELF learning thus carried out becomes a kind of consciousness-raiser. It is an invitation for them to seek out not only the equivalents but also the disparities as they move between two languages and cultures.[12]

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the success of prolonged efforts at propagating the English language overseas and promoting a communicative approach to teaching it, linguists researching EFL education in Asia, like David Nunan, have expressed scepticism concerning the amount of time and effort devoted to the acquisition of English (Nunan, 2003). There is little doubt that learning a foreign language entails great dedication on the student's part, an abundance of resources to be provided by institutions, and extensive help from experts. How these can be effectively utilised to achieve maximal effect will continue to be a subject of academic enquiry by EFL practitioners and researchers. On a broader front, the formulation of a language policy for schools, in which translation is taken into account as an integral part, will provide the key starting point for the development and refinement of new EFL methods[13]. As a matter of policy, due consideration should be given to the level of proficiency in English expected of different types of students, the amount of educational resources to be devoted to foreign language learning (as opposed to other areas), and even the number of bilingual teachers to be trained to meet ever-growing needs—unless, of course, further expansion is halted or denied. But as a subject of reflection for policy makers, there should also be a concomitant concern for the preservation and active utilisation of key cultural elements that are part and parcel of the native language (like indirectness in

---

[12] Too often advocates of the monolingual 'immersion' approach pay scant attention to learners' needs. In a recent empirical study of Hong Kong university students' evaluation of a course in which English is used as a medium of instruction (EMI), Miller notes how they show an appreciation for their lecturer's occasional use of Cantonese to explain difficult points; some degree of flexibility in language use is clearly preferred (2007, p. 754).

[13] In discussing recent developments in language planning, Mark Fettes notes that recent scholars see it "as a means to compromise solutions rather than to favour one language over another" (1997, p. 19).

Chinese, or politeness in Japanese).[14] The worth of a foreign language like English (as a lingua franca), too, cannot be viewed merely from an instrumental perspective; identificatory issues can never be avoided. The power of L1 in serving certain socio-cultural functions, in addition to purely linguistic ones, is beyond dispute, and it cannot be renounced hastily as an outmoded tool in a so-called globalised era. This is especially so with languages that are spoken by sizeable populations and supported by rich literary, cultural and socio-economic traditions, as we see in the case of China, Japan and Korea.

The debate over the relevance of translation, not just to EFL teaching but also to other fields and disciplines, will most likely continue, admitting of no easy resolution. There are many, including East Asianists, who believe that translation is obsolete because it fails to address the challenges of the new world. For example, Amy B.M. Tsui and James W. Tollefson have said, "the intensity, simultaneity, and immediacy of interaction and knowledge generation have rendered obsolete the reliance on translation and have made a *lingua franca* indispensable" (2007, p. 2). This position in fact tallies with main trends in applied linguistics, which advocate vehemently for a unitary language and the global use of English. It is, to all appearances, an essentially anti-translation stance on which we have cast significant doubt in the foregoing discussion. Some critics have decried the superficiality of much of applied linguistics research, which (it is said) neglects educational effectiveness, pays no attention to the politics or sociology of language, and cares little about international, intercultural relations. Others say that academics in this field mostly work under the rubric of structuralist linguistics and focus on trivial issues of regional varieties in pronunciation and grammar. The many divergences of opinion between applied linguists and Translation Studies scholars with respect to EFL teaching, as highlighted in the present article, point to the need for further dialogue between them. Among the questions they will have to address are: How do we reconcile the differences between the multilingual translational position and the monolingual 'Globalish' position? Is the former idealistic and unachievable, and the latter inevitable and irreversible?[15]

References

Atkinson, D. (1987). "The Mother Tongue in the Classroom: A Neglected Resource?" *ELT Journal* 41.4: 241-247.
Bennett, J. M. (2009). Transformative Training: Designing Programs for Culture Learning. In M. A. Moodian (Ed.), *Contemporary Leadership and Intercultural Competence: Exploring the Cross-cultural Dynamics within Organizations* (pp. 95-110). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

---

[14] Japan has often been seen as a nation which is *empowered* by translation and where English standards remain low – reflective, perhaps, of poor EFL teaching. Its success in preserving its own language (and traditions) is notable; equally so is its ability to import the rest of the world through translations. Julian Pigott has discussed the failure to produce "Japanese with English abilities" despite the fact that all students have at least eight years of English instruction before admitted to university. Lip service has also been paid to government policy, as announced in the 2007 White Paper by MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (2007 White Paper) (2012: 249-265) (see also Seargeant 2009).

[15] There have, of course, been some laudatory attempts in such a direction. The project by Anthony Pym, et. al. (2013), referred to above, is one such. What is more, some EFL theorists have argued against the adoption of one single method and called for the consideration of multiple strategies to be deployed in conjunction. This is likely to pave the way for a "reconciliation."

Canagarajah, A. Suresh (1999). *Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cook, G. (1998). Use of Translation in Language Teaching. In M. Baker (Ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (pp. 117-119). New York and London: Routledge.

Cook, G. (2007). A Thing of the Future: Translation in Language Learning. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics 17*(3), 396-401.

Cook, G. (2010). *Translation in Language Teaching: An Argument for Reassessment.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Copland, F., & Neokleous, G. (2011). L1 to Teach L2: Complexities and Contradictions. *ELT Journal 65*(3), 270-280.

Crandall, J. (1997). Language Teaching Approaches for School-Aged Learners in Second Language Contexts. In G. R. Tucker & D. Corson (Eds.), *Second Language Education* (pp.74-78). London: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Dagilienè, I. (2012). Translation as a Learning Method in English Language Teaching. *Studies about Languages 21*. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/105755/j01.sal.0.21. 1469

Du-Babcock, B. (2007). Language-based Communication Zones and Professional Genre Competence in Business and Organizational Communication: A Cross-Cultural Case Approach. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication 17*(1), 149-171.

Fettes, M. (1997). Language, Planning and Education. In R. Wodak & D. Corson (Eds.), *Language Policy and Political Issues in Education* (pp. 13-22). London: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Gan, Z. (2009). 'Asian Learners' Re-examined: An Empirical Study of Language Learning Attitudes, Strategies and Motivation among Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong Students. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development 30*(1), 41-58.

Hadzantonis, D. (2013). *English-Language Pedagogies for a Northeast Asian Context: Developing and Contextually Framing the Transition Theory*. New York and London: Routledge.

Hashimoto, K. (2007). Japan's Language Policy and the 'Lost Decade.' In A.B.M. Tsui & J.W. Tollefson (Eds.), *Language Policy, Culture and Identity in Asian Contexts* (pp. 25-36). Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Hashimoto, K. (2013). The Japanization of English Language Education: Promotion of the National Language within Foreign Language Policy. In J. W. Tollefson (Ed.), *Language Policies in Education: Critical Issues* (pp. 175-190). London: Routledge.

Hendrickx, P. V. (1972). Language Teaching and Teaching Translation. *Babel: An International Journal of Translation 18*(1), 14-20.

Howatt, A. P. R. (1984). *A History of English Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jackson, J. (2010). *Intercultural Journeys: From Study to Residence Abroad*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Jackson, J. (2013). The Transformation of a 'Frog in the Well': A Path to a More Intercultural, Global Mindset. In C. Kinginger (Ed.), *Social and Cultural Aspects of Language Learning in Study Abroad* (pp. 179-204). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

James, C. (1989). Three Uses for Translation in Foreign Language Teaching. *Trabalhos em Linguistica Aplicada 13*, 15-26.

Kachru, B. B. (1992). *The Other Tongue: English across Cultures*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Kim, E.-Y. (2011). Using Translation Exercises in the Communicative EFL Writing Classroom. *ELT Journal 65*(2), 154-160.

Kobayashi, H., & Rinnert, C. (1992). Effects of First Language on Second Language Writing: Translation versus Direct Composition. *Language Learning 42*(2), 183-215.

Kobayashi, Y. (2011). Applied Linguistics Research on Asianness. *Applied Linguistics 32*(5), 566-571.

Laviosa, S. (Ed.) (2014). Special Issue on Translation in the Language Classroom: Theory, Research and Practice. *The Interpreter and Translator Trainer 8*(1).

Li, D.C.S. (2013). Linguistic Hegemony of Linguistic Capital? Internationalization and English-Medium Instruction at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. In A. Doiz, D. Lasagabaster & J.M. Sierra (Eds.), *English-Medium Instruction at Universities: Global Challenges* (pp. 65-83). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Li, Y. & Li, W. (2013). *The Language Situation in China*. Vol. 1. Berlin/ Beijing: De Gruyer Mouton/The Commercial Press.

Littlewood, W. (1999). Defining and Developing Autonomy in East Asian Contexts. *Applied Linguistics 20*, 71-94.

Machida, S. (2008). A Step forward to Using Translation to Teach a Foreign/Second Language. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching 5*, 140-155.

Malmkjaer, K. (Ed.). (1998). *Translation and Language Teaching: Language Teaching and Translation*. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing.

Mezirow, J. (2000). *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Miller, L. (2007). Issues in Lecturing in a Second Language: Lecturer's Behaviour and Students' Perceptions. *Studies in Higher Education 32*(6), 747-760.

Naysmith, J. (1987). English as Imperialism. *Language Issues 1*(2), 3-5.

Nunan, D. (2003). The Impact of English as a Global Language on Educational Policies and Practices in the Asia-Pacific Region. *Tesol Quarterly 37*(4), 589-613.

O'Malley, J.M. & Uhl Chamot, A. (1990). *Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pennycook, A. (1994). *The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language*. London and New York: Longman.

Phillipson, R. (2009). *Linguistic Imperialism Continued*. London: Routledge.

Pigott, J. (2012). A Humanistic Approach to Foreign Language Education in Japan. *Ritsumeikan Studies in Language and Culture 23*(4), 249-265.

Pym, A., Malmkjaer, K., & Gutiérrez-Colón Plana, M. (2013). *Translation and Language Learning: The Role of Translation in the Teaching of Languages in the European Union*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2001). *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

Routh, R.V. (1941). *The Diffusion of English Culture outside England: A Problem of Post-War Reconstruction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Saraceni, M. (2010). *The Relocation of English: Shifting Paradigms in a Global Era*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Seargeant, P. (2009). *The Idea of English in Japan: Ideology and the Evolution of a Global Language*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Stern, H.H. (1992). *Issues and Options in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thomas, S. (1989). Using Translation to Overcome Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure. *New Comparison: A Journal of Comparative and General Literary Studies 8*, 75-84.

Tsui, A.B.M., & Tollefson, J.W. (Eds.). (2007). *Language Policy, Culture and Identity in Asian Contexts*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Zhao, S. (2013). Hong Kong's English Language Skills Branded 'Pathetic' as Chinese Has 'Negative Influence'. *South China Morning Post,* 5 November.