

Developing an Understanding of Translingual Writing: A Resource for Graduate Educators

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### *Abstract*

Via an account of the genesis, development, and enactment of a seminar in translingual writing, this paper represents an attempt to indicate the extensive amount and interdisciplinary nature of the knowledge that one needs to be familiar with in order to develop a rich and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon as well as to provide a resource for faculty interested in developing such a course or for faculty or graduate students to use for self-study in this area. Specifically, the paper (1) addresses the motivation for the development of the course and provides a description of the course and its context; (2) identifies and briefly describes required and additional readings—classified by their disciplinary orientations (specifically, literary studies, dialectology/black English vernacular, applied linguistics, rhetoric and composition, and translanguaging); (3) offers an extensive set of questions for discussion based on the readings and on issues frequently raised in class—including terminology, language, difference, disciplinarity, instruction, and consequences of adopting a translingual approach to writing; and (4) provides an extensive bibliography of work in the area of translingual writing.

### *Keywords*

translingualism, translingual writing, second language writing, composition studies, applied linguistics

### *Introduction*

Early in the fall of 2014, I received a manuscript, *Clarifying the relationship between L2 writing and translingual writing: An open letter to writing studies editors and organization leaders*, co-authored by a group of second language writing scholars, namely, Dwight Atkinson,

Deborah Crusan, Paul Kei Matsuda, Christina Ortmeier-Hooper, Todd Ruecker, Steve Simpson, and Christine Tardy. The manuscript came along with a request to read it over and consider publicly endorsing it. The letter briefly described the domains of second language writing and translingual writing and, as the title suggests, addressed their relationship—with the aim of distinguishing the two areas and warning about the effects of their conflation. The authors were concerned that such conflation was resulting in the marginalization of second language writing scholarship in composition studies journals and at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and affecting hiring practices at institutions of higher education.

I read the manuscript with great interest and care. However, I am embarrassed to say that, at the time, I was virtually clueless about translingualism or translingual writing. I had heard the terms, but I would have been at a loss to provide a useful definition or description of this movement in composition studies. In any case, because I knew each of the authors of the open letter personally and respected their work and their judgment, I formally endorsed the document—which would later be published in *College English* in 2015.

But it was clear that I needed to do some serious homework on translingualism. So I did an extensive search for and review of the relevant literature. And I decided to pursue the matter further by offering a graduate seminar on translingual writing in the fall of 2016 and again in the spring of 2019 and the spring of 2020. The first time around, the course was more like a survey than a seminar, and I was learning the ropes along with my students. We read, we wrote, we presented, we discussed, we argued, we agreed, we disagreed, we agreed to disagree, and by the end of the semester, I believe we developed a decent understanding of what translingual writing is about. The second and third times around, both I and my students were prepared to look at this topic critically and in depth.

The context for this doctoral level graduate seminar in translingual writing was a large research university in the midwestern part of the United States. The seminar was offered through the Department of English, a relatively large department, diverse with regard to areas of study (literature, rhetoric and composition, second language studies, creative writing, English education, and English linguistics). The seminar was developed and taught under the auspices of the Graduate Program in Second Language Studies. Courses offered by this graduate program typically draw doctoral students not only from the English department (especially from second language studies) but also from other programs and departments (usually rhetoric and composition, education, foreign languages, and general and applied linguistics).

This seminar has drawn a very international group of students (which reflects the makeup of the second language studies program)—from China, Iran, Korea, Lebanon, Nepal, Poland, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, and the United States. The majority of these students were multilingual writers themselves, had done graduate coursework in both second language studies and rhetoric and composition, and had taught first-year writing courses for both international and domestic students. Also, for many of these students, second language writing was their primary area of research.

The aim of the course was to develop a broad, deep, and critical understanding of translingualism, and more specifically, translingual writing. Such development was greatly facilitated by the heterogeneous nature of the students, who brought to the course a wide variety and interesting mix of disciplinary perspectives from the humanities, social sciences, and education as well as a familiarity with work from numerous related disciplines, which is necessary to understand the complexity/make sense of translingual writing and its implications. These disciplines included linguistics (theoretical and applied), sociolinguistics/dialectology,

psychology (especially learning theory), first and second language acquisition and development, bi- and multilingual studies, second and foreign language instruction, curriculum development, literary studies (especially comparative literature), and critical theory. The result of this convergence of knowledge was stimulating and engaging exploratory discussion.

In terms of course structure, the seminar adopts a chronological approach overall, beginning in the 1970's with the landmark CCC language statement, *Students' right to their own language*, and culminating with the most contemporary publications on the translingual movement. Reading for the course is comprised of book chapters and (mostly) articles from a variety of journals, including but not limited to *Across the Disciplines*, *American Educational Research Journal*, *Applied Linguistics Review*, *College Composition and Communication*, *College English*, *Composition Studies*, *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *Literacy in Composition Studies*, *Modern Language Journal*, *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, and *Research in the Teaching of English*.

Each reading done for the course was explored using a common heuristic, addressing such issues as definitions of translingualism and translingual writing, definitions of types of language alternation—code switching /codemixing /codemeshing, disciplinary perspective(s) conveyed (including disciplinary ontologies and epistemologies), intended audience(s), intended purpose(s) and goals, orientation to translingual theory and practice (e.g., supportive, resistant), and what the reading has to offer writing professionals (teachers, researchers, and theorists). Course activities were comprised of close reading and focused (through the use of the heuristic) discussion (with a primary focus on theory and disciplinarity), biweekly (500-750 word) reaction papers on (student chosen) topics addressed in the readings and discussions—these papers were presented in class and shared online), and a final paper typically relating translingual practice to

students' particular interests—papers that could serve as the basis for conference presentations and/or publications.

Additionally, there is a central focus in the course on what I see as different schools of thought on translingual practice and some of their main exponents: literary studies (e.g. Steven Kellman), dialectology/Black English vernacular (e.g., Vershawn Ashanti Young), rhetoric and composition (e.g., Bruce Horner), applied linguistics (e.g., Suresh Canagarajah), and translanguaging (e.g., Ofelia García). There are also some preliminary background readings. While I categorize the readings by schools of thought here, in the class, the readings are presented in chronological order, interspersing readings from different schools—especially those in applied linguistics and rhetoric and composition.

The instructor's role in this course was to curate the readings, familiarize students with the traditions from which readings were drawn, provide historical context and information on the authors of the readings, facilitate and moderate in-class discussion, field students' questions, and provide feedback on their written assignments.

### *Readings*

In this section, I provide a list and brief characterizations of readings for the seminar. Within each category, I specify required and additional readings—this is not meant to distinguish reading in terms of quality: the former best fit my central narrative for the course; the latter, add useful information. My choice of readings and their categorization reflects my understanding of work in this area, my biases, and the constraints imposed by the finite classroom context. It would be perfectly reasonable for someone else to divide up this literature in a very different way. Additionally, I do not mean to imply that the work included here exhausts the relevant literature on this topic.

### *Preliminaries*

The preliminary readings comprise work in two areas—contact zones and student’s language rights. Required reading on contact zones includes Louise Pratt’s (1991) work on the arts of the contact zone and Min-Zhan Lu’s (1994) essay on the politics of style in the contact zone. Additional reading includes Suresh Canagarajah’s (1997) study of African-American students’ academic coping strategies.

Required reading on students’ language rights includes the CCCC (1995) language statement on students’ rights to their own languages and Geneva Smitherman’s (1999) reflection on the development of this statement. Smitherman and Victor Villanueva’s (2003) edited volume on language diversity in the classroom and Russel Durst’s (2014) profile of Smitherman as a translingualist serve as additional reading.

### *Literary studies*

Required readings in this category are the essays of Gloria Anzaldúa, Ha Jin, Chang-Rae Lee, Chinua Achebe, and Salman Rushdie in Steven Kellman’s (2003) collection of work by translingual writers—whom Kellman defines as “...those who write in more than one language or in a language other than their primary one” (p. ix). Additional reading in this area include Kellman’s monograph on the translingual imagination and Kellman and Natasha Lvovich’s co-edited special issues for *L2 Journal* (2015) on literary multilingualism and for *Studies in the Novel* (2016) on translingual fiction.

### *Dialectology/Black English Vernacular*

Vershawn Ashanti Young’s (2004) article which introduces the concept of and coins the term code meshing, specifically with regard to combining Black English Vernacular with White English Vernacular in academic discourse, as well as Young’s monograph (2007) which

addresses, in part, the same issue, and his chapter (2013), a further discussion of code meshing in the context of translingual practice, are required reading in this category. Additional reading includes Young's (2009) argument against code switching; Young & Aja Martinez's (2011) collection of essays on code meshing as World English; and Young, Edward Barrett, Y'Shanda Young-Rivera, and Kim Brian Lovejoy's book on code meshing, code switching, and African American literacy.

### *Applied linguistics*

I have included here the work of scholars who I see as falling primarily in the area of applied linguistics, although many of them cross over between applied linguistics and composition studies, and have divided my presentation of this work into two time periods reflecting basic or foundational and contemporary work in this area.

The first group of readings were published between 2006 and 2015 and comprise a large body of work by Suresh Canagarajah and reactions to this work. Required reading includes Canagarajah (2006a) on the place of World Englishes in composition, (2011) on code meshing in academic writing, (2013a) on literacy as translingual practice, (2013b), on negotiating translingual literacy in the classroom, and (2013c) on the end of second language writing. The work of Paul Kei Matsuda (2013a) on the renewed attention to language in composition studies driven by the translingual writing movement, (2013b) a response, in part, to Canagarajah (2013c), and (2014) a description of the emergence and critiques of the translingual writing movement; Atkinson, Crusan, Matsuda, Ortmeier-Hooper, Ruecker, Simpson, & Tardy (2015) the previously mentioned open letter/manifesto regarding the relationship between second language writing and translingual writing; and Canagarajah's (2015) response to Atkinson et al (2015) make up the rest of the required reading in this section.



Additional reading during this time period includes Canagarajah (2006b) on a writing pedagogy involving shuttling between languages; (2013d), a monograph on translingual practice (especially relevant are chapters 1, 2, and 6); Nelson Flores (2013) on the relationship between neoliberalism and plurilingualism; Ryuko Kubota (2014) on the connection between multilingualism/pluralism, postcolonial theory, and neoliberal multiculturalism, and Dana Ferris's (2014) book review essay addressing the concepts of *English Only* and multilingualism in composition studies.

The second group of applied linguistics readings was published between 2016 and 2019. Required reading here includes Canagarajah (2016) on translingual writing and teacher development in composition, Severino's (2017) diary study of language learning with implications for translingual writing, Tardy's (2017) call for transdisciplinary scholarship involving second language writing and composition studies, Atkinson & Tardy's (2018) dialogue on the relationship between second language writing and translingualism, Jeroen Gevers (2018a) critical reassessment of translingualism in the context of second language writing, Brooke Schreiber & Missy Watson's (2018) response to Gevers (2018a) focusing on the relationship between code meshing and translingual pedagogy, and Gevers' (2018b) response to Schreiber & Watson (2018), addressing the complexities of linguistic social justice.

Additional reading for this time period is comprised of Canagarajah (2017), primarily a response to Flores (2013) and Kubota (2014) with a focus on translingual practice and neoliberal policies; Eunjeong Lee's (2017) account of translingual negotiation of local language ideologies; Kate Manglesdorf (2017) on the role of language difference in translingual enactments; Canagarajah & Sender Dovchin (2019) on the politics of translingualism as resistance; and

Estela Ene, Kyle McIntosh, & Ulla Connor (2019) on intercultural rhetoric and translingual practice.

*Rhetoric and composition*

In this section I have included scholars whose work I see as being primarily or exclusively in rhetoric and composition/composition studies and have divided my presentation of their work into three time periods reflecting early, transitional, and contemporary work in this area.

Required reading published from 2002-2013 comprises Bruce Horner & John Trimbur (2002) on English only and US college composition; Christiane Donahue (2009) on internationalization and composition studies; Horner, Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster & Trimbur (2011) on language difference in writing—a manifesto for the translingual movement in composition studies; Horner, Samantha NeCamp, & Donahue (2013) on a multilingual composition scholarship and a move from *English only* to a translingual norm; and Lu & Horner (2013) on translingual literacy, language difference, and agency.

Additional reading from this time period includes Lu (2009) on translingual literacy; Fraiberg (2010) on a multilingual and multimodal framework; Jordan's (2012) monograph on redesigning composition for multilingual realities; Nancy Bou-Ayash (2013) on translingual practices from Lebanon and mainstream literacy education; Aimee Krall-Lanoué (2013) on a translingual approach to error; and Sarah Stanley (2013) on translingualism and basic writers.

From the 2014 to 2016 period, required reading includes Bou-Ayash (2014) on U.S. translingualism through a cross-national and cross-linguistic lens; Horner (2014) on reworking English in rhetoric and composition; Vivette Milson-Whyte (2014) on the implications of code meshing for denigrated language varieties and their users; Vanessa Kraemer Sohan (2014) on

responding to student texts from a translingual starting point; Carrie Kilfoil (2015) on moving from a monolingual to a translingual ideology in rhetoric and composition graduate education; Jay Jordan (2015) on material translingual ecologies along with a response from Brian Ray (2016) and a counter response from Jordan (2016); Anis Bawarshi (2016) on a translingual perspective on genre; Dylan Dryer (2016) on appraising translingualism; Keith Gilyard (2016) on the rhetoric of translingualism; Juan Guerra (2016) on cultivating a rhetorical sensibility in the translingual writing classroom; Rebecca Lorimer Leonard & Rebecca Nowacek (2016) on transfer and translingualism; Lu & Horner (2016) on translingual work in composition; and Trimbur (2016) on translingualism and close reading.

Additional reading from this period comprises Lorimar Leonard (2014) on multilingual writing as rhetorical attunement, Ray's (2015) review essay on language difference as a new norm in college writing instruction, Lisa Arnold (2016) on responses of multilingual and international faculty to composition theory, Bou Ayash (2016) on postmodern language representations in academic literacies, Donahue (2016) on rhetorical and linguistic flexibility as new norms; Horner's (2016) monograph on rewriting composition; Horner & Tetreault (2016) on translation as global writing; Jerry Won Lee (2016) on going beyond translingual writing; J. W. Lee & Jenks (2016) on doing translingual dispositions, Ray & Connie Kendall Theado (2016) on writing instruction in multilingual/translingual and transnational contexts; and Xiaoye You's (2016) monograph on cosmopolitan English and transliteracy

In the period from 2017 to 2019, required reading includes Alvarez, Canagarajah, E. Lee, J.W. Lee, & Shakil Rabbi (2017) on translingual practice, ethnic identities, and voice in writing; Guerra & Ann Shivers-McNair (2017) on reconfiguring entanglement in a translingual world; Horner (2017) on translingual agency; Horner & Tetreault (2017) on exploring translingual

writing pedagogies and programs; Asao Inoue (2017) on writing assessment in translingual approaches; Thomas Lavelle (2017) on the ins and outs of translingual work; Jonathan Hall (2018) on boundary work in rhetoric and composition, second language writing and WAC/WID; Horner (2018) on translinguality and disciplinary reinvention; Donahue (2018) on the future of exchanges between writing and language studies; Zhaozhe Wang (2018) on rethinking translingual as a transdisciplinary rhetoric, and Horner & Sara Alvarez (2019) on defining translinguality.

Additional reading during this period includes Patricia Bizzell (2017) and William Lalicker (2017) on challenges for translingual writing pedagogy in different countries; Peter DeCosta, Xiqiao Wang, Jyotsna Singh, Fraiberg, Esther Milu, & Canagarajah (2017) on pedagogizing translingual practice; Dryer & Paige Mitchell (2017) on unexpected consequences of translingualism in first-year composition; Gallagher & Noonan (2017) on learning to do translingualism; J.W. Lee's (2017) monograph on the politics of translingualism; Katie Malcolm (2017) on a translingual studio approach in a community college; and LuMing Mao's (2018) dialogue between comparative rhetoric and translingualism.

### *Translanguaging*

The last school of thought I will mention here is translanguaging. While translanguaging is different from translingualism in that work on translanguaging primarily grows out of bilingual/multilingual education, addresses primarily K-12 contexts, and focuses as much on oral language as on written language, there is enough overlap to warrant the inclusion of some of the most relevant translanguaging literature here.

Required reading in this area includes Ricardo Otheguy, Ofelia García, & Wallis Reid (2015) on clarifying translanguaging and deconstructing named languages; Jeff MacSwan's

(2017) response to the foregoing article, offering a multilingual perspective on translanguaging; and Otheguy, García, & Reid's (2018) response to/critique of MacSwan's article, addressing a translanguaging view of the linguistic system of bilinguals. Additional reading includes García and Wei Li's (2014) monograph on translanguaging with regard to language, bilingualism, and education; and Creese & Blackledge (2010) on translanguaging in the bilingual classroom as a pedagogy for learning and teaching.

### *Questions for discussion*

The core of our course on translingual writing was discussion based on the close reading of assigned texts. This discussion took the form of asking and responding to the multitude of questions, specific and general, simple and complex, and concrete and abstract, generated by our readings of the assigned texts. This section will present a selection of the questions raised on specific topics relating to translingualism and translingual writing.

### *Basics*

What is translingualism? How is it different from related concepts, such as multilingualism, multiculturalism, plurilingualism, metrolingualism, and cosmopolitanism? Is there a common definition of the concept? What are its identifying characteristics? Is it an ideological orientation? A pedagogical approach? How is translingualism manifested in writing—i.e., what does a translingual text look like?

What are code mixing, code switching, and code meshing? Are they discrete phenomena? How are these actions different? Is there substantial overlap among them? Is code meshing to be preferred over the other two? To what does “code” refer to in these terms?

Who makes up the intended audiences for scholarship on translingual writing? Instructors? Researchers? Theorists? What are its goals or objectives? Improved writing ability? Social justice? Of what use is it to writing practitioners?

What is the difference between translingualism and translanguaging?

What is the relationship of translingualism and multimodality? What are the “modes” involved in multimodality?

### *Language*

Do discrete languages (e.g., Chinese, Arabic) exist or are they are merely social constructs?

Do multilinguals have discrete languages represented in their brains or do they have nonspecific language resources in a single completely integrated language system? Is there empirical evidence of a cognitive or neurological nature that supports or refutes either of these positions?

How does translingualism explain an individual’s language acquisition and development?

Are languages unstable and always in flux? Does significant language change/adaptation take place rapidly or slowly and incrementally over long periods of time and across contexts?

Is having a command of different dialects or registers or rhetorical styles in one language equivalent to having such a command in two distinct languages? If so, does this require the erasure of the notions of monolingualism and multilingualism?

Is language something we have or something we do? If someone loses the ability to use one of their languages (temporarily or permanently) due to a stroke or traumatic brain injury, how can one lose what one never had? Why can’t language be something we have (competence) *and* something we do (performance)?

### *Difference*

What exactly does it mean to say that difference is the norm? Does everyone differ in the same way?

Does the idea of a norm imply the existence of difference and vice versa? Is it necessary to consider the matter of degree of difference; that is, that some differences are negligible while other are salient?

Is a clear understanding of norms a prerequisite for discussing differences; otherwise how can we know whether something is different or not?

Should conventions be viewed as merely restrictive and oppressive linguistic norms? Might teaching norms enhance writer agency?

Does translingualism overemphasize performance and flatten language and language user differences? Does it ignore individual competence? Does it disavow the sociohistorical differences of languages and repudiate the sociocultural differences of language users?

Does positing a sameness of difference devalue the struggles of traditionally underrepresented groups in society and the academy?

### *Disciplinary*

Are the tenets of translingualism largely derivative of earlier work in other disciplines? Do translingualism's proponents simply use new terminology for existing concepts? How and to what extent should contributions from other areas be recognized and acknowledged?

Is translingualism something innovative or new or rather a synthesis of different theoretical and pedagogical orientations towards language/communication from different disciplines?

Does advocacy of translingualism, by its seeming erasure of the distinction between monolingual and multilingual writers allow a primarily monolingual field to see itself as multilingual, and

thus (intentionally or unintentionally) to some extent appropriate/assert hegemony over disciplines grounded in multilingualism?

Why is there often friction between proponents of translanguaging/translingual writing and certain disciplines (e.g., second language writing)? To what extent is this friction due to differences in academic orientation (e.g., humanities vs. social science), research methods (e.g., hermeneutic vs. empirical), scope (e.g., national/local vs. international/global), goals (e.g., achievement of social justice vs. improvement of academic writing ability, epistemologies (e.g., relativist vs. objectivist), political orientation (e.g., ideological vs. pragmatic), and expectations with regard to students (e.g., linguistically homogeneous vs. linguistically heterogeneous)?

### *Instruction*

What pedagogical value does a translingual writing approach have that other approaches do not?

Does a translingual writing orientation offer feasible pedagogies? Does translingual writing provide specific tools that can be adopted in most composition classrooms? What are the challenges faced by instructors when adopting a translingual writing approach, and what are solutions to these challenges? How can translingual writing be assessed?

Should educators identify the needs of learners and stakeholders in a particular context before incorporating a translingual orientation? What needs do students have that can only or better be met by a translingual writing pedagogy and no other existing pedagogy?

Can a translingual writing approach work when the instructor is monolingual/monocultural and the students are multilingual/multicultural? In a linguistically heterogeneous classroom, would an instructor need to have at least some proficiency in using each of the multiple languages spoken by the students?



To what extent, if any, should teachers prepare their students to code mesh? Is it ethical for translingual scholars to suggest that students code mesh when those scholars rarely do so in their own published writing?

Is translingualism more a political than a pedagogical movement? Is a translingual writing approach, in essence, a form of critical pedagogy?

Is translingual writing appropriate for K-12 writing education?

### *Consequences*

How realistic is it to expect that multilingual/multidialectal writers will be able to successfully use their multiple languages/dialects in academic writing, say, in a master's thesis or dissertation prospectus? Can developing an idiosyncratic style do more harm than good to those writing in an academic setting? Could translingual writing instruction leave students poorly equipped for professional life after graduation?

Can a translingual writer's merging of two languages/dialects hinder as well as facilitate successful communication? Can shuttling between languages alienate readers? If translingual writing requires extra effort by readers, is it reasonable to ask readers if extra effort is what they are looking for?

If most translingual writing instruction has focused on native English speakers in first year composition in the United States, what challenges will it face in ESL or EFL contexts?

In an ESL context, is it unreasonable to assume that at least some international second language writers, who have just enrolled in an English dominant institution of higher education and who have spent many years learning English specifically to succeed in this context, would prefer not to mesh their languages or develop an idiosyncratic style in their academic writing?

In an EFL context, might translingual writing be judged as poor writing that should be avoided? Given high stakes tests or job interviews would these students prefer to learn standard English and Anglo-American conventions? Would they care less about their agency, identity, or resisting the dominant discourse of English than gaining proficiency and literacy, passing tests, getting jobs, or having papers published?

Does translingualism address the needs of less English-proficient writers? Must second language writers reach a certain level of language proficiency to understand the rhetorical demands of the second language and notice how similar or different they are to those their own primary languages?

Are minority linguistic rights and ESL students' needs comparable? Can those advocating on behalf of newly arrived immigrants, international students with a different variety of English, and second language learners use the same movement as those advocating for the rights of a population that has been historically oppressed within its own country?

#### *Final thoughts*

While this paper provides a rather detailed account of a particular course, it is *not* meant to be simply a course description—a “show and tell” piece. The purpose of the description here is to acknowledge the unique context, choices made, and elements taken into account in the development of this course. And, similarly, while the paper does include information on how the course was prepared and taught, it is *not* meant to be simply a blueprint for instruction—a “how to” piece. The purpose of including this information is to attest to the viability of such a course, that is, to show that this paper is based on more than armchair speculation. *Nor* is the purpose of this paper an attempt to develop a static canon of literature on translingual writing or to offer a ready-made, one-size-fits-all course package for graduate programs in rhetoric and composition

or second language studies. The intended aims of this paper *are* to (1) indicate the extensive amount and interdisciplinary nature of the literature that one needs to be familiar with in order to develop a nuanced understanding of translingual writing and (2) provide a *resource* for faculty contemplating offering graduate-level courses on translingual writing appropriate for their time, place, audience, and purpose, or for faculty or graduate students interested in doing self-study in this area.

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