

Recentring English Language Teaching: India At The Centre Of The Multilingual Turn?

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My plenary address at the 12th International ELT@I Conference (Anderson, 2017) reported on an exploratory survey that Amy Lightfoot and I conducted (Anderson & Lightfoot, 2018) investigating both translanguaging practices in English language classrooms in India and attitudes towards translanguaging among teachers surveyed. Respondents reported making (on average) only occasional use of other languages in English language classrooms, most often for comparing and contrasting language features, explaining concepts, managing classes and translating for learners. Only a minority of teachers reported actively facilitating translanguaging, and more experienced teachers were more likely to express more pro-translanguaging beliefs and practices. Important differences between urban, semi-urban and rural contexts were found, indicative of a need for varied, context-sensitive approaches to multilingual practices in English classrooms across India. While such self-reported data must always be interpreted with caution, our research documented something most Indian teachers and scholars are very familiar with—the complexity of multilingual practices in Indian classrooms.

We conducted this research because very little prior research has focused specifically on translanguaging in India, despite its rapid rise in the international literature (e.g., García & Wei, 2013) as part of the wider “multilingual turn” in language teaching (May, 2013). Given India’s multilingual history, the prevalence of translanguaging in its culture and artefacts, and an awareness of the need for “code-switching and code-mixing” in national policy documents (NCERT, 2006, p. 12), it seems to me that India has the heritage and expertise to lead the world in reconceptualising how learners’ languaging resources (the total sum of their lexicogrammatical knowledge across all the languages that they use) can best be used to facilitate more effective learning of all subjects, including English. Smith (2018) has recently argued for a decentring of ELT (from the Anglophone west), and here I suggest we might recentre it in the realities and practices of India’s classrooms, as the world’s largest (albeit heavily devolved) educational system (Muralidharan & Sundararaman, 2015).

While much research has been conducted on multilingual practices in Indian English classrooms (see the many interesting papers in Coleman, 2017), such accounts often focus narrowly on “L1 use”, mirroring international literature in which languages are somewhat simplistically separated and “judicious” L1 use is typically recommended (e.g., Turnbull and Dailey-O’Cain, 2009). Even terms such as “medium of instruction” and “EMI” suggest the same separation, rather than “media of instruction” or even “languages for learning”, which, as a more inclusive construct, is arguably what we should be moving towards all around the world.

In my personal experience in India, I do not observe people “using L1” or “L2”. Rather, as Canagarajah (2013, p. 175) notes, “they depend on practices that are adaptive, reciprocal, and dynamic to co-construct meaning” enabling them “to connect learning with use in their language interactions-constructs” (p. 176). Further, I see similar practices in Indian classrooms, including those of effective teachers of English, offering a new vision of authenticity that does not depend on the fiction of native-speakers, nor prioritise the texts

they produce (Anderson, 2018). Yet research on such practices is still in its infancy. We need to understand what is happening in these classrooms, and we need to interpret such practices without dependence on exogenous monolingual constructs such as “second language acquisition” or “interlanguage” (Kachru, 1994) to theorise new visions of effectiveness appropriate to situated needs and outcomes.

I would like to conclude by challenging teachers, researchers and academics to consider how languaging practices function in Indian society, and how this might influence our choice of classroom activities, assessment tasks, intended curricular outcomes and even language-in-education policy. Is it possible that the classroom, and the education system at large, can both mirror and prepare Indian learners for the many worlds—real and virtual—that they are destined to participate in, and shape, in the future?

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Biography

Jason Anderson is a teacher educator, researcher and award-winning author of books for English language teachers. He has worked in over twenty countries worldwide at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. His research interests include teaching methodologies and approaches, translingual approaches to language teaching, teacher reflection and the challenges .

Warsaw Convention

This refers to an international agreement that defines to rules and regulations that govern civil aviation. It was initially, signed by a small group of countries but has since been amended multiple times and now been adopted by most countries in the world. Among other things, the Warsaw Convention defines the potential liabilities that an international carrier faces with regard to the air transport of people and luggage of various kinds. It helps provided a common framework for dispute resolution between parties belonging to different countries.

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