Language and Learning: Commitments to Asian Studies and the Future

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Asian Studies by definition and practice traverses disciplinary boundaries. Familiarity with the chosen field requires, first and foremost, time and energy spent in the acquisition of language as well as in studying the history and culture of the region. In this intellectual endeavour, at least as much as in other fields (and perhaps even more), an emphasis on language learning should be more than lip-service: there is now a rich body of literature by scholars of "Other" places (and their critics), demonstrating the social, political and theoretical ramifications of language power differentials (for example: Said 1974; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983; Collins 1990; Mohanty 1991; hooks 1992; Alexander and Mohanty 1997; Spivak 1992; De Pedro Ricoy 2000).This literature suggests inter alia that the language we use in research, to learn as well as to convey our findings, shapes and is shaped by broader power relations. Knowledge and fluent or competent use of certain languages (most notably English) is accorded value in the global academic context. The task of addressing this value – to acknowledge it and address its implications – is therefore part of the legacy of Asian Studies scholars in the twenty-first century.

In her discussion of cultural research on women, Spivak notes that the first step in cultural translation is "learning (the) mother-tongue" of the women in focus, grounding cultural fluency in the concrete process of language (1992:189-190). Superficially, Spivak's words relate to the flow of terms across languages, and the power differentials that shape and are shaped by language. However, Spivak also refers here to the critical consciousness of perspective demanded by ethnography and other works of cultural translation, in which the researcher's voice filters the speaker's words. In social research

(research about people and relationships) we are often required to make clear the landscape we survey. That is, we want to clarify what is understood, by whom, and in what context. This critical consciousness requires that we examine the place our own language occupies in the world, and the way that informs our understanding of other languages.

In light of the intrinsic relationship between language and knowledge production, we have an obligation to nurture and promote language learning, among our undergraduate and postgraduate students as well as within our academic community. Furthermore, our own language/learning should be understood as a productive, valuable and critical part of our research, and one of the foundations upon which our work – as scholars, teachers and members of an intellectual community – is built. As I have argued elsewhere, an applied and examined knowledge of our own linguistic capacities inflects upon the work we produce, and is particularly integral to the process and products of ethnographic research (Dales 2007).

Thus for scholars of Asian Studies, at least in the early years of research, a balance is required between language learning (and maintenance) and investigation of the broader English-language scholarship on the area. Furthermore, if we are continue developing our expertise we must continue our engagement with the field, its language and the scholarship it produces. At this point I highlight my own shortcomings in this area, as one who has published only in English, my native language. The following discussion can thus be understood as a kind of treatise on what I believe to be worth striving for in academic work, with the tacit understanding that we all work in the space between ideal and concrete reality.

This paper presents three key problems. The first relates specifically to language learning, while the second and third relate to the negotiation of our concomitant obligations to research and teaching. All three can be seen as pertinent to scholars at all levels, but have a particular salience for early career academics. For their current and potential future implications, I present them for consideration in this discussion on the transferral of academic values in the Asian Studies scholarly community.

Language learning questions

Language learning is an essential investment for those who work in Asian Studies. It can be an end in itself, allowing communication and interaction, an entré into the culture, history and society. For social scientists, it is intrinsic to the academic project: language enables and determines our engagement with the people we study. It demonstrates our interest and commitment, and allows us access to knowledge we could not otherwise easily gain.

But language makes certain demands of us: How do we speak with – not simply *to* – those whose society we study, when we are placed close(r) to the Anglophone academic centre? How do we maintain familiarity with scholarship in the language of the field, while also keeping abreast of English-language literature?

In response to the first question, I argue that we have an obligation to develop work that addresses those we research. Hountondji refers to the "extroversion", or external orientation of research that occurs at the periphery, outside the global metropole (2002: 26). By (exclusively) producing work in English, for an English-speaking audience, we subtly reinscribe the hegemonic relationship of margin to centre, and reinforce our own relationships of power vis-à-vis our "subjects". Of course, this interpretation of our scholarly work could be considered extremist: most, if not all, of us would rail against accusations of colonialism or cultural imperialism, and many of us articulate our opposition to these systems of inequality implicitly and explicitly at various stages of our work, from fieldwork to theoretical innovation.

Nonetheless, I suggest that the intellectual legacy we enjoy should encourage us to publish in the languages we work in, either for broad or popular consumption (as public intellectuals) or in academic fora such as scholarly journals and books. Working with people as research subjects, and even more so working between multiple languages, draws into relief the power differentials implicit in academic processes. This is true of all interpretative research, which involves "the representation and appropriation of Others' experiences as well as the researcher's...(and) requires interpretation across

cultures of socially constructed meanings (Smith 1996: 162). It is one of our jobs to ensure that this process of interpretation is two-way, to seek dialogue with scholars in our field communities and to conduct – at least sometimes– this dialogue in the language of the field.

How then do we make the time to read (let alone write) in another language? This question is of specific concern to me as I begin a period of extended fieldwork in Japan. My time here is to be divided between the interviews and note-taking of ethnography, researching appropriate (new, informative and/or contextually important) Japanese resources and finally, exploration and digestion of relevant English sources. The difficulty of balancing these three tasks reflects the general challenges of academic work: the constant flow of new research of which to keep abreast, the energy and attentiveness required for good ethnographic note-taking and the cultivation of creativity and theoretical innovation that underpins good scholarship. In addition, I need to develop/maintain linguistic proficiency, to comprehend and ultimately to produce, work in Japanese.

While being in the field offers the best, or at least most immediate, opportunities for this development, beyond the field Asian Studies scholars have an imperative to include linguistic engagement in our general practice. Where we have time to research (and where resources are available) we should make time to research in the language of the field. This could mean one publication every two or three years. It could mean presenting in our field language at academic conferences. The question of how best to manage this time allocation – how to fit more tasks into a limited day/year/lifetime – remains unresolved, but I look to learn from colleagues and mentors who have succeeded in their efforts, and whose work demonstrates their commitment to the field and scholars working in languages other than English.

A further issue for negotiation is the application of research skills and knowledge in the classroom. While this is not inevitably problematic for all research/teaching academics, as an early-career academic I am struck by the emphasis on achieving a "teaching-research" nexus, and the practical obstacles to this goal.

The teaching-research nexus – how to find it?

In my previous position I was employed to teach language, although I research culture. Working to academia's ideal of the "teaching-research nexus" required that I tailor either my teaching or my research, while recognising that the relationship between the two core elements of academic work is more complex and contended than often assumed. The multidimensionality of the relationship has been thoroughly addressed by Elton (2001), who critiques the myth of a universal and uniform positive relationship between research and teaching. Building on this work, Griffiths suggests a need to recognise that the kinds of relationships between teaching and research, and their outcomes and methods, will vary according to institutional conditions, disciplinary differences, and the particular definition of what constitutes research (Griffiths 2004: 710-11, 714).

I would also suggest that the teaching-research relationship reflects other conditions: market demand for particular disciplines, qualifications or academic 'outcomes'; the tools used to quantify success in both teaching and research; the temporal location of the academic's career (early-career, mid-career or senior academic) and the contemporary state of the academic labour market.
These variables aside, the potential benefits of translating quality research into quality teaching make this a worthwhile endeavour. Thus it is important to think about ways of moving beyond the common predicament of the early-career academic who teaches in one field and researches another. I suggest there are five possible strategies to this end:

1) Change one's research to reflect one's teaching. This strategy can be understood as an ideal "research-teaching nexus", where students are direct beneficiaries of staff research expertise. My (admittedly unrepresentative) observations of colleagues at several institutions and career levels suggest that this approach is rarely taken up. One explanation for this might be that the impetus for research – what sparks our curiosity and compels us to dig – often comes from outside the curriculum and the classroom. (This is most obviously the case when research is about other societies, temporalities or spaces.) With the exception of those who research the classroom and its

components (students, textbooks, pedagogical processes), it is difficult to create a research body from one's teaching. It is even harder to change a research trajectory that is already established.

2) Teach what the workplace requires, and try to find the overlap between that area and one's research interests. Focusing on the interstitial space between teaching and research fields potentially increases the interdisciplinarity of the research produced, may encourage collaboration (where teaching is shared by staff) and may lead to new and interesting research avenues.

3) Teach what the workplace requires, and continue to research and publish in the fields one knows. This option can be understood as a discrete approach, and at least in terms of institutional and broader recognition it is likely or often that teaching will be subordinate to research. (This is because evaluation of academic achievement or status tends to be based on the quantification of publications and grants rather than teaching evaluations). Furthermore, this approach can lead to a lack of postgraduate supervision opportunities. For junior academics this situation reflects a disjoint in the "growing" of potential postgraduates (it is hard to attract students to one's research if the research is not presented in class). This may remain problematic for more senior academics where the recognition accruing from research work (eg resulting from publishing and presenting overseas) are not transferrable to the fields taught. It goes without saying, of course, that postgraduate students are not "collectibles", and undergraduate students should not be harnessed into postgraduate studies simply to enhance a supervisor's CV.

4) Move around until one finds a job that allows one the opportunity to teach some of what is researched. This is a highly problematic option for several reasons. Firstly, it presupposes the flexibility and mobility of the individual, to relocate where and when it is needed. This is likely to exclude many academics with caring responsibilities, as well as those who cannot move for health or other personal reasons. Perhaps even more significantly, this approach presupposes job availability: that there will be a suitable job and that the individual will be successful in a highly competitive selection process. This is patently not the case for academics in Australia today, where

increasing casualisation means increased uncertainty for many – Junor's study (2004: 276) suggests that 20% of academics are employed on hourly casual contracts, and according to DEST in 2008 more than 38% of staff at Australian universities were on limited term contracts (NTEU website). The prospect of landing a desirable position exactly in one's field of expertise is not to be banked upon.

5) Finally, there is the option to teach what the workplace requires, while creating a "mini-nexus", through guest lectures and co-teaching. This approach adopts some of the assumptions of the second and third points above and aims to develop research expertise within one's intellectual comfort zone, while at the same time using teaching as a vehicle for exploring new zones for future academic engagement. Students benefit from innovative research, generally presented by passionate lecturers, and academics have the opportunity to present work that may encourage postgraduate students and therefore lead to supervisory experience.

In each of these approaches there is tension between teaching and research. While not necessarily unmanageable, it is nonetheless a process of negotiation for every academic employed in a traditional teaching/research role. For language teachers whose research is neither linguistic nor pedagogical (ie second language acquisition), it is not always easy to find ways to introduce specialised research to the classroom, particularly at the beginners level.[1] While I strongly support Liddicoat's (2002; 2004) proposal that teaching language inherently means teaching culture, I have not yet developed effective strategies for connecting my research on contemporary gender and feminism with the curriculum demands for the course I teach on intermediate Japanese. This is not to say that such a connection is impossible, and indeed I continue to work on my approach to this

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[1] This situation no doubt varies according to the particularly language, the level and structural features (contact hours etc) of instruction and the individual teacher's experience and prerogatives. For example, I would suggest that English-as-first-language speakers learning Japanese in a traditional university context (4hrs/week of contact, 13 week semesters) cannot be expected to be able to read Japanese literature, newspaper articles or academic texts in their first years of study.

issue. Rather, my point is that the relationship between what we teach and what we research requires further consideration in light of the realities of academic work and university conditions.

I suggest that what is needed is some reflection by university policy-makers and managers on the practicalities of teaching outside one's research area. Consideration for the hours required to teach language, the hours required to learn language, and the benefits of collaborative teaching models to allow a "mini-nexus" would at least acknowledge the critical significance of language as a means, as well as an end, in academic processes. This consideration might also be extended to the quantification of research outputs which rely upon (second) language acquisition and application.

Publishing well VS publishing fast

Academics are expected to publish, regularly and in high-ranking journals (or books by high-ranking publishing presses). The Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (DIISR, formerly DEST) allocates points per publication of (inter alia) refereed conference proceedings, refereed journal articles, scholarly books, and scholarly book chapters (DIISR 2009). Quantification of research publications according to the national evaluation system is supplemented by internal assessment of research output, varying according to the institution but typically adhering to the basic four categories assessed by DIISR (Hemmings, Smith and Rushbrook 2004). In both levels of assessment, and particularly in the current evaluation system known as Excellence in Research Australia (ERA), articles published in journals which are highly-ranked (according to lists compiled in consultation with professional associations) are more prestigious sites for publication than other journals, refereed conference proceedings. In some disciplines, highly-ranked journal articles are also more prestigious than scholarly books or book chapters.

The highest-ranking journals are rigorous and competitive, meaning that many papers are submitted and few accepted. Research that requires translation, or transcription and then translation, generally takes longer than work that does not. However this imbalance is

obscured in a track record, at least when assessed by those outside the field: ie those who assess research quantum but do not research in a second-language, namely senior management.

In this sense the investment of language learning is devalued by academic management structures. Most obviously this is reflected in the way that translations are excluded from Higher Education Research Data Collection (HERDC) point allocation (DIISR 2009: 24). Presumably this exclusion reflects an assumption that translation does not constitute "substantial new knowledge" nor represent "original research" (DIISR 2009: 24)

For those of us who work in disciplines such as anthropology and linguistics, as well as non-traditional disciplines such as Asian Studies, official recognition of the investment constituted by language learning – through a higher weighting or allocation of research points, or other incentives, for producing work in our field-language – is needed to ensure the continued production of quality research.

Furthermore, in most cases the more competitive the journal the greater the lag for publishing time. The time investment of using second-language texts aside, do we aim to publish quickly, approaching B/C ranking journals, or do we take a long-term perspective, aim for A*, and be prepared to concede two years from submission to publication? This length of time is problematic enough for those of us who are established in ongoing academic positions. However, for academics who are casual or on short-term contracts, the delay can be disastrous. Without even considering the additional delays of rejection, the time-lag between submission and publication in a high-ranking journal makes planning of publications a three-year exercise – too long for those who work on year-to-year contracts, and difficult to justify where workplaces require yearly quantum for research mapping exercises.

In light of these considerations, I would suggest that for ECRs (especially those on contracts, looking to obtain ongoing positions) when publishing in peer-reviewed journals, publishing *quantity* is at least as important as, perhaps more important than, publishing *quality*. Publishing in online journals, or aiming for the quicker B ranked journals may not be strategic for mid-career academics, who

look to make a name for their work in the international scholarly community. However, for junior and contract academics, having publications – runs on the board – means at least a better chance of securing a job in which to last to mid-career.

Conclusion

Language learning is a commitment to the state of the arts of Asian Studies, but also one of the tools needed to practice in the field. As scholars in Asian Studies, we have an obligation to ensure that these tools are passed on to future scholars, for use in ways we have not yet managed and in situations we have not yet experienced. Transferring language skills requires good teaching, and good teaching arguably rests on a passion for learning, in practice as well as in principle.
We can facilitate this transferral through our own practice: keeping abreast of literature in our field language; developing (second) language skills with which to publish outside the Anglophone centre and creating opportunities for dialogue in our field language(s). Notwithstanding the pressure for academics to publish fast and publish well, we need to remain attendant to intellectual rigor, and to the theoretical debates that occur in the communities we study. Ultimately, if we look to sustain a vibrant intellectual community engaged in studies of Asia, we need to engage in the difficult but rewarding task of learning to speak (and write) in Other language(s), and to navigate a path towards a more truly inclusive scholarly community.

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