

Reading/Writing Multilingualism: language, literature and creativity in the multilingual classroom

Rachael Gilmour, Queen Mary University of London

Abstract:

This article examines the relationship between the discipline of ‘English Literature’, and the contemporary multilingual classroom. It argues that although our field has often been cast as a kind of corrective to the ‘problem’ of language diversity by helping to teach language norms, literature can – and should – be made a preeminent space for students to reflect on their own experiences of language diversity, and to translate this into self-reflexive critical tools to think about language in literature. As an example of this kind of practice in action, the article discusses the experience and outcomes of a project in the English Literature department at Queen Mary University of London, called *Reading/Writing Multilingualism*, working with year 10 and 12 students from two local secondary schools who have English as an additional language.

Keywords:

Multilingualism, polylinguaging, English literature, poetry, creativity.

In this article, I want to set out some problematics and outline some pedagogical strategies that aim to recalibrate the relationship between the discipline of ‘English Literature’, and the contemporary multilingual classroom. I will argue that while our field has often been cast as a kind of corrective to the ‘problem’ of language diversity by helping to teach language norms, literature can – and should – be made a preeminent space for students to reflect on their own experiences of language diversity, and to translate this into self-reflexive critical tools to think about language in literature. Many students, particularly in urban contexts, have highly complex language worlds, whose negotiation gives them, potentially, sophisticated critical metalinguistic understandings of how languages work – aptitudes which can make them better readers of literary texts. To be able to bring their own experiences of language diversity into the classroom, meanwhile, helps to foster students’ sense of inclusion and investment in literature. As an example of this kind of practice in action, I will discuss a project run for

three years in the English Literature department at Queen Mary University of London, working with year 10 and 12 students from two local secondary schools who have English as an additional language. I write as a university academic in an English Literature department with a background in both literature and linguistics, rather than as an educational researcher; but in the hope that this project and the ideas which inform it will be of interest to other researchers and teachers in the field of English in the UK. It emerges out of my research in postcolonial literary studies, language diversity in modern and contemporary literature, and ideologies of language, and commitment as a teacher to social justice; and it has entailed encountering and working with theories of creativity in ways that have also enriched my own undergraduate teaching practice.

There are currently estimated to be over 1 million students in UK schools who have ‘English as an additional language’, or EAL (Holmes 2015: 2). While on the one hand, in certain contexts Britain’s cultural diversity is represented positively as the sign of a tolerant and open society, it is nevertheless the case that monolingual language ideologies continue to hold sway in public discourses, in what Bourdieu calls ‘a unified linguistic market, dominated by the official language’ (1991: 45). At the level of policy, for example, in October 2013 the UK Coalition government brought in more stringent English language requirements for British citizenship, following a trend visible in each new iteration of immigration and citizenship law since 2002. Two months later, the government announced new legislation to make receipt of British state benefits dependent on being able to speak ‘reasonable’ English. Both measures were framed as ensuring that migrants were able to participate in, and not ‘exploit’, British society and public services (Home Office 2013). Across a range of fields of public discourse, this kind of association of English with national cohesion and civic belonging is commonplace. As Adrian Blackledge has argued, language other than English – and, since 2001, particularly South Asian languages – are associated in British political and media discourse with a range of social ills including ‘civil disorder, school underachievement, social segregation, societal burden, isolation, unhappy marriage, poor employment prospects, mental health difficulties, lack of social mobility, and threat to democracy, citizenship and nationhood’ (2005: vii). These negative perceptions of language diversity can also be seen in newspaper coverage of the 2013 Office for National Statistics Census results, which reported that Polish is now ‘Britain’s second language’ and that in some inner-city areas – including in that part of inner London where the university and schools under discussion here are located – 40% of the population speak a language other than English. In some quarters of the British

press, the census results were taken as a sign of Britain's burgeoning cultural diversity and vibrancy, or a prompt to discuss the ongoing structural marginalization of multilingualism in an evidently increasingly multilingual society. Yet far more commonly, and perhaps predictably, the results served as a touchstone for invocations of a lost (and in actual fact mythic) British cultural and linguistic homogeneity. The *Daily Express* ran with the headline 'Migrants Shun the English Language' (O'Grady 2013: n.p.), while *The Sun* led with 'English is a second language for 40% in parts of Britain', and went on with the *non sequitur*, 'it's hard not to conclude that many migrants have no interest in learning English because they simply don't want to integrate' (Wilson 2013: n.p.). In the field of education, in spite of the strategy laid out in the DfES's 2009 *Languages for All*, recognizing the value of language teaching in Britain to our own society and role in the global economy, we see a steep decline in the resourcing and uptake of second modern language learning. At the same time, we have a national curriculum which does not recognize, or value, actually-existing language diversity in terms of dialects, 'community' or 'heritage' home languages, or – as I'll discuss in more detail below – students' often complex and flexible 'polylinguaging' practices. As a discipline, English Literature in particular has been held up, in fact, as a kind of normative response to linguistic and cultural diversity in which what it means to be British, alongside linguistic mastery of 'Standard English', may be learned and shared through reading literary texts. This, as Yandell and Brady have recently observed, is a central assumption of the current national curriculum for English, even more so than any of the previous four versions (2016: 44).

Beneath their apparent differences, conventional understandings of 'multilingualism' actually have much in common with ideological arguments about Standard English, insofar as they rest on the assumption that languages are separate, autonomous entities (Makoni and Pennycook 2007) – an assumption which has long been criticized within applied linguistics. According to such understandings, while individuals may use different languages, they do so in different settings, and only ever one at a time: what Jørgensen et al. (2011) call the '(double or multiple) monolingualism norm'. By this reckoning, for example, EAL students will use English as a learned code for communication in school, and their 'community language' in family or community contexts. Yet this is to ignore the lived reality of how language is actually used, and particularly in linguistically complex, 'super-diverse' (Vertovec 2007) urban environments, in which speakers are surrounded by symbolic resources of all kinds, and often have correspondingly highly diverse language repertoires. In

an increasingly digitally-connected, mediatised world, these include different forms of communication that broach the supposed divide between the linguistic and the visual, or ‘multimodality’ (see for example Kress 2010). In this, what Jørgensen et al. call the ‘polylinguaging norm’ (2011: 34), a speaker’s language practice is drawn adaptively from the range of linguistic resources and ways of making meaning at their disposal, which are deployed and combined in varying ways according to context. As Holmes nicely puts it, examples of such practice can range ‘from a reviewer describing a new restaurant as possessing “a certain *je ne sais quoi*”, to a second-generation British-Pakistani teenager judiciously switching to Urdu when asking his Grandmother for extra pocket money’ (Holmes 2015: 3). Such insights will hardly be lost on teachers of English in contemporary British classrooms, and will inevitably inform their classroom practice, particularly in linguistically superdiverse urban contexts, yet there is an ongoing difficulty to harness the creative and critical power of students’ ‘linguaging’ experiences when curricular demands, attainment targets, and norms continue to be structured monolingually (see for example Spotti and Kroon 2015). To find strategies for this kind of work is of the greatest importance also in giving students agency as makers of meaning, and space to find their voice as readers and writers in contexts of ongoing inequality (see for example Blommaert 2005; Bourdieu 1991). There is also a wealth of research to support the view that such strategies do not undermine, but rather support, the goal of making students better communicators, and ultimately ‘speakers of English’, by encouraging and respecting their abilities to experiment and innovate with language. A range of recent arguments about the value of creativity in English teaching are surveyed and forcefully supported in Andrew McCallum’s recent (2016) article in this journal.

Though English has often been treated – and, in curricular terms, shaped – as a subject which can help to forge societal cohesion through enforcing linguistic and cultural norms of ‘Britishness’, it is in actual fact an inherently linguistically diverse, as well as linguistically reflexive, field. In literary modernist scholarship, for example, Juliette Taylor-Batty (2013) has recently argued for the significance of multilingualism as a phenomenon fundamental to writers from Samuel Beckett and James Joyce to Jean Rhys and Dorothy Richardson. In fact, writers in English throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have reflected, and reflected on, the everyday experiences of language diversity, and the expressive potential of writing from outside the conventions of ‘Standard English’. Salman Rushdie’s (1981) ‘chutneyfication’ of English is a well-known case in point, as are Tom Leonard and James

Kelman's challenges to the politics of language standardization from the perspective of working-class Glasgow. There are, in fact, a wealth of poets and novelists, writing in Britain, and exploring the experiences, politics, and creative possibilities, of moving between different forms of language – from black poets of an earlier generation such as Linton Kwesi Johnson and Grace Nichols, to contemporary writers like Daljit Nagra, Suhayl Saadi, Raman Mundair, Xiaolu Guo, and Brian Chikwava (see for example Gilmour 2012, 2015).

It is out of this literary field on the one hand that, at least initially, the project I discuss here emerged; and on the other, out of dialogue with teachers of English in two inner London mixed state comprehensive schools. These are both schools serving largely working-class communities, in a diverse area with high levels of social deprivation. English teachers from both schools have been the project's collaborators, and their students have been the project's participants, running three times over three years so far, from 2013 to 2016. Students' writing and artwork, films from the project, and a set of teaching resources, are permanently available on the open-access project website (Gilmour 2012-), and many of the examples I will be discussing here can be found there as well. The schools are different in many ways but both highly successful in the terms valued by OFSTED, and from the perspective of the project, also have in common a cohort of dedicated, skilled, and creative teachers of English, willing to give up their time to collaborative initiatives aimed at finding ways to expand their students' opportunities to engage with literature. Several teachers involved were also explicitly motivated by the chance to work outside of what they perceive to be the quite narrow and prescriptive demands of the curriculum, in terms of teaching material and delivery; voicing the kinds of frustrations expressed by the state comprehensive English teachers interviewed by McCallum (2016). This project represented, to them, an opportunity to give their students more chances to be creative, to read literary texts and have classroom discussions which spoke directly to their specific experiences, and to work collaboratively between schools and across year groups. This latter aspect of the project, working with year 10 and 12 students in a group together, was specifically prompted by the teachers from both schools involved at the planning stage, and remarked on by students in all three years as something they had enjoyed and benefitted from. In both schools, like others in this part of London, the vast majority of students speak a language other than English as their home language: the area has a high concentration of Bangladeshis and their British-born children, and by far the majority of the students involved in the project speak Sylheti at home. Other participants have been students who speak Somali, Polish, Arabic, Chinese, and Russian at

home; as well as two or three so-called ‘monolingual’ English speakers. Each year’s intake has comprised roughly 20–25 students drawn from years 10 and 12 in both schools, with around 15 contact hours each time. Though both schools regularly admit students relatively new to the UK and to English, this has largely not been reflected in the project’s intake, and one question remains how to extend its scope to these students. Since the workshops are voluntary and run outside school teaching hours, and perhaps also because they are held at a university, participants have perhaps inevitably been drawn from a somewhat self-selecting group of enthusiastic learners, in most cases with quite advanced skills in English. Because of the organisers’ intention to make the project and its resources available to as many students as possible, no student has attended in more than one year; which is a shame from a research perspective, making it impossible to gather data on students’ progress year-to-year – but, in terms of the project’s main aims, hard to argue with.

The central aims of the project are threefold: to introduce students to a range of ‘multilingual’ literary texts that are based in English as their matrix language; to discuss these in relation to students’ everyday experiences of language diversity; and to give students opportunities to respond creatively, in poetry, prose, and visual media, in response to their reading and classroom discussion. In workshops, students read and discuss poetic and prose texts which incorporate and reflect on language diversity in various ways, transgress ‘monolingual’ propriety, and use complex repertoires of language and meaning-making as material for creativity. Importantly, though, workshops have begun, not with literary texts, but with discussion of students’ own experiences of and ideas about language, with exercises intended to explore their own linguistic repertoire and to encourage them to think about how they use language creatively in everyday settings: for example, creating their own ‘language map’, and writing a collaborative poem in which each participant writes a line beginning with the phrase ‘the sound of my voice...’. These are important discussions in their own right; they also create a context for thinking about literary texts which emerges out of students’ reflection on their own language practices, rather than the other way around. Though the project draws on literature from the GCSE or A level curriculum – for example, Daljit Nagra’s poem ‘Singh Song!’ (2007) – the focus has been on widening the scope of students’ reading and literary experience. Round-table classroom discussion, in small groups and among the group as a whole, has centred on the question of ‘the creativity of language’, coupled with students’ reflection on ‘how texts impact on them’ (McCallum 2016: 73), and considering how students’ personal experiences of language diversity are relevant to both. In the course of

reading other writers' literary texts which exploit their linguistic repertoires to various kinds of effect, we have used classroom work to discuss, reflect on, and use, the full range of students' own repertoires as well. As will be seen below, this has included creative work with what we might think of as fragments and smatterings of language, as well as languages over which students feel they have full 'mastery'. This aspect of the project – making space for students' own creativity – is one which has grown in scale and scope in each subsequent year, in response to participants' expressed desire for time to write and create in response to our discussions and reading. Students have worked both individually and collaboratively, writing in poetry and prose, performing their work aloud to one another, as well as producing a range of multimodal art works, all housed on the project website. In all three years of the project, students also took part in a writing workshop with the contemporary poet Daljit Nagra, in which he performed and discussed his own use of code-switching, multilingual punning, and grammatical interference in poetry (in his case, between English and Punjabi), as well as facilitating students' own poetry practice and giving them feedback on their writing (for film of one of these workshops, see Gilmour 2012-).

What rapidly became obvious in the project was that students' language-repertoires, and sense of creativity in language, were – as research I've discussed above might indicate – far too complex to be accommodated by any simple model of 'bilingual creativity', where they would work in or between two languages neatly side-by-side. As 'polylinguals', students have recourse to a diverse range of language resources which they employ in improvisatory and fluid ways to make meaning in different contexts. They are also self-consciously reflective on their own language practice as a matter of everyday conversation, as emerged in the construction of idiolectal 'language maps' in the first workshop. Students were eager to discuss the interplay of English and Bangla, for example, in mainstream school contexts (using Bangla for in-group joking, but not wanting to do so in front of non-Bangla-speaking teachers who might 'feel weird about it' or think that they were telling jokes about them); and to explore the range of their language repertoires, and the way that they combine language in different ways, and use language as the ground for camaraderie, competition, or creativity. As well as English and their 'home' or 'community' languages, students were well aware of the contexts and ways in which they pick up and use all sorts of other bits and pieces of language in everyday life – for example expletives or slang picked up from friends who speak other languages; a vernacular London English including elements drawn from Jamaican Creole (a

history of which they are generally well aware); Arabic, learned at the mosque; African American Vernacular English, from music and social media.

These kinds of polylingual insights – about what it can mean to use and switch between different kinds of language practice – offer a useful framework for reading, for example, Luke Ramirez’s (1990) movement between English, Belizean Creole, Garifuna and Spanish:

can you tell us which direction we are taking
 caz we waan no whé paat we guen;
 bisétuna nasú busini halīa badúa lañ;
 queremos saber nuestra dirección
 whé paat we guen...

Initially, the pleasure of reading the poem for students often lies in its ‘deciphering’. For those students who are studying Spanish at school, there is a satisfaction to be derived from translating the fourth line; many can also understand a smattering of Jamaican Creole, and its relationship to Belizean Creole means that most can pick up the meaning of the second and fifth line. A second layer of interpretation lies in reflecting on the power of a poem to include and exclude different kinds of readers at different points; several students have been struck forcefully by the productive power of *non*-understanding, where the fact that you do not understand is part of the poem’s meaning. And finally, discussions have revolved around the capacity of poetry to convey through language diversity the social and political environment of a place like Belize – or London – where many different kinds of language are spoken (on multilingualism and literature in Belize see Schneider 2018). Reading strategies like these set the groundwork for considering a radically multilingual poem like ‘Gonbidapena’, from the Maltese poet Antoine Cassar (2008), which appears on his WordPress blog site:

My great grand mother tongue was wing, or wind, or water.

Txori txiki-txikiak, orain hemen, gero han,
 mogħnija b’għerf arkan, b’mużga ta’ mitt elf nota
 tressant des formes parfaites dans le bleu des savanes,

eta izan zen hitza. , , , ,

del pecho a la boca, de Adán en Adán,
 les mille voyelles du vent, in ever-shifting order,
 lekutatik etorri, lekutara joan.

Denok dugu barruan ibai ezkutu bat,
 manantial matinal, babbling hubbub of blood,
 hamla ta' nar u nida titkaxkar u tintradd.
 Edan, erdaldunak, hau da zuen herria,
 f'kull hamrija l-g'heruq, f'nifs ir-rih kull zerriegħa,
 et avant tout vignoble ce vin du mot nomade.

Cassar's poem can be discussed as a 'multilingual poem' in its own right, using the kinds of questions about deciphering raised by Ramirez; but also in terms of its online framing using the multimodal apparatus of the WordPress blog site (optimized for mobile devices). This includes not only an English translation, 'notes' that give glosses from Egyptian, Sumerian, Phoenician, Greek, and 'borrowings' from the Basque poet Kirmen Uribe (but do not explain which other languages the poem moves between), and an audio file of the poet reading the work, but also Cassar's embedded Twitter feed, discussion of his various poetry projects as 'a writer of Maltese, English, and multilingual verse', and a running tally of how many people have visited the blog site (Cassar 2008). As sophisticated readers and communicators across digital media, it is perhaps not surprising that students had a quite immediate, intuitive grasp of how the poem's meanings and possible readings were both altered and diversified by its different layers of embedding and framing. Equally, they were interested in the ways in which this resembled and differed from more 'conventional' framing of published poetry by typography and layout to cover art, blurbs and notes about the author (what Genette (1997) calls 'paratexts', 'a zone between text and off-text', mediating and conditioning the way in which the text itself is read). Though students were accustomed to treating poems as artefacts abstracted from such frameworks – as stable entities retaining their 'meaning' no matter where or how they are reproduced – their reading practices throughout other aspects of everyday life gave them an immediate, often quite fluent critical engagement with how this kind of multimodal meaning-making works; and an enthusiasm for connecting it to the seemingly disconnected practice of reading poetry in the classroom. One challenge of the project has been to find new and readily accessible teaching resources that undermine these distinctions, and model and explore new kinds of literary 'reading'; for example, poet and multimedia artist Abeera Kamran's search engine poem 'Sadness of the Body' (2015), or her 'Literature of the Playlist' project (n.d.).

The teaching methodology of the project has been to move backwards and forwards between three kinds of work – exploration of questions around language in practice, reading and

discussion of literary texts, and students' own creative responses – while reflecting on the emergent relationships between them. In their creative practice, students have often ranged quite widely from what we as teachers considered were our central 'topics'. Munadiyah, for example, a year 12 student, took classroom discussions of the history and languages of London's East End into a powerful poem which employed her very well-developed 'Standard English' powers of expression and wordplay to explore the experience of unbelonging and oppressive surveillance – in effect being always looked at, and never listened to – while living in the city as a hijab-wearing Muslim woman; with the repeated refrain: 'I'm not going to apologize':

That's what I said as I sipped the cup of PG Tips that simmered my speech
That's what I said as I refined my cuisine down the chippie, salt and vanquish
[...]
Apparently my birthplace is only fact once I copyright it on Google maps
Apparently my passport is only real once I renew my vows with the border force
(Gilmour 2012-)

Other students took as their linguistic material the varieties of spoken language that surround them in everyday life, as in Farhana's poem 'Tongue Within My Mother Tongue', which reflects simultaneously on the nature of friendship and the relationship between varieties of Bangla:

I speak Bengali and so do you.
Yet you sit there laughing at me.
You say 'lef' and I say 'razai'.
You say 'Salon' and I say 'Salom'.

They both mean the same thing –
Yet you sit there judging me
And I'm judging you.

Lef/ razai = Duvet

Salon/ Salom = Curry (Gilmour 2012-)

Farhana's simple and deft poem, with its alternating 'you' and 'I', sliding between English and varieties of Bangla, and reflecting on the intimacy and brittleness of friendship and the politics of language within a community, offers ample evidence of the ways in which

students' 'polylingualism' is not an impediment but a powerful resource for their creativity in writing. So, too, is Julekha's insightful poem about language and family dynamics:

So I said to my mum
 Kita asen kaybar
 But I said to my dad
 What's there to eat?

My brother was watching TV
 SpongeBob SquarePants to be exact
 I punched him on the arm
 Demanded, where the fuck is the remote?

He got up and left, looking for mum,
 Threatening me,
 As if I was going to get in trouble.
 Was I scared? No.

Dad wasn't home, mum doesn't understand. (Gilmour 2012-)

Perhaps more surprising – yet similarly demonstrating the creative ways in which individual students shape their sense of self in relation to language worlds that are increasingly diverse at scales from the highly local and intimate to the digitally global – is the work of students for whom the language of US hip hop is an important resource, or whose interest in manga gives them a sense of connection to Japanese culture. In Medinah's workbook (fig. 1), a long and intimate poem about her grandmother's funeral is placed opposite a sequence using the fragments of Japanese she has been teaching herself via the internet:

Fig. 1.

Medinah's work offers just one striking example of how self-conscious, self-defining polylingualism may be channelled creatively; and how students' language-worlds can be much richer, more varied and more surprising, than we as teachers might anticipate.

Overall, this project seems cautiously to demonstrate a number of things. It offers evidence of the value of literature teaching models in which language diversity – not as an abstract

concept, but as grounded in students' everyday communicative and aesthetic experience – provides a route into the critical analysis of literature, and which seek out literary resources which use such diversity expressively. It also suggests the value of the kind of creative classroom practice which is, as McCallum (2016) has argued, marginalized by education policy in relation to English teaching. It points specifically to the value of students' diverse language practices as a resource for their own creativity, if only the divide can be breached between a classroom language world defined by 'Standard English', and their own polylingual language environments. Such environments, as applied linguists argue and this project seems to indicate, foster a high degree of linguistic self-reflexivity: these are students to whom language is not a self-evident, transparent medium of expression, but a set of resources on which they draw self-consciously, often performatively, and with a corresponding sense of critical awareness. This is, I argue here, a resource to be harnessed in the classroom in discussion of language and literature, brought into relation with students' own lives and experiences.

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