

A Conceptualization of Transfer for L2 Multilingual Writing from a Translingual Lens: Codemeshing as Evidence of Transfer

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Translingualism offers a new orientation to linguistic practices in composition as always stemming from a context and thus, as dynamic and consisting of a continuously developing linguistic and multimodal repertoire (Canagarajah, 2013; 2015; Horner et al., 2011; Lu and Horner, 2013). However, SLW scholars have criticized these translingual approaches to understanding linguistic practice, arguing that they don't offer practical ways to help language learners, especially those in the first stages of learning a new language (Atkinson et al. 2015). I will address this criticism by arguing that codemeshing (combining knowledge of languages in writing from a translingual perspective) is evidence of transfer of learning (Canagarajah, 2011), and thus it should not be avoided in the writing of emerging L2 users.

Key words: Translingualism, transfer, codemeshing, L2 writing.

Codemeshing, the negotiation of languages and modes of communication in writing, and an integral notion of translingual writing, evidences transfer of knowledge and thus, learning of writing. For the purpose of this presentation, L2 and multilingual writing are used interchangeably to refer to writing performed by users of English whose main language for literacy development was not English. My ultimate goal is to argue that L2 writing pedagogies could be reinforced by translingualism, an approach that explains more accurately actual writing practices as always involving the negotiation of diverse semiotic resources, by promoting the use of codemeshing and, thus, the transfer of learning.

It is well known that number of multilingual students (also referred to as L2 writers) continues to increase in North American universities; therefore, there is an urgent need to respond to these demographic changes with writing pedagogies that allow them to grow as student writers in practical ways.

The question of learning how to write intrinsically relates to the notion of transfer (generally understood as the application of knowledge learned in one setting to a new one) (Yancey et al., 2014). Investigating what constitutes transfer of learning implies a better understanding of learning itself and, therefore, the possibility of implementing adequate pedagogies in the classrooms.

From a Second Language Writing (SLW hereof) standpoint the notion of transfer has mostly been addressed as the influence of a learner's L1 knowledge and skills on L2 learning and performance and as a negative outcome or interference of the L1 in L2 performances (DePalma & Ringer, 2011) has resulted in pedagogies that

encourage L2 writers to avoid all traces of their L1. Rather than encouraging L2 writers to keep learning, these constraints in writing hinder their performances. As Kubota (1998) claims, avoiding differences (and thus, negative transfer from this view) in rhetorical patterns between the L1 and the L2 in L2 writing has been the major concern of Contrastive Rhetoric, with direct consequences in SLW pedagogies. Although Kubota stated that only “if similar rhetorical structures are present across cultures, positive transfer could occur” (1998, p. 75), I argue that L1 influences on L2 writing, whether they are rhetorical or linguistic and disregarding the level of similarities between the languages at stake, depict transfer of learning always in progress and, as such, are opportunities to develop it. In this sense, Canagarajah points out, “the ‘deviations’ from a language that we see in the usage of multilinguals might be cases of positive transfer rather than negative interference” (2011, p.413).

In their 2012 study, Kobayashi and Rinnert refer to Cook’s term of multicompetence (“the compound state of a mind with two grammars”, 1992), which calls, in their opinion, for a better interpretation of transfer because, “while recognizing crosslinguistic influence, Cook (2002) argues that there is no movement of linguistic elements from one part of the mind to another. Rather than separate systems with clear boundaries, he conceptualizes L1 and L2 (interlanguage) as merged or overlapping systems” (p. 103).

These conceptualizations of transfer in L2 writing are limited to the cognitive dimension of the phenomenon, overlooking the social and ecological aspects that impact learning processes, and as DePalma and Ringer contend, “ignoring the agency of writers” (p. 138), which, at the same time generates in Matsuda’s words “a static theory of L2 writing” (1997, p. 242-244 in DePalma & Ringer, 2011, p. 137). To account for these issues, DePalma and Ringer propose the term “adaptive transfer” for both L1 and L2 writing, which they define as “a conscious or intuitive process in which composers apply and reshape their writing knowledge and experiences in order to negotiate new and potentially unfamiliar rhetorical tasks” (2011, p.141). DePalma and Ringer recognize the “multilingual” nature of transfer since, they claim “writers have the agency to draw from among a variety of discourses and language varieties” (p. 141), but they also state that “adaptive transfer” does not “treat every deviation from Standard Written English as a sign of agency” (p. 144). However, as I will further explain, whether or not writers deviate from SWE, they are already engaging in translingual practices (Lu & Horner, 2013).

Because the notion of “transfer” has received more attention within the fields of educational psychology and composition studies, I will propose a conceptualization of transfer for L2 writing that takes into consideration principles from DePalma and Ringer’s adaptive transfer and other educational psychologist and composition scholars but that, first and foremost, is rooted in translingualism. In fact, Leonard and Nowacek (2016) argue that “transfer scholarship might be informed by a translingual approach to composition in two main ways” (p. 260).

First, in relation to language ideologies, transfer studies could investigate why attitudes towards linguistic diversity are more tolerant in FYC than in subsequent courses. Second, the nature of “transfer” itself is informed by translanguaging, since “language difference as a locus of meaning rather than a problem (...) transfer researchers might reorient their understanding of what has caused a transfer attempt to fail—and what, in fact, constitutes failure” (p. 260). The conceptualization of transfer for L2 writing that I propose goes in line with their arguments, as examples of codemeshing will show.

While the notion of transfer is being revisited in the context of L2 writing, an approach to composition that directly implicates L2/Multilingual writers, translanguaging, is emerging in North American contexts to provide theoretical and practical answers to the increasing changes in student populations. However, this new orientation to writing hasn't been taken up optimistically by SLW scholars.

In fact, Atkinson et al. (2015) addressed the concerns created, they claim, as the result of the conflation of SLW and translanguaging. As a response to this letter, Canagarajah's piece *Clarifying the Relationship between Translingual Practice and L2 Writing: Addressing Learner Identities* (2015) discusses (and answers) the criticisms described from a SLW perspective.

Atkinson et al. define SLW as “an international and transdisciplinary field of study that is concerned with any issues related to the phenomenon of writing in a language that is acquired later in life” (2015, p. 384). Studies from a SLW perspective frequently rely on Contrastive Rhetoric, therefore, assuming that writing in one language is intrinsically different from writing in a second language. While the trajectory of SLW as a disciplinary area goes back to the 1960s when ESL was consolidated as a field and Contrastive Rhetoric was first established by Kaplan (around 1966), translanguaging stands as a novel “work in progress” (Matsuda 2014, p. 478) approach to composition¹. Translanguaging, “emphasizes the fluidity, malleability, and discriminatory potential of languages” and, therefore, it challenges language and writing ideologies related to the assumption of monolingualism and the use of standard norms by calling on “a more agentive use of various language resources in constructing and negotiating meaning, identity, and even larger ideological conditions” (2015, p. 384) in all composing practices.

Some of the tenets of translanguaging, as described by Lu and Horner (2016, p. 208) are the following:

- Language is performative, “not something we have but something we do” (p. 208)
- All decisions on language use inform and are informed by the contexts in which they take place as well as economic, geopolitical, socio-historical and cultural factors,

¹ This orientation to language diversity in writing was introduced by Horner et al. in 2011 (Canagarajah 2015, p.5).

- “Difference as the norm of all utterances”, which are “acts of translation inter and intra languages, media, modality” in what seems adaptations to dominant conventions or deviations (p. 208).

Finally, it is important to mention that translingualism differs from multilingualism in its view of linguistic practices as emerging from contexts rather than discrete systems that can be isolated and systematically measured.

Another criticism coming from SLW scholars is that a translingual approach does not take into consideration the fact that multilingual or L2 students might want to abide to norms considered standard for practical reasons and thus, as Ruecker claims, translingualism might be “delaying students attempts to learn standardized language varieties” (2014, p. 116 in Canagarajah 2015, p. 11). Canagarajah addresses this criticism by saying that, from a translingual approach, standard varieties are understood as social constructs and they are deconstructed in the classroom in order to understand how social norms became to be dominant (p. 11). In this regard, a translingual approach would “ask students to explore ways by which they might engage in fertile mimesis and critical agency in recontextualizing all forms of English, including those recognized by some as standard and those not” (Horner & Lu, 2013, p. 34). Rather than teaching student writers the norms of a standard variety, an L2 writing pedagogy informed by a translingual approach would help them learn how to negotiate those norms as well as their rationale behind and diverse forms of reception.

Most importantly, Atkinson et al. claim that, because translingual writing attends to the use and practices of an individual’s linguistic repertoire, it has not addressed the needs of *emerging* L2 writers (2015, p.384).

Codemeshing as Evidence of Transfer

It still seems unclear for SLW scholars how concrete pedagogical translingual practices can help L2 writers improve their writing. Due to the fact that languages are seen as fluid and continuously subject to variation, a new understanding of competence and proficiency is necessary. From a translingual approach, learners are language users and vice versa. Therefore, mastery in linguistic practices is assessed as appropriate responsiveness to diverse situations and the creative use of linguistic differences as resources in meaning-making activities. To address this criticism, I will explain that codemeshing (a form of translanguaging in writing) (Canagarajah, 2011) evidences transfer of learning and thus, how its use could be implemented in L2 writing courses.

The idea of codemeshing is akin to “translanguaging”, a term that originated in the tradition of bilingual education (García, 2009), which is defined as “a naturally occurring competence that multilinguals perform in daily communicative practices, by which they integrate languages and modalities in their learning to enhance it” (Canagarajah, 2011, p. 401-402). Translanguaging is based, according to García

(2009) on a dynamic and recursive model of bilingualism. Dynamic because it “refers to language practices that are multiple and ever adjusting to the multilingual multimodal terrain of the communicative act” (p. 144) and recursive “because it reaches back to the bits and pieces of ancestral language practices, as they are reconstituted for new functions and as they gain momentum to thrust forward towards the future” (145). García’s translanguaging, thus, implies an understanding of language as action (2014) that necessarily encompasses knowledge from what from a monolingual perspective we refer to as separate languages. The following example shows how a kindergarten child develops her linguistic knowledge, imperfectly (bigger > “mas grande” not “*grander”) and progressively (“*grander” is a step previous before learning “más grande”):

Teacher: This tree is bigger. That tree is smaller.

Adriana: [Tries out under her breath]. This tree is *grander*

(9/23/2007) (García, 2009, p. 156)

This understanding of “translanguaging” as action goes hand in hand with a translanguing orientation to writing. In this regard, genres are, in Bazerman’s words, “not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. They are environments for learning” (p. 19) which, therefore provide an exigency for transfer as Nowacek claims (2011, p. 28) . Codemeshing is, according to Canagarajah, “the realization of translanguaging in texts” (2011, p. 403). As a practice deployed in translanguing writing, codemeshing is also a learning strategy that allows a writer to negotiate her linguistic repertoire and, as such, evidence of transfer of learning. The examples from one of Canagarajah’s students, Buthainah, show how she strategically moves beyond the modality/one language monolingual assumption (translanguages/codemeshes) in her literacy narrative writing.

- Example 1: “Our first exposure to real English was at that airport. The man said *beaucoup de choses* that I could not understand”.
- Example 2: “At that time, my dear reader, I have not learned English in school yet since English was required to seventh graders and beyond; and I was in sixth grade ☺”

Her reflection accounts for how she is codemeshing languages and modalities: “Symbols work as another way of expressing myself. I used Arabic, poems, French, and now symbols. Limiting myself to one language is—ironically—limiting . . . But, experiencing more than one language, we are able to express ourselves in different ways or the best way. So, symbols serve as another “language” that words may not be the best tool to express” (p. 405).

- Example 3: “As I type each word in this literacy autobiography, storms of thoughts stampede to be considered and mentioned” (p. 407).

Referring to this expression, she explains: “it provides the readers of a visual for what I felt at that time. I do not see why only bulls stampede—this verb can be

used figuratively as well. I do not think that this is an issue of native speakers of English, I think that it is a stylistic choice” (p. 407).

Buthainah deploys interactional strategies in her writing, which allow her to negotiate meaning with readers. In her own words,

“I really do respect the readers of my paper. And I know that there will be different interpretations of my text. However, acknowledging this fact and informing the reader that I-as the author-know that they exist and that they are different thinkers and intellectuals than I am is a gesture of respect” (p. 408).

It is important to notice that, as Canagarajah explains, form (grammatical accuracy) is not a priority for Buthainah if it is hindering meaning, because multilinguals acknowledge that writing is multimodal, that meaning is co-constructed and there are “ecological resources” that work as “cues for interpretation” (p. 413). In addition, it is important to notice that Buthainah is willing to accept the fact that there are mistakes in her writing, for example, misspelling “verses” as “versus”. As she herself explains,

“I am quite embarrassed about this error (and another mistake below). I had multiple drafts of this essay, but did not notice this error. Of course, if I noticed it, I would have corrected it. I could have misspelled it, and the Word document auto-corrected it. I was so engaged in developing the content that I did not notice it” (p.414).

A Conceptualization of Transfer for L2 Writing from a Translingual Approach

These examples demonstrate her ability to repurpose/reshape and transform her previous knowledge (on different genres and their conventions) and the use of different codes (Arabic, French and English) and modes (visual, linguistic). By codemeshing strategies, she is also performing her agency by experimenting with language and writing and thus, expanding on her knowledge of writing (p. 405), for example, by being “sensitive to the capabilities of the audience in negotiating her text” (p. 403) and assessing her readers’ uptake of her codemeshing strategies. As Rounsville et al. argue, the ability to understand prior resources and knowledge is one of the “hallmark strategies that effective writers bring with them to any new writing context” (2008, p. 98). Strategies of codemeshing require the writers to connect in meaningful ways their prior knowledge (on writing, languages, modalities) to new writing situations. In addition, codemeshing implies, in Reiff and Bawarshi’s (2011) words, “boundary crossing” behavior, since the writer explicitly negotiates her prior knowledge and readapts it in different writing scenarios.

By looking at the types of knowledge that she brings to her writing in English by codemeshing, we can conceptualize the notion of transfer in L2 writing as:

- A dynamic process of transformation in accordance with DePalma and Ringer’s adaptive transfer (2011; also in Yancey et al, 2014) that affects

the individual and changes their identities as well as the relationship between herself and the social activity in line with Beach's idea of "consequential transitions" (defined as developmental changes in an individual, the activities in which she engages in or both that allow for knowledge construction, 2003, p. 55). The writer constructs her text in relation to specific ecologies and social contexts by interacting with/in them, thus building relationships with participants in the process (readers, reviewers and other resources). For example, Buthainah writes for a class, for her classmates and teacher, developing relationships with them stemming from and allowing for the production of her writing. She treats "writing as social action" (2009, p. 411). By codemeshing she discovers the meaning of her literacy experiences in Arabic, French and English.

- Transfer involves "constancy with change" or finding similarities between two writing situations but also contradictions (Beach 2003, p. 39) and thus, assuming the situatedness of writing and genres as spaces for negotiation. Buthainah is familiarized with the conventions of different genres and, at the same time, of how cultural, religious and other factors influence the patterns of language use and genre conventions.
- Because every writer's linguistic repertoire is unique and responds to readers in particular ways to accomplish specific purposes, transfer of knowledge is divergent and idiosyncratic (dePalma, 2015). Two writers do not transfer the same knowledge to the same situation, everyone's previous knowledge and unique literacy experiences will shape their uptake and genre performance.
- Transfer is imperfect, since transferred knowledge might apply to one specific situation but not to another one and readers' uptakes determine the trajectory of the genre. This idea goes in line with Nowacek's argument that "A robust theory of transfer must acknowledge and account for frustrated as well as for successful integration experiences" (2011, p. 41). In this regard, as Canagarajah states in relation to B'S writing strategies, "Her views (...) are not settled and final. As her positions are unresolved, she would benefit from expert guidance" (p. 414) because "choices are not always clear-cut" and "there is always an element of risk-taking in rhetoric" (p. 414).
- Transfer is multidirectional, since multilingual writers use their knowledge of diverse languages and language varieties, registers and language usage, genre patterns and modes of communication.

Implications for the L2 Writing Class

In order to develop pedagogies for the L2 writing class, it is essential to design curricula that consider a conceptualization of transfer of that correlates to how actual writing practices take place. Composition practices always involve negotiation and thus, transfer of previous knowledge that, is, in many cases, hard to pinpoint, as argued by Wardle (2007). Codemeshing as evidence of transfer allow us to see what types of knowledge are being repurposed and thus, to build on them and use them strategically in different writing situations.

In relation to how these pedagogical principles could be implemented to help emergent L2 writers (which was the main criticism coming from SLW scholars), several activities can be designed to accomplish this goal. For example, we could ask students to compile a literacy portfolio with examples of different types of writing with diverse linguistic varieties (prestigious and less prestigious ones) that made an impact (positive or negative) on their lives and engage them in activities about the social and ecological contexts in which the writing took place. To trace how their knowledge developed in idiosyncratic ways, students can create diagrams/conceptual maps in which they connect their previous writing/linguistic experiences and the new writing/linguistic notions learned during the class.

To conclude, L2 writing courses should be approached from a translingual lens in order to help L2 student writers develop their learning by encouraging them to transfer their previous knowledge and codemesh rather than by asking them to avoid traces of their previous writing and linguistic knowledge and thus, hinder not only their communicative skills, but also, and most importantly, their learning.

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