Reimagining English language learners from a translingual perspective

Jason Anderson

This article explores the potential implications of theorising in translingualism and translanguaging for foreign language teaching and learning. I discuss key terminology and introduce a translingual continuum as a potential way to understand language use practices both within and across communities. I report on an exploratory study into the self-identified future language use profiles of 116 adult EFL learners studying in the UK, the majority of whom perceive a need for translingual practices in their varied futures. I discuss the implications, both of these findings and other research for language teaching pedagogy, considering how translingual competence may differ from communicative competence, and providing practical suggestions for teachers working in different contexts. I also discuss how reimagining the language classroom as a translingual community is potentially able to redefine notions of authenticity and the role of the teacher as a translingual practitioner, thereby avoiding the divisive native-speaker/non-native-speaker dichotomy.

Introduction

In contrast to the 20th century, when learners' prior linguistic resources were either neglected, or outlawed from the language learning classroom, the 21st century has seen a resurgence in recognition of such resources, both in bilingual education (García 2009) and in foreign language teaching (Butzkamm and Caldwell 2009). However, in many English language learning contexts worldwide monolingual practices continue to dominate even when the opportunity for more translingual approaches to language learning exist. While multilingualism is today viewed as an asset, our current understanding of it continues to be premised on the notion of languages as separate, largely immutable entities. As Pennycook (2008: 30.1) notes, "It is not enough just to question monolingualism and argue for multilingualism, since both conceptions emerge from the same context of European-based thinking about language". Both Pennycook and Canagarajah (2013) have argued that only a translingual perspective can overcome this paradigmatic misconception.

This article seeks to explore the potential implications of recent theorising in translingualism and translanguaging for foreign language teaching and learning, both for learners studying in their home communities, where classes are more likely to share prior linguistic and other resources (hereafter *shared-L1 classrooms*[1]), and for learners studying in traditional Anglophone 'Centres' (Philipson 1992) of ELT, where classes tend to be multilingual (hereafter *mixed-L1 classrooms*[1]). After discussing key terminology and invoking a translingual continuum as a potential way to understand language use practices both within and across communities, I report briefly on an exploratory study into the self-identified future language use profiles of 116 adult EFL learners studying in the UK. I discuss the implications, both of these findings and other research for current and future language teaching pedagogy, both for mixed-L1 and shared-L1 classrooms. In this latter context I also discuss how reimagining the language

classroom as a translingual community is potentially able to redefine notions of authenticity and the role of the teacher as a translingual practitioner.

Definitions and terminology - A translingual continuum

While the term 'codeswitching' has historically been used to refer to the use of more than one language in close association, it implies both the presence of discrete codes and the act of 'switching' between them. As such it can be seen as a mono/multilingual interpretation of non-monolingual practices. More recently, the terms 'translingualism' and 'translingual' have emerged to refer to the more flexible use of resources from more than one 'language' within a single system, *trans*cending traditional understandings of separate languages. It is a common, and increasing practice, both of multilingual communities and interactions involving communication technology, worldwide (Pennycook op.cit.; Canagarajah op.cit.). As such, translingualism goes beyond 'codeswitching', potentially involving a much more finely integrated use of resources from two or more languages, as invoked in Canagarajah's *codemeshing* (op.cit.) or García's *translanguaging* (op.cit.), which she refers to as "the act performed by bilinguals of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximize communicative potential" (op.cit.: 140). Importantly, and especially in digital communication, translanguaging can also include multimodal resources (Canagarajah op.cit.), as shown in Figure 1, from an instant messaging group used by Malaysian teachers of English.
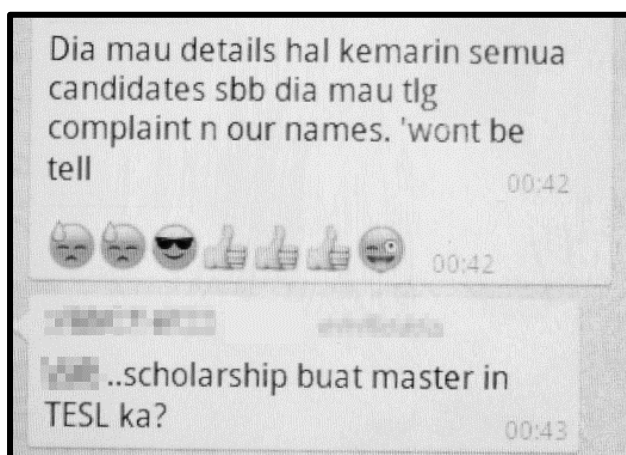
FIGURE 1
Translingual, multimodal instant messaging
Note: personal data has been pixelated.

García's definition of translanguaging can be located at one end of a continuum. I will use the terms *monolingualism* and *monolanguaging* (in which only one 'language' is used) to refer to practices at the other end (see: Figure 2). Partway along this continuum, practices may be described as *partly translingual*, as per Williams' (1996) original use of the term 'translanguaging'. Williams' work with bilingual classes in the 1980s investigated how groups of mixed-L1 learners (some Welsh-L1 and others English-L1) might usefully work with both inputs (for example, texts, explanations, etc.) and outputs (for example, presentations, essays, etc.) in both languages within the same lesson to strengthen the linguistic resources of all learners in the class. In such classes,

code choice is negotiated, and may at times involve monolingual practices, the adjacent use of two codes as separate systems (e.g. through translation), and translingual integration of resources. Communication may move flexibly along this translingual continuum depending on activity, outcome and interlocutor(s). In this article, both Williams' and García's translanguaging are seen as important, albeit different constructs of translingual practice of relevance both for language use in wider society (social practice) and for language learning in the classroom (pedagogic practice).
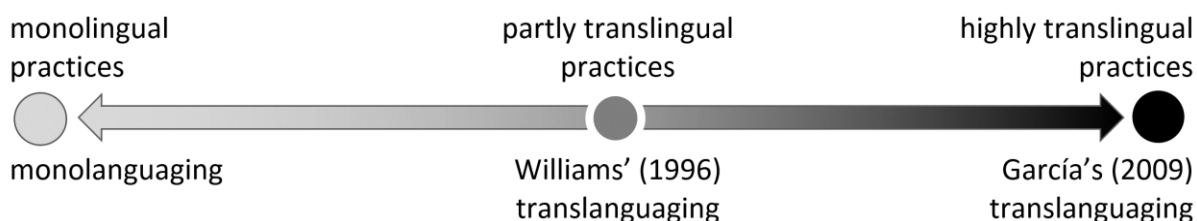

FIGURE 2
The translingual continuum.

An exploratory study of 'EFL' learners in the UK

In order to gain an initial understanding of the relevance of translingual practices for adult English language learners from multiple countries worldwide, I conducted an exploratory study into the self-identified language use profiles of adult language learners studying at centres within a medium-sized chain of private language schools in the UK. Teachers were requested to show participating learners[2] a clinal chart describing three potential future language use profiles illustrated with six examples (two each) of monolingual (Profile 1), partly translingual (Profile 2), and highly translingual (Profile 3) users (these terms were avoided) as shown in Appendix 1. After reading through the examples with learners, teachers elicited which of the profiles most closely matched each of their learner's perceived future language use profile. Learners were able to select one of the three profiles, or an intermediate position comprising aspects of two adjacent profiles (1/2 and 2/3 in Figure 4 below). Teachers were asked to take brief notes on respondents, including nationality, reasons for learning and any other relevant details. The three profiles and six examples were presented using simple, non-academic terminology.

Numerical data was received from 116 learners, on full-time General English, Exam English and ESP courses. Individual learner profiles were received from 70 of these and analysed to determine if any commonly shared features (such as reasons for learning English, career or study paths, role of English at work, etc.) could be identified among the learners in each of the three profiles. While data on age or proficiency level were not collected individually, all were adults (16+) ranging from A2 to C1 levels. 24 nationalities were represented, from Asia (52% of respondents), Europe (38%) and South America (10%) with all but one respondent from countries where English is a foreign language without official status. No nationality constituted over 12% of respondents, with Saudi Arabia (12%) and China (11%) the highest (see: Figure 3).
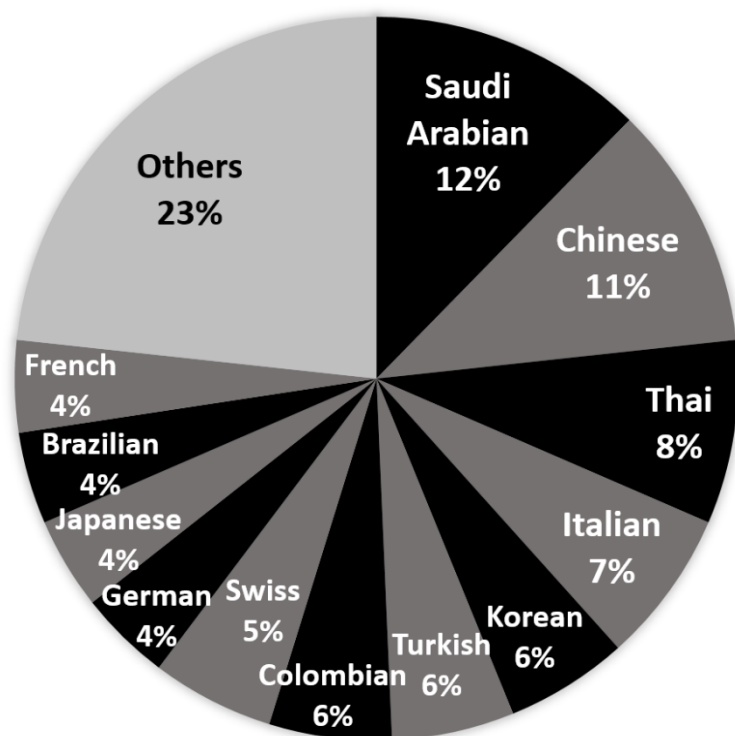
FIGURE 3
Nationalities of participating learners.

The numerical data indicates that only a minority of respondents (19.8%) perceived that they would be using English predominately monolingually in the future, and a similar number (20.7%) perceived that their future language use profile would be highly translingual. Almost half the respondents (47.4%) perceived that they would be using English sometimes largely monolingually, and sometimes more translingually (see: Figure 4). When taken together, the data indicates that the majority (c.76%) of respondents perceive a need for translingual practices in the future.

FIGURE 4
The self-identified future language use profiles of 116 adult learners studying in a private UK-based ELT organisation.

When the varied individual respondent profiles were analysed, certain learner types began to emerge from the data within each of the three profile types (see: Table 1). For example, Profile 1 included a number of learners who were planning to continue their education in a (perceived) monolingual UK context, before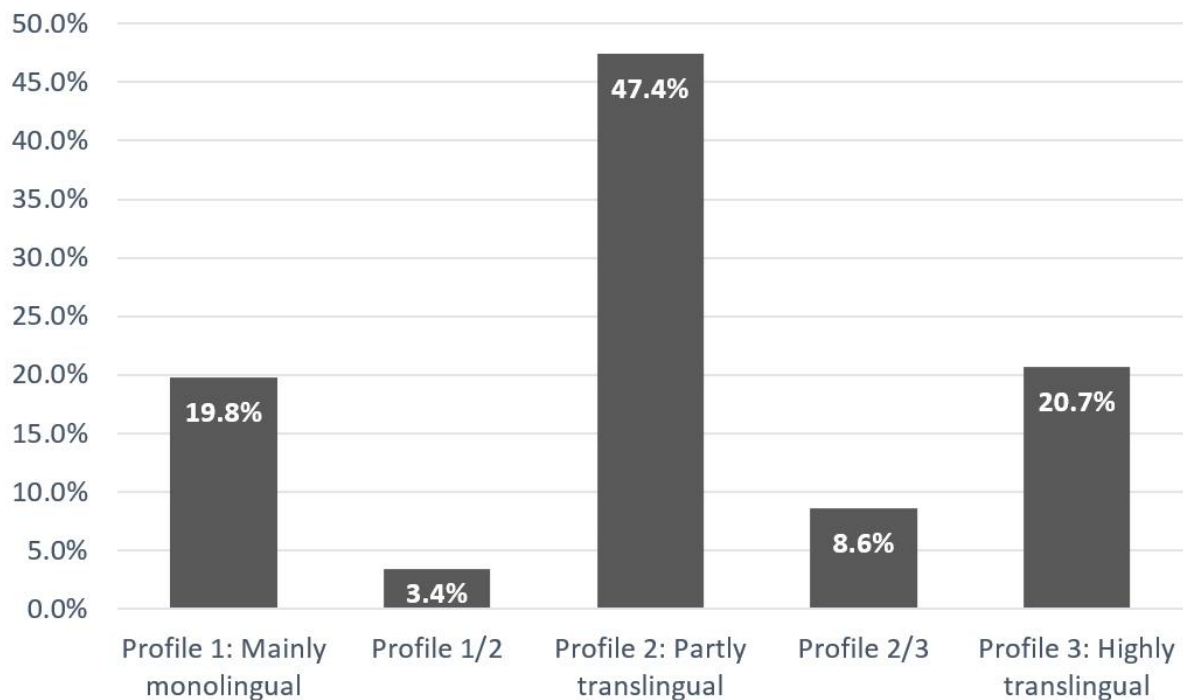 returning to their home country to work in a largely monolingual environment as well as a smaller number of immigrants expecting to integrate into local UK communities. Profile 2 often included learners who perceived that for their further education they would likely be using English in close conjunction with prior languages, and a smaller number of learners who perceived that their future work demands would require a combination of monolingual and translingual practices. Profile 3 also included learners who anticipated a need for translingual practices in future work contexts, such as those working in their home country for multinational employers with English language policies, or those based overseas who need to liaise with individuals and organisations in their home country. Learners who came from and planned to return to highly translingual communities (for example, Hong Kong, Switzerland) also tended to categorise themselves under Profile 3 or 2/3. A minority of learners who were less sure about their future careers preferred to hedge their profile as contingent on future study or career decisions (see: Table 1).

	Name	Nationality	Notes
Profile 1	Ahmed	Saudi Arabian	Currently learning academic English and planning to compete a Master's degree in the UK, and then return to his home country.
	Balasz	Hungarian	UK resident, planning to remain in the UK and to integrate into a local community in a small town.
Profile 2	Carolina	Colombian	Planning to continue her higher education in Colombia predominantly in Spanish, but with some subjects being taught in English. She will be expected to read, write, listen, speak and conduct some research in English alongside other Spanish speakers.
	Daan	Thai	Intends to work in Thailand in the tourist industry, probably as a guide. This will entail switching quickly between Thai and English while showing foreign tourists around his country.
Profile 3	Eun-young	Korea	Expects to use English in close conjunction with Korean, hoping to work in either a global corporation in Korea or in an English-speaking country dealing with Korean customers.
	Francis	Hong Kong	English is widespread and integrated with Cantonese in his home community, to which he plans to return after his studies.
Contingent profile	Gertrude	Swiss	Considering taking a job in London for a company with head offices in Switzerland. Perceives she will fall into Profile 3 if she takes the job, and Profile 2 if not, using less English in a predominantly Swiss-German-speaking environment.

TABLE 1
Example learners who self-identified within the three future language use profiles.
Note: Pseudonyms used throughout.

While the findings are interesting, it is important to acknowledge significant limitations to this exploratory study as follows: Firstly, given the difficulty for any language learner of predicting their future language use profile accurately, the results should not be taken as representative of current or future language use, only perceptions of the latter. Secondly, given the potential variability in how the survey was administered, and factors such as learners' levels of English and their interpretation of the description of the three profiles and the examples given, it is possible that some learners may have

misunderstood the constructs, and a small number of responses (<5%), where described profiles did not appear to match the profile type, confirm this limitation. Thus, the quantitative data should be considered as indicative, and the profiles provided as examples of potential, rather than salient, profile types. Nonetheless, it indicates that many learners often currently categorised as 'EFL students'[3] envisage the need to use English translingually in the future.

A vision of translingual competence

In contrast to established notions of communicative competence promoted in language teaching, which tend to be premised on an assumed monolingual target language community (for example, Canale 1983), more recent descriptions of translingual competence recognise that, when appropriate, code choice may be negotiable and fluid. These include Canagarajah's (op.cit.) *performative competence*, a social, practice-based competence in which rules and terms of engagement are co-constructed and social values gain prominence, and García's (op.cit.) *dynamic bilingualism*, within which linguistic resources from a single, integrated system are deployed appropriately, "adjusting to the multilingual multimodal terrain of the communicative act" (op.cit.: 144). Considering the increasingly multilingual and multimodal practices especially prevalent in online and virtual communities, for such learners it may be appropriate to also integrate a notion of 'semiotic competence' within constructs of translingual competence.

It should be noted that this perceived translingual future will not exclude monolanguaging (for example, using only 'English'), which will continue to be an important and valued practice in the future education and work contexts of most users of English, as indicated by many of the respondents above. The ability to conform more closely to the entrenched norms of (English) monolingual communities will be relevant when interacting within such communities and with individuals whose expectations are conditioned by these communities. Thus, developing this ability to *monolanguage* (as a verb) is likely to be a continuing need (and challenge, given the frequent lack of tolerance for non-standard code use) for many EFL learners, along with the ability to move flexibly along the translingual continuum depending on context and interlocutor(s).

Raising awareness of translingual practices through 'EFL' instruction

It follows from the above that both the content and the processes of instruction for learners traditionally deemed to be learning 'English as a foreign language' in both *mixed-L1* and *shared-L1 classrooms* might usefully be modified to prepare them for future translingual environments. They will likely benefit from awareness-raising activities and critical discussions in which they consider issues of context, appropriacy and efficacy of communication across environments ranging from wholly monolingual to highly translingual, thereby strengthening their translingual competence.

One example activity that is likely to be useful in mixed-L1 classrooms is to ask learners to access online information in their L1 (e.g. news articles) and share this with classmates through the L2 (here: English), thereby developing learners' abilities to work with text and dialogue in multiple languages simultaneously in a way that replicates Williams' (op.cit.) translanguaging closely, and is also likely to happen frequently in future translingual work and study environments. Learners may provide summaries of news stories of interest, compare how a single story is reported in different countries or conduct research drawing on multiple linguistic resources to present to classmates.

Another example activity involves presenting learners with examples of translingual texts involving English, and to encourage discussion and interpretation of these texts. This may be of particular use in shared-L1 classes, where learners can develop their understanding of how two or more specific languages are integrated in a given text. As an example, Figure 5 shows an extract from a highly translingual conversation (English and Bahasa Melayu) carried out on an instant messaging app between Malaysian English language teachers enrolled on a combined language learning and methodology course. After contributions were anonymised, the same teachers were shown this and similar extracts (see: Figure 1), and invited to discuss and rationalise choice of linguistic and other semiotic resources (for example, emojis) in the conversation extracts. After initial surprise and sometimes disdain towards their own naturally translingual practices, the learners in this instance were quickly able to recognise and to identify positively with their own ability to appropriate a wide range of resources effectively in their conversations. They spontaneously decided to evaluate their contributions in order to distinguish between more and less effective translanguaging, depending on intent and intended interlocutor.
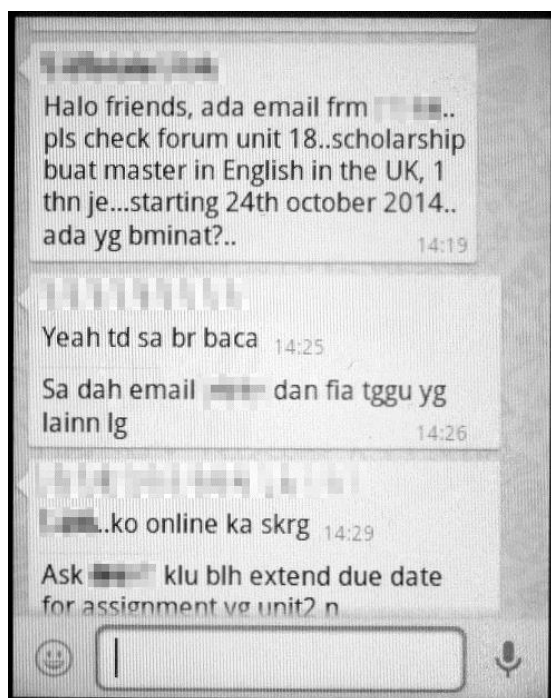

FIGURE 5
Translingual instant messaging conversation between Malaysian teachers.
Note: personal data has been pixelated.

Younger learners, both in primary/secondary education and in private or extra-curricular classes can also benefit from more L1-inclusive practices involving translanguaging. As well as more established uses of L1 (including translation, contrastive analysis, L1 explanations of complex grammar), such classrooms can draw on the extensive body of research and resources in bilingual education to support the development of learners' thinking skills, sense of identity and heritage. Such activities may include the production of bilingual stories or reports, interviewing community or family members in L1 for class presentations in English, or providing access to L1 versions of core English texts on national curricula. Celic and Seltzer (2011) provide multiple suggestions for such translingual activities, both for teachers who do and do not share their learners' L1.

Reimagining EFL classrooms as translingual environments

Given that the vast majority of English language learning around the world takes place in primary and secondary classrooms where learners often share significant prior linguistic, schematic and cultural resources (here simplified to 'L1'), a significantly more far-reaching (and potentially controversial) implication of the above findings would be to suggest that the EFL classroom could itself become (or become accepted as) a translingual environment, where translanguaging is recognised as an authentic, rather than deviant, practice of the classroom community.

Within such a community, rather than viewing L1 simply as a resource for language learning, it would be possible to "[turn] the classroom into a site for translingual socialization" (Canagarajah op.cit.: 184). Learners could be encouraged to discuss meanings or refer to practices, relationships, and events originating in L1, L2 or translingual communities. These micro-alternations are likely to reflect translingual practices in wider (especially online and 'virtual') communities and thereby facilitate the gradual emergence of translingual competence. Giving learners agency over choice of linguistic resources could become an important factor in allowing this competence to emerge naturally within the classroom community, as described in research by Liebscher and Dailey–O'Cain (2005).

This vision is consistent with both Pennycook's (op.cit.) and García's (op.cit.) definitions of translingualism and translanguaging respectively, with learners "accessing different linguistic features … to maximise communicative potential" (García, op.cit.: 140). Interestingly, it is also consistent with Widdowson's definition of authenticity in language use, which he notes is only possible when language use is "localised within a particular discourse community" (1998: 711). For a community of individuals trying to understand and learn a new language together through the use of shared resources, any activity that facilitates such understanding (such as translanguaging/translation) meets Widdowson's criterion for authenticity. As Canagarajah puts it: "The pedagogical domain is itself a site of complex translingual practices and generates useful insights into communicative practices" (op.cit.: 12).

Translingual teachers for translingual learning

Having established both the potential benefits of developing translingual competence for the learners in this study, and the related benefits of viewing the classroom as a translingual community for (at least some) EFL learners, the necessity for the teacher to also be translingual in such contexts becomes self-evident. Such a teacher is able to understand, interpret, scaffold and challenge their learners' choice of linguistic resources appropriately. Importantly, s/he is also able to model effective translingual and monolingual practices across the translingual continuum. A key advantage to this vision of a translingual teacher is that it avoids the problematic native/non-native speaker dichotomy (for example, Medgyes 1994), replacing it with a distinction that recognises the importance of teacher understanding of the learners' *languaculture* (Agar 1994). While monolinguals would not make appropriate translingual teachers (in agreement with Butzkamm and Caldwell's *bilingual teacher*; op.cit.), native speakers of both L1 and L2 (here English) can potentially be effective translingual teachers, providing they have sufficient translingual competence to draw appropriately on resources from both languages. Within the classroom, such translingual competence might be defined pedagogically, focusing on a teacher's ability to choose appropriately from L1 and L2 resources, dependent on, for example, the level, age and needs of the learners, and the aims of the course. Equally, by recognising the importance of the prior linguistic resources of non-native speaker teachers, translingualism is potentially able to move beyond the native speaker fallacy that has for decades disadvantaged the majority of language teachers worldwide (Phillipson 1992).

A challenging conclusion

In this article I have discussed the possible positive implications of viewing EFL learners as translinguals, their classrooms as translingual communities, and their teachers as translingual practitioners. Despite the potential for such a vision to empower those involved when compared with monolingual alternatives, I would like to finish by acknowledging some of the challenges and counterarguments involved when theorising about, and advocating for, more translingual practices in language pedagogy.

Firstly, any attempt to deconstruct traditionally accepted understandings of the nature and role of 'language' puts strain on use of any linguistic terminology (see: Jørgensen, Karrebæk, Madsen and Møller 2011). Various terms used above, such as 'L1/L2', '(non-)native-speaker', etc. necessarily imply the discrete-systems approach that the position adopted herein attempts to reject.

Secondly, and shared with theorisations on Lingua Franca English, with which translanguaging is sometimes associated (Pennycook op.cit.), questions of models, norms, and how performance is assessed need to be addressed before curricula and syllabi can promulgate more translingual perspectives. These tie in closely with envisaged goals and outcomes, a topic addressed recently by Leung and Scarino (2016: 92), who note that "goals for language learning should … be framed within an integrated view of the development of the holistic linguistic repertoire of learners…". Despite the proliferation of translingual communities around the world, such a view is supported by few, if any, education systems worldwide – a sociopolitical challenge, that García

(op.cit.) argues, stems from a government need to regulate how language is used in schools.

Finally, even if translingual competence is the intended goal, it could be argued that many language learners manage to develop a level of translingual competence without it ever being taught intentionally in the classroom. In other words, it is a skill that evolves naturally once monolingual competence in the L2 has developed. That may be so, yet further exploration of this important question is required before we can make such an assumption. Similar arguments were levelled at aspects of communicative language teaching, such as the need to distinguish between *use* and *usage* or the need to teach communication strategies:

> ...in general there is not the least need to teach our students 'the interpretive and expressive strategies of making sense amid a negotiable reality', even assuming that we were able to define what this involves. (Swan 1985: 9)

Over 30 years have passed since Swan argued this point. In the current era of global and lingua franca English(es), and near-instantaneous technology-mediated multimodal communication, this negotiable reality is rapidly complexifying. And while we may today be even less able to define exactly what it is, helping learners to notice and interpret (some of) its complexities, and to interact both with them and even in spite of them, is becoming an increasingly important part of our role as language teachers.

Notes

1 I use these terms in place of the traditional terms 'multilingual classroom' and 'monolingual classroom' respectively, given that every language classroom is by definition multilingual. L1 here refers to the prior *languacultural* (Agar 1994) resources of the learning community (the class), rather than the learners.
2 Learners were first informed of the purpose of the study, and that participation was optional and anonymous.
3 compared with ESL (US)/ESOL (UK).

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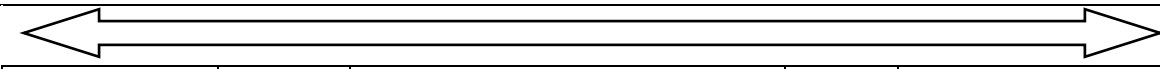
The author

Jason Anderson is a teacher, teacher educator, educational consultant, and award-winning author of books for language teachers. He has taught languages, trained teachers, and developed materials to support teachers in primary, secondary, and tertiary contexts, both pre-service and in-service, in numerous countries across Africa, Asia and Europe. He has worked for national ministries of education, private organisations and development partners including UNICEF, the British Council, and VSO. His interests include pre-service and in-service teacher education, multilingualism in language teaching, sociocultural theory and issues of appropriacy of methodology and social context, especially in low-income countries.

Email: jasonanderson1@gmail.com

Appendix 1: Survey tool

The future language use profiles of my learners

Interview the students in one of your classes to find out about how they expect to use English in the future in relation to other languages. Categorise each student according to the profiles provided. Some learners may fit neatly into one profile, others may be a combination: 1/2 or 2/3. For students who are not sure, get them to make a 'best guess', thinking about their most likely situation. Use the bottom row to record your findings.

	Profile 1	1/2	Profile 2	2/3	Profile 3
Description	I expect to use English in isolation from other languages.		I expect to communicate sometimes only in English and sometimes using English in close conjunction with my first language (or other languages).		I expect to use English in close conjunction with my first language (or other languages) most of the time. This may include not only speaking and writing, but also listening and reading.
Examples	1. An Eritrean refugee needing to integrate into a monolingual community in the UK. 2. A Japanese tourist who needs English only to travel on holiday.		1. A Spanish businesswoman who sometimes communicates monolingually with UK/American clients, and sometimes uses Spanish and English together when discussing English documents with Spanish colleagues or sending an email in English using information referenced in Spanish. 2. A Moroccan university student, studying in Arabic, but expected to research topics and questions using English and French resources on the internet. He regularly reads English and French, but discusses these, translates from them and writes about them mainly in Arabic.		1. An Indian student living in New Delhi, where Hindi, English and other languages are widespread in her community; at home, at study and in between. 2. A Chinese travel agent living and working in London, dealing mainly with Chinese clients but in an office where English is the most dominant language.
My students					