Left Foot on Traditional Literacy, and Right, on Transliteracy

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ABSTRACT

Recently, Cosmopolitan English and Transliteracy won the 2018 Research Impact Award from the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), the largest international organization that specializes in the teaching and studies of composition. This recognition seems to signal a turn to transliteracy education, i.e., English writing education should embrace a vision and actual pedagogical practices of cultivating citizens of the world who use English ethically. The purposes of this article are threefold: to define transliteracy, to provide illustrative studies, and to propose its application in foreign language contexts. The author suggests that in designing innovative programs sensitive to various English styles teachers need to strike a balance between traditional literacy and transliteracy. New ways of implementing such literacies in some alternate space, as mediated by modern communication technologies, especially the Internet, are provided.

KEYWORDS

Accent, Cosmopolitan English, English, Identity, Literacies, Styles, Voice

INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, the renowned applied linguist Claire Kramsch (2014, p. 296) wrote about a new challenge faced by teachers of language in the 21st century:

There has never been a time when language teaching and learning has been more interactive and more imaginative than today…and yet there has never been a greater tension between what is taught in the classroom and what the students will need in the real world once they have left the classroom.

That tension still exists today, be it in face-to-face encounters or modern communication technologies-mediated interactions. Very possibly, our students will run into people who use different Englishes or English with diverse local features. Strict applications of grammar rules may not help much in such interactions.

However, this does not have to mean that writing teachers should give up trying, nor should they forsake the wisdom from all conventional teaching practices. Rather, the challenge calls for innovative pedagogical designs that integrate both highly valued literacy practices and marginalized ones to help our learners prosper in negotiating different ways of using English. For instance, language
teachers can integrate a transliteracy perspective. If properly implemented, it can help our learners to appreciate, appropriate and create texts that promote greater understandings of self and other than traditional literacy alone. This article will start with a review of the transliteracy approach based on Xiaoye You’s (2016) award-winning book *Cosmopolitan English & Transliteracy*. It will then briefly discuss selected examples from his book. Last, potential applications of this approach are suggested to enliven today’s writing classrooms at both tertiary and secondary levels, with concluding remarks that we should strike a balance between promoting transliteracy and conventionalized literacy. It is hoped that this article will initiate dialogues on the subject and facilitate the creation of collaborative projects that may best serve our learners today.

**BACKGROUND**

Transliteracy is a pedagogical response to the realities of emergent communities and emergent ways of using English within and between these communities. In You’s own words:

*A cosmopolitan orientation suggests that English users will interact with diverse dialects and languages in addition to Standard English. Furthermore, they will encounter diverse cultural discourses and, through deep engagement with them, potentially form affinities with the communities and groups behind these discourses. The cosmopolitan orientation demands that we seek to cultivate in English users the ability to engage with these cultural discourses through reading and writing using Standard English, other CE styles, other languages, and other semiotic resources. This ability necessarily requires that English users negotiate across language differences and “consciously and effectively move back and forth between as well as in and out...communities they belong to or will belong to” (Guerra, 1997, p. 258). I call this ability and its enactment transliteracy. (p. 20)*

Therefore, transliteracy is You’s reality check of what learners today are facing and what writing teachers should do accordingly. To fully appreciate a transliteracy approach, it is important to consider some basic questions concerning language learners all over the world. It is also important for language teachers and learners alike to answer these questions. The following manifestations, partly drawing on my own experience, but not without support of literature, are provided for reference:

1. Can language learners, especially after they grow up, speak with native-like accents exactly like native speakers do? No, or at least, it is close to impossible, even though motivated learners may achieve an admirable level of “passing for a native speaker” in certain domains (e.g., Piller, 2002). For many, it is more likely to always speak with their own accents, which mark their places of origin and travel;
2. Should language learners be evaluated solely based on their non-native like accents or use of Non-Standard English? Definitely not. Many scholars (e.g., Canagarajah, 2006; Kramsch, 2009) have challenged such a deficit view of language learners, advocating a more accepting alternative view of learners, and yet in reality, non-native like accents often trigger a train of negative reactions;
3. Can language learners develop native-like writing competency, i.e., with their English writing exactly the same as native speakers of English? No and yes. No, because often, language learners write in distinct ways, very much like speaking with their own accents, which mark their non-native speaker status as well as their evolving, sometimes conflicting, relationships with diverse languages and cultures (Li, 2007). Yes, because Standardized Written English can be acquired by both native and non-native speakers. It takes both groups much time, practice and socialization to become proficient in this special code;
4. Can language learners communicate worthy contents despite their non-native-like accents or ways of writing? Definitely. This is shown in works by non-western creative writers such as Joseph