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Bridging across languages and cultures in everyday lives: An expanding role for critical intercultural communication

Melinda Dooly and Claudia Vallejo

*Department of Language & Literature Education and Social Science Education,
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain*

In this age of communication revolution and intense globalization, there is a growing interest and expectation that individuals be familiar, comfortable and willing to engage in multicultural, international contexts. News of ‘global citizen week’ and ‘global citizen festival’; public and academic debates regarding ‘globalization’ and an increasing number of media outlets (web pages, twitter accounts, etc.) aimed at ‘global citizens’ are just a few indicators of a growing sense of shared responsibility – locally and globally – for occurrences around the planet. There seems to be an emergent consensus that political, socioeconomic and environmental realities impact multiple levels worldwide and therefore should be engaged from different viewpoints: not just by nation-states but also by individuals, communities, civil organizations, and institutions and transnational networks.

Subsequently, it has become more commonplace to hear of the need to educate intercultural, ‘global citizens’ in order to nurture respect for all and build a sense of belonging to a common humanity (cf. UNESCO Global Citizenship Education). However, this notion of global citizenship can bring to mind a vague, ‘culturally-bland’, non-political world-state which is both unrealistic (Parekh, 2003) and difficult – if not impossible – to critique. As Pais and Costa (2017) argue, perceptions of global citizenship often encompass parallel but conflicting discourses that, on the one hand promote ‘ethical values, social responsibility and active citizenry’ (p. 1) and on the other, implicitly endorse neo-liberal tenets of individual and corporate investment and gains.

From an educational outlook, increased critical intercultural education has been proposed as a way to move forward (cf. Crosbie, 2014; Ahn, 2015) in an ever more connected world.

Given that the unprecedented ubiquity of new media has made interpersonal and mediated channels of intercultural communication inseparable (see Chen, 2012; Chen & Zhang, 2010; Cheong, Martin, & Macfayden, 2012; Shuter, 2011), and that the marks and imprints of macro-level contexts and structural forces on human interactions across cultures are indelible, it behooves the intercultural communication field to direct renewed attention to contemporary studies in global and development communication. (Asante, Miike, & Yin, 2014, p. 3)

Along these lines, some theorists (cf. Andreotti, 2014, 2016; Ladegaard & Jenks, 2015; Yep, 2014) have begun questioning whether intercultural education programmes actually interrogate assumptions and implications/limitations of ‘Universalism’ and hegemonic definitions of culture, power and history. Still, as ‘hypermobility leads to unprecedented encounters between people from different countries, while, on the other, forms of rejection of and attacks on the “Other” increase on a daily basis’ (Dervin & Liddicoat, 2013, p. 1), there is an evident need for some sort of awareness and understanding, both locally and globally. This need is also enhanced by the tendency of globalization to resignify the local – and vice versa – in what Delanty (2006) has described as critical cosmopolitanism, concerning ‘the multiple ways the local is redefined as a result of interaction with the global’ (p. 36).

These notions of local and global awareness are commonly bundled into the very broad term of ‘Intercultural Competence’ (IC). Inevitably, defining IC is problematic, as is witnessed by the many different terms that have been used in academic discourse: ‘multiculturalism’, ‘cross-cultural adaptation’, ‘intercultural sensitivity’, ‘cross-cultural awareness’, ‘cultural intelligence’, ‘global citizenship’ and ‘global competences’, to name a few examples (cf. Fantini, 2009, p. 457). Even if one can get past the point that simply defining IC is problematic, there is the possible pitfall of conceptualizing interculturality as something fixed or static (cf. Finch & Nynäs, 2011; O’Regan & MacDonald, 2007).

Still, as it has already been pointed out above, it is difficult to deny that we live in a world where IC is increasingly valued (no matter how it is defined). In this age of communication transformation and penetrating globalization, languages and cultures come into contact constantly – driven by conflicts, migration, media, transnational

capitalism and many other factors. Subsequently more and more individuals find themselves in the role of mediating between diverse languages and cultures in their daily lives: individuals working as interpreters, shopkeepers, teachers, workers in multinational companies or NGOs; as well as young, multilingual children and youth acting as linguistic and cultural mediators between their family and other members of society – often known as ‘language brokers’. More recent studies see language brokers as actors who go beyond ‘translating’ between languages or transmitting information. As Yanaprasart (2017) puts it, they ‘facilitate communication between two linguistically and/or culturally different parties in a new, creative, dynamic “third place” (Kramsch, 1993)’.

It is precisely this nebulous space where individuals cross and reshape boundaries on a daily basis that is the focus of this special issue of *Language and Intercultural Communication*. The articles in this issue discuss transformative practices involving social activities and interaction that push beyond ‘fixed’ and separate systems; practices that take place in the interstices of languages and cultures where new meanings and new understandings often emerge. Indeed, the concepts of borders and boundaries, metaphorical or real, emerge in all the works of this volume. The authors herein heed Ladegaard and Jenks' (2015) advice that ‘only by looking at cultural and linguistic practices in people’s lives as they work, talk, socialise and go about their daily business do we get an insight into their orientations and dispositions in a globalised world’ (p. 1).

In their articles, the authors confront the thorny issue of delineating what is meant by ‘crossing bridges’, ‘building bridges’ and also ‘bridging’ as social practices. For instance, how can we discuss ideas of borders and boundaries without essentializing notions of cultures or languages? In her article, Yanaprasart underscores the fluidity of boundaries or borders, employing the term ‘boundary spanner’ in reference to individuals who are perceived by others as facilitators of significant interactions between different language speakers. In her study, she focuses on these ‘boundary spanners’ – individuals disposed to move out of their comfort zones to accommodate others – and willing to engage in what Yanaprasart calls ‘solidarity’ strategies. Invoking Turner’s (1967) term of the multilingual ‘liminal personae’, the author explores the perceptions of multilingual individuals working in multinational

companies and how they regard their own lingual ‘boundary spanning’. Focusing on language as a social practice, the study approaches the subjects’ perceptions of multilingualism through a lens of fluid language boundaries. This is a notion that is becoming more and more prevalent in academic and sociopolitical discussions concerning plurilingualism – often referred to as ‘translanguaging’ (cf. Canagarajah, 2013; García, 2009; García & Li, 2014).

Along similar lines, Callaghan, Moore and Simpson explore the transgression of cultural and linguistic boundaries through the lens of translanguaging (Blackledge & Creese, 2017; García & Li, 2014; Gorter & Cenoz, 2015; Li, 2011). Their study, set within the context of basketball training sessions with individuals from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, considers how the players not only creatively transform multiple language-communicative modes but also break down borders of stigmatized social disorderliness typically associated with an inner-city in the United Kingdom. Drawing on data from an ethnographic study, the authors outline the transformative processes of translanguaging, as outlined by Li Wei and Zhu Hua (2013):

The transnational processes in which people from different national, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds move across their traditional group boundaries to get into close contact with each other are also transforming the communicative environment and mode in late modernity. Multilingualism plays an essential role in the interchanges between individuals of different origins and makes it possible for people who may not share cultural assumptions or values to (re)negotiate their relations and identities. (p. 518)

Bradley, Moore, Simpson and Atkinson also employ translanguaging as an approach that includes ‘complex semiotic (plurilingual) landscapes’. Their article describes a research-based programme that supported young people’s exploration into ethnographic investigation of multilingual practices through art. Through the creation of collages, the young artist/researchers were encouraged to explore their own notions of ‘home’ by interrogating the way in which the landscapes around them generate meaning through linguistic and visual discourse and spatial practices (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010) while fostering critical analysis of the communities in which they

live and the discursive identities that they and others co-create. The workshops aimed to make the young participants aware that:

Identity is to a large extent a discursive phenomenon, as representations of self and other are co-constructed through language and other semiotic resources. It is also a material phenomenon in being enacted in time and space, in real settings (...) and as a consequence of actual events: individuals do not take up identities context free. It involves acts of embodiment as individuals perform and display their identities (...). Individuals, however, do not enter these subjectivities on equal terms. Apart from inter-individual differences in capabilities, they vary in terms of their social position and concomitant access to linguistic, cultural, economic and other resources – social and material – that grant them different degrees of recognition. (Zotzmann & O'Regan, 2016, p. 114)

Bradley et al.'s text shows how the workshop encourages the young artists to interrogate the inequality of access to such resources as they discursively and semiotically co-construct their identities in the gaps and at the edges of the lingual, spatial and visual boundaries of their community. As Helm and Dabre (2017) express it, these youth are shown ways to stand up for social justice and 'to challenge exclusionary discourses and practices, to construct shared knowledge and fight for the rights of all'.

In a similar vein, Chaplin considers how refugees in a programme of creative writing co-construct – and challenge dominant discourse – via performativity that employs diverse semiotic resources. The article underscores how the process of creative writing is an exceedingly complex, yet personal experience; and that this complexity is amplified when the writing process is multilingual. Highlighting the way in which multilingual authors traverse the production of creative texts and deploy their rich linguistic and cultural resources, Chaplin argues that this complexity is magnified when writers have undergone traumatic migration, as their language choice is particularly imbued with emotional and political connotations.

In the following article in this special issue, Brownlie contemplates 'cultural and linguistic practices in people's lives' (Ladegaard & Jenks, 2015, p. 1) in her study on conflict resolution practice in two settings: family and workplace mediation sessions.

Similar to Callaghan et al., Brownlie pays particular attention to the creative and transformative ways in which the participants in the sessions co-construct a local 'small culture' (referring to Holliday's (1999) proposed notion of emergent, dynamic and cohesive social groups at different levels of social infrastructure).

Brownlie's article highlights the complexity and continually shifting 'play of various cultural categories and their attributed features, practices and activities' as they are deployed by the participants in their interactions. Brownlie's article brings to mind yet another issue often associated with 'borders': the conflictive stance between agency and structure in discussions of identity (cf. Block, 2013). In his review of past research published in *Language and Intercultural Communication*, Block proposes that 'there is a tendency to grant much more weight to agency than to structure in the making sense of how individuals make their way through social worlds' (Block, 2013, p. 6). In Brownlie's study, the different structures (workplace and university mediation sessions) implicitly play a role in the intersubjectivity of the participants' mediation practices, while at the same time their agentivity in 'discursive ascription of identity categories' also comes into play. Although Brownlie does not attempt to resolve this duality of 'either/or thinking' in reference to the 'structure/agency dynamic' (Block, 2013, p. 17), her text, like others in this issue, once more bring this debate to the fore.

The last two research articles in this volume tackle head-on questions arising from the teaching of IC. Parks delves into the implications for students' development of IC at four universities where she has identified a gap between the teaching of language and content in Modern Language degrees. Using questionnaires and follow-up interviews of students and faculty members at the universities, Parks contemplates whether or not their curriculum fosters a critical perspective, in particular when language learners find themselves in an unfamiliar 'third place' (Kramsch, 1993) and where they must 'disassociate themselves' from the familiar in order to adequately and critically reflect on 'otherness' (and, one assumes, also on 'own-ness'). Parks argues that previous, well-known models of IC and Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) should be expanded to take into account two key competences that emerged from the data: awareness of otherness within self (defined as the ability to recognize how one's 'own beliefs, behaviours and discourse are comparably culturally marked')

and communicative criticality, which entails being able to understand and accept the process of thinking and experiencing as afforded – and limited – by the different linguistic resources of the speaker (e.g. first, second or foreign languages). As with the other articles in this special issue, the flux of borders between languages and cultures are key to the study.

Zhou and Pilcher also approach the term of Intercultural Competence (IC) with emphasis on the liminal aspects of intercultural awareness and understanding. Taking a qualitative look at students' reflective essays during a course aimed at teaching IC, the authors find that 'multiplicity, intersectionality and performativity of identities' emerges and that the students vacillate between largely essentialist notions of culture (moments of 'falling back') and more complex, non-essentialist understanding of intersubjective constructions of culture. Zhou and Pilcher argue that IC educators should not necessarily rebuff essentialist reflections of culture as 'simplistic', rather it must be acknowledged that these conceptualizations often exist 'symbiotically' with the complex phenomena that constitute the plurality of culture(s), both individually and as a group. Approaching IC education from this perspective necessitates acknowledging the complexity of intercultural situations (Dervin, 2016) as well as affording space for the students to experience discomfort and perhaps even failure. The authors stress the process of critical reflection upon these – at times painful and difficult – experiences as key for the development of IC.

We finish the issue with an innovative contribution to the pedagogical forum written by Helm and Dabre. Their article describes the implementation of English Languaging Workshops run in a small city in the north-east of Italy. Similar to Chaplin's study and context, this article outlines how these workshops engaged refugees and activist organizations in 'translanguaging conversations'. The authors highlight the way in which these practices helped raise cross-linguistic and cross-cultural awareness of all the participants – refugees and non-refugees alike – while at the same time, served to 'subvert the power dynamics whereby language learners, refugees and migrants are positioned as defective or ineffective communicators of a target language'.

This brings to mind issues related to 'intercultural ethics', wherein 'intercultural communication should never be accepted as giving privileged warrant for any type of

cultural practice, but should always be rigorously questioned, problematised and deconstructed' (MacDonald & O'Regan, 2013, p. 1016). Helm and Dabre also demonstrate how 'classifications of self and other are largely influenced by discourses about social groups that are produced and re-produced at different levels of society and in different social spheres' (Zotzmann & O'Regan, 2016, p. 114). However, as this last text – as well as other articles in this special issue – demonstrate, these classifications can be challenged and transformed. Drawing upon Pratt's (1991) concept of engineered 'contact zones' in reference 'to social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power' (p. 34), Helm and Dabre set out a pedagogical framework that integrates a 'range of translanguaging strategies' so that the participants of the workshop might share equitatively – through the use of a variety of linguistic and semiotic resources – in discussions of social inequalities and injustices that are pertinent to their own lives.

Thus we return full circle to the crux of this special issue, aiming to push forward the academic debate circling around interculturality, current global forces and the potential for social transformation. In his keynote talk at IALIC 2016, John O'Regan mentioned the wide 'range of new neologisms for describing the age in which we live' (2016), citing abundant terminology currently found in academic discourse (e.g. 'transmodality', 'transtextuality', 'transsignification', 'transcultural flows', 'transculturality', 'translanguaging', 'transculturizing', 'polylanguaging', 'poly-lingual-languaging', 'transnationalism', 'translingual practices', 'codemeshing', 'metrolingualism', 'assemblages' and 'translinguistic landscapes'). O'Regan contends that the concept of intercultural communication might appear to be outdated and overtaken by the times and yet, at the same time essentialisms, particularly in respect to culture and identity, still persist.

There does appear to be a rather uneasy balance when one tries to carry out research and practice centred around borders, possibly leading to 'performative contradictions, where interculturalists are projected simultaneously into positions of cultural relativism on the one hand and ideological totalism on the other' (O'Regan & MacDonald, 2007, p. 267). Perhaps, as Zhou and Pilcher have pointed out in their study, there may be times when we resort to essentialism, but arguably intercultural

communication comprises a responsibility to push beyond reductivism towards an understanding and acceptance of the instability of multiple selves and multiple others, living together in a world which is at once both local and global. It is precisely this uncertainty, this vagueness, that contributes to the challenges of ‘bridging’ – or reaching across – ever-changing roles and scenarios in everyday lives that we believe makes intercultural communication studies vibrant and relevant and that they should continue to be central for rich debate and research now and in the future.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Melinda Dooly holds a Serra Hünter fellowship as researcher and senior lecturer in the Departament de Didàctica de la Llengua i la Literatura i de les Ciències Socials (Department of Language and Literature Education and Social Science Education) Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) where she teaches English as a Foreign Language Methodology (TEFL) and research methods courses, at both undergraduate and graduate levels. She is lead researcher of the Research Group on Interaction and Plurilingual Education ‘GREIP’ at the UAB. She has taught in different countries worldwide, including an honorary lectureship at the Institute of Education University College London. Her research interests are technology-enhanced project-based language teaching and learning and intercultural communication.

Claudia Vallejo Rubinstein is a doctoral candidate, associate professor and researcher in the Departament de Didàctica de la Llengua i la Literatura i de les Ciències Socials (Department of Language and Literature Education and Social Science Education) – Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. She is also research assistant of the Research Group on Interaction and Plurilingual Education ‘GREIP’, accredited and funded by the Catalan government since 2005. She has participated in and participates in various local and international projects and in training activities on education in plurilingual contexts, on children and citizenship and on social inequalities in education. Her PhD research, in progress, analyses plurilingual and intercultural practices in an out-of-school programme for students ‘at risk’ of school failure and their transformative potential towards a more inclusive, motivational and egalitarian education.

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