

Chapter 1

Introduction: A Relational View of Language Learning

Neil Murray and Angela Scarino

Abstract This introductory chapter, intended to both frame and provide a brief overview of those that follow, takes as its point of departure the realisation that in a world of globalization, where ‘super diversity’, multiculturalism and multilingualism increasingly characterize communities, and where language contact and cross-cultural interactions have become the norm, a change in the way in which we think about languages and languages education is needed. In particular, languages education needs to be developed on the basis of an understanding of the interplay of all the languages and cultures available in local contexts. In addition, it needs to be developed in such a way that students, as language users and language learners, become effective mediators of meanings across multiple languages, cultures and semiotic systems, thereby undergoing a process of personal transformation. We suggest that the need for such development should urge language planners, policy-makers and educators to adopt a relational perspective on language and languages that both respects and accounts for different world views and which has important implications for curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and evaluation. Each of the chapters of this volume, in its own way, provides insights into the need for and consequences of such a perspective.

Keywords Language ecologies • Relational view of language learning • Superdiversity • Multilingualism • Multiculturalism • Language policy and planning • Socialisation in diverse linguistic and cultural systems • Mediating linguistic and cultural difference • Enculturation • Global Englishes

N. Murray (✉)
University of Warwick, Coventry, UK
e-mail: N.L.Murray@warwick.ac.uk

A. Scarino
University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia
e-mail: angela.scarino@unisa.edu.au

1.1 Background

This book was motivated by the realisation that, as result of significant and fast-moving changes to both the global and local contexts in which languages are inevitably situated (see, for example, Blommaert 2010), there is an increased need—some would say compulsion—for those involved in languages education to view individual languages not as isolated entities that are the subject of language policy-making, theorising and practice, but as part of a larger ecology. This ecology comprises multiple languages which, increasingly, are coming into contact with and impacting upon each other, often in subtle and significant ways. Adopting such a view presents the possibility of a richer, more inclusive and egalitarian view of languages and the cultures with which they are intertwined. It also enables a more vibrant teaching and learning environment that is as much about developing the intercultural capability of students—and indeed teachers—as it is about the acquisition of language. Yet, at the same time, it also raises complex and contentious epistemological and pedagogical questions. Resolving those questions to achieve a coherent, holistic approach to languages and languages education is a tall order indeed and appears to be emerging as something of a holy grail for applied linguists and others, provoking research into new and exciting areas of inquiry. Somewhat paradoxically, there is a sense, perhaps, that we are on the cusp of a major change in how we think about not only languages, languages education and the teaching and learning of languages, but also about the role of language and culture in learning more generally. We are only beginning to consider those questions that will need to be addressed if such change is to come about. What is undeniable is the sense of growing momentum, and the contributions that make up this volume provide multi-perspective insights into the thinking and research of scholars who are seeking both to further our understanding of some of the key questions that promise to inform change, and to find satisfactory ways of addressing those questions.

1.2 Multiculturalism, Superdiversity and New Perspectives on the Learning of Languages

The fact of language contact is, of course, not new; it has been happening for centuries. Today, however, the scale and speed of language contact is unprecedented due to the convergence of a series of factors associated with the process of globalisation—as either its drivers or products—including:

- Greater mobility of individuals and communities within and across national borders as a result of technological advancements and political developments;
- New media and an exponential growth in and level of access to electronic forms of information;
- Socio-political realities that drive individuals and communities to migrate as a result of political unrest and/or persecution;

- Skills and knowledge shortages in certain locales, countries and regions; and
- Decisions by individuals and families to uproot and relocate themselves in order to realise aspirations in respect of their education, employment, self-development, and an improved lifestyle.

Collectively, these factors have served not only to create a level of social, cultural and linguistic complexity characterised by Vertovec (2010) as ‘superdiversity’, and surpassing anything that many migrant-receiving communities have hitherto experienced, but also to alter the very nature of how we might understand linguistic and cultural diversity itself; that is to say, notions of multilingualism and multiculturalism. In particular, it suggests the need for a repositioning in how we view language, and, by extension, the teaching and learning of languages. This need for a shift in perspective is articulated by Della Chiesa et al. (2012) in the following terms:

In this time of globalisation, language learning is ever more important—central to politics, economics, history and most obviously education ... language learning is not isolated, but totally enmeshed with all the important issues of the future of humanity (p. 23) ... language learning is not only the means to improve communication, but more importantly a key avenue to promoting global understanding. To understand the importance of language and culture, people need to be familiar with several languages and cultures. (p. 23)

The implications of this new salience and relevance of language and the learning of languages in today’s increasingly multilingual and multicultural world are threefold and inter-related. Firstly, the mobility of people today and the consequent convergence of diverse world views, along with the more intricate political and social dynamics that accompany it, must now feature as key concerns in the learning of languages; to teach languages without regard for such concerns is to do a disservice to those who need to communicate effectively and appropriately with whomsoever they come into contact and from whatever language(s) and cultural background they originate. Language planners, policymakers and educators need to recognise and account for the fact, highlighted in Della Chiesa et al.’s OECD study, that multicultural societies contain diverse communities, each of which originates from a context characterised by different configurations of languages. In these contexts there will be different policies, practices and representations concerning languages. Each of the particular languages will have a different history of use and a different place in the educational and social landscape. Different values will be attached to different languages and different varieties of languages. The relationship among the different languages in particular contexts will also be different. Each of those languages will have different roles and purposes in the educational and social/political systems that characterise the contexts in which they exist and evolve. Furthermore, in each such context, people will vary in the nature and strength of their affiliations to different languages and the choices that they make about their use in diverse situations.

Secondly, there is a need to give greater prevalence to the social-psychological dimensions of language use and language learning. The ability to function effectively and appropriately in multilingual, multicultural societies requires language users to assume the role of intercultural mediators of languages and cultures, facilitating communication in the context of diversity without relinquishing their cultural alle-

giances and sense of who they are. Participants in any given communicative experience need to be encouraged to recognise the need, and demonstrate a willingness, to accommodate not to the particular linguistic and cultural 'norms' of the lingua franca adopted for the current purposes of communication and as used by its traditional native speakers, but rather to those of the particular individual(s) with whom they are interacting. In interpreting, creating and exchanging meaning, interlocutors will draw upon language and cultural references that come from their primary and ongoing socialisation in diverse linguistic and cultural systems. Their different life-worlds and the frames of reference that they bring mean that the exchange of meanings is always a site of negotiation, clarification and explanation.

Thirdly, and a necessary consequence of implications one and two, if language is to enable its users to become mediators of meanings across languages and cultures and to reflect the complex, diverse and interconnected world in which each of us increasingly operates, then those users need to be equipped with sophisticated capabilities for language use. In particular, they need to be sensitive to variation in the way in which meaning is realised in different languages. They need to acquire the 'grammar' of the interlinguistic and intercultural space and ways that enable them to operate productively in that space, able to negotiate different world views and their linguistic and cultural manifestations, while achieving the communicative purpose at hand.

These things entail a broad change of perspective that has implications for languages in education; how they are conceptualised, learnt and taught. In particular, they suggest a need to view language learning as a dual process of learning language and learning to use language, and of developing intercultural understanding as an integral part of the process. In addition, this learning entails a relational view of languages, such that students become effective intercultural communicators in whatever context, and achieve to their full potential without needing to relinquish or sever their own language and cultural roots. A relational view of languages, as the descriptor suggests, focuses on plurality rather than singularity and on the relationships among languages in use, rather than on their objectification. Drawing on Halliday (1993), in the context of education this means, in a pluralistic way, learning language, learning through language and learning about language. In learning language, students learn the language(s) of their primary socialisation and of the communities of users of additional languages which are part of their school education or home experience. In learning additional languages, learners come to see the relationship between those language(s) that are already a part of their repertoire and the additional language being learned. Indeed the learning of the additional language necessarily builds upon the learners' existing linguistic and cultural life-world. And this relationship is integral to learning. In 'learning through languages', students experience the value of language, and indeed multiple languages, as mediums through which to learn and develop new knowledge. Enabling young learners, who may be entering the education system with a home language that is different from the language of instruction, to continue to learn in the language of their primary socialisation while developing the language of mainstream instruction, is crucial to their success in learning. That success is not only to be considered in cognitive

terms but also in social/emotional terms, when students see that all the languages in their repertoire are valued. In ‘learning about languages’ students develop the meta-linguistic and metacognitive awareness of, for example, how language works, how particular languages work in distinctive ways, how languages construct meanings, and ultimately, the power of languages to include/exclude and persuade/dissuade, and the power of multilingualism and multiculturalism.

A relational view of language learning can be understood at many different levels. At the contextual level, it signals an ecological relationship among languages in use in diverse settings, recognising that their configuration, their relationships, and choices about their use differ in time and space. At a conceptual level, a relational view of language can be understood as the integral relationships between, for example, language, culture and learning. At an educational level a relational view of language learning signals first and foremost the diversity of learners, with their diverse languages and cultures, diverse life-worlds and diverse ways of understanding and being in the world.

The goal of language learning should be to develop in students an inter-linguistic and intercultural capability that enables and encourages them to communicate successfully across languages and cultures as semiotic systems. It should encourage them to draw upon, as a resource, their diverse prior and evolving experience of using language and the diverse languages that are part of their linguistic and cultural repertoire. In reflecting on the changing face of multilingualism and multiculturalism in education, Stroud and Heugh (2011, p. 424) articulate the need for such a change of perspective in the following terms:

Classrooms and curricula need to be able to engage with and build on the diversity in semiotic modes that learners bring into the classroom ... The shifting nature of learner personae and subjectivities point to the need for new understandings of the teaching/learning process ... particularly its individuation to accommodate different types of learning biographies emanating from the heterogeneity of learning.

At the same time, developing this goal does not mean that all norms of language use are abandoned; rather, it means holding both standard use and variation in play simultaneously, ensuring that learners appreciate the differences between and value of both.

At a broad level of analysis, then, we would suggest that a view of language learning framed within a rapidly evolving multilingual and multicultural educational context might encompass a number of characteristics. Such a view would:

- Reflect a shift toward plurilingual approaches to learning languages that takes into account all of the languages in a learner’s repertoire and as such provides a counterpoint to the monolingual bias that has traditionally characterised language education work (Cenoz and Gorter 2011; Franceschini 2011);
- Recognise that language and culture are at the core of educational activity—indeed human activity generally—and that educational achievement and proficiency in the language of instruction are strongly correlated (Cook 2005; Stephen et al. 2004);
- Provoke a critical appraisal and probable enhancement of the notion of ‘competence’ as it is currently conceived, so as to ensure that it captures the relational

positioning of practices that operate between linguistic and cultural systems and the individual's capacity to negotiate the processes of encoding, interpreting and meaning-making across languages and cultures;

- Focus on multilingual practices and related research, including language use behaviours such as translanguaging (Garcia 2009), code-switching, code meshing, polylingualism, and the role of reflection and reflexivity in understanding and engaging in such practices; (Creese and Blackledge 2010; Wei 2011);
- Recognise the diverse contexts of practice that increasingly face policy-makers and practitioners within both languages education and education more broadly; contexts often saturated with information, resources, expectations and experiences and which require investigation and understanding unconstrained by pre-conceptions so far as is reasonably possible (Blommaert and Rampton 2012);
- Acknowledge the role of identity, multiple identities, and identity formation in language learning and the need to take account of identity theory (Norton 2000) in the shaping of policy and practice;
- Include the deliberate examination of possible tensions between institutional notions of multilingualism as the use of individual languages in particular contexts, and the potential creativity of mixed language practices where multiple languages intersect.

This shift toward what might be referred to as a multicultural and multilingual view of language learning serves to focus the spotlight firmly on the learner, not as some entity dislocated from the object of learning but rather as the very embodiment of it, located at the point of intersection between language, culture and learning, where the language learner assumes multiple roles: learner, user, and person. As *language learner*, he/she uses language and cultural tools to assimilate, create and produce new knowledge and understanding. Here, encultured understandings derived from the home language and culture interact with the encultured understandings of the target language community—a process that serves to highlight the language learning process as subjective, negotiated and in flux. As *language user*, the learner uses the target language for personal expression and to develop a personal voice in the target language. The learner has to perform in the target language, where he/she can be positioned as a legitimate user. In communicating in the target language, the learner has to reconcile the linguistic and cultural demands of communication across languages and cultures; that is, he or she has to become an intercultural user. As *person*, the learner brings a unique personality and identity that will inevitably influence the way he/she engages with and use the target language but which will gradually undergo transformation as they develop their intercultural competence though increasing his/her capacity to engage with the target language and its multifarious users. That is, while there will be some dissociation from or suspension of their personality and identity as they participate in learning and communicating in the target language, over time that process of adjustment or adaptation will fundamentally alter their sense of who they are. In other words, the process of language learning is not simply one of buying into a set of prescribed beliefs and behaviours; it is one of personal transformation manifested

in intercultural competence and an increased facility to operate comfortably across languages and cultures.

1.3 Some Implications

This change in how we view language learning and the language learner has important implications for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment and evaluation. Through their stance (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1999), language teachers need to equip their students with the experiences and tools to engage with and traverse linguistic and cultural difference; to encourage them to mediate meanings across languages and cultures and to develop a capability that permits and enables them to draw on whatever languages and cultural knowledge they have at their disposal. Communication itself—and thus language learning—becomes more a process of effectively negotiating difference in the exchange of meaning and employing an ever more developed capability to that end. In developing that capability, students need to be provided with opportunities to reflect on, recognise and exploit relationships between languages; to draw comparisons; to construct and deconstruct meaning, explain relationships between forms and meanings, differences in the nature of those relationships between different languages, and the implications for encoding and interpreting meaning; and to ‘move between languages’ productively and with ease (e.g. Ortega 2009, 2010).

The ramifications of this change are significant and they bear heavily on another issue that is current and controversial in applied linguistics—English as a *lingua franca* and the accompanying notion of global Englishes. This issue has great relevance for the kind of multicultural, multilingual view of languages and language learning that, perhaps inevitably, accompanies a relational perspective of languages and languages education.

A key theme running through English as *lingua-franca* discourse is the idea that because, in today’s global world, English is the language of international communication and the majority of interactions conducted in English are between non-native speakers—that is, speakers from Kachru’s ‘outer’ and ‘expanding circle’ countries (1985)—native speakers, their Englishes and their ownership of English have become irrelevant. Because today, World English belongs to everyone who speaks it and not merely to those traditionally privileged ‘inner circle’ native-speaker groups, the varieties that they choose to speak are as legitimate as native-speaker varieties. As Widdowson put it, ‘how English develops in the world is no business whatever of native speakers in England, the United States, or anywhere else’ (1994, p. 385). Those varieties take on local linguistic and cultural flavours as their speakers adopt a pragmatic stance where the means of communication are treated as secondary to the ends, in preference to one that places native speaker norms on a pedestal. Indeed, Canagarajah (2004) argues that because functionality and pragmatics have taken precedence as its users construct English to suit their purposes in any given context at any given time, there is no longer any universal English

language or World Standard English (WSE) and Kachru's three circles are 'leaking' as a result of the forces underlying globalisation. Kuo (2006) articulates this shift of perspective and its broad consequences in stark terms:

Since native speakers are no longer important or relevant in the global spread of English, it now seems rather redundant for L2 learners worldwide to conform to native-speaker norms. L2 learners are now entitled 'privileges' hitherto reserved exclusively for native speakers, such as a claim to ownership, a right to use English without others passing judgements, an equal footing with speakers of other English varieties, and, perhaps more profoundly, a right to shape the future of English (Melchers and Shaw 2003). (Kuo 2006, p. 214)

The notions of English as lingua-franca (ELF), global Englishes and plurilingualism would appear to sit comfortably with a relational view of languages and language learning. Most notably, both allow for the online construction and negotiation of language by interlocutors according to the demands of the situation, where participants are free agents in mediating meanings across languages and cultures in order to 'get business done' as efficiently and effectively as possible. At the same time, they also bring with them pedagogical challenges. For example, how does one reconcile the kind of freedom borne of functionalism and pragmatism of the sort to which Canagarajah (2004) refers and which encourages creativity and mutual intelligibility in favour of adherence to the rules and principles of an 'ideal' (native-speaker) model, with the need to standardise and objectify language to the extent necessary to teach it systematically, particularly to multilingual, multicultural student cohorts?

This rather more nuanced view of the language learner's developing intercultural communicative capability has important ramifications for how it is understood, and, by extension, on what basis it should be assessed. Language learners' communicative capability has less to do with how well their language at a given point in time measures up to that of a given standard—or variety—of English, and more to do with their ability to negotiate meaning through the medium of English with potential interlocutors from multifarious language and cultural backgrounds and who may speak a different variety of English. Increasingly, this is surely the situation that users of English are going to be facing. And the same is true for diverse languages, though perhaps to a smaller extent. As we have seen, interactions in English between non-native speakers predominate in today's globalised world and the increasing acknowledgement of the reality and legitimacy of different varieties of English means that judgements of learners' use of language need to be based on their ability to adapt on the fly to any given interaction both linguistically and culturally, whatever the parameters. Because these parameters are increasingly unpredictable, the extent to which that ability to adapt is manifested, and perhaps the speed and deftness with which it is developed and employed in interactions, should arguably be a primary indicator of a learner's capability.

There is no doubt that such a relational view presents tensions and complexities, but it is also a view that begins to do justice in contemporary times to the need (1) to exchange across languages and cultures not only words, but meanings and (2) to ensure that learners have every opportunity to succeed in learning languages, learning through languages and learning about languages.

1.4 The Chapters

The papers in this volume consider aspects of the relational view of language policy and planning and language learning in the dynamic Asia-Pacific region. English has a dominant place in the landscape across the region as a whole. Chinese has gained increased visibility in the region, with a heightened interest by many countries in expanding its learning. The Australian Government's white paper: *Australia in the Asian Century* (Australia in the Asian Century Taskforce 2012) strengthens (again) the focus on the importance to Australia of the languages of the region—especially Chinese, Hindi, Indonesian and Japanese.

The papers in Part 1 examine the phenomenon of English and local mother tongues in diverse parts of the region. Andy Kirkpatrick demonstrates cogently the impact on local languages of government and institutional policies promoting the role of English in the region as the medium of instruction in institutions of higher education. Such promotion, he argues, is largely a result of internationalisation and a desire by universities to raise their international profile and rankings and ensure their continued financial viability. Inevitably, it seems, the consequence is that in the absence of carefully considered policies that take into account particular contextual circumstances, local languages are dislodged and the use of English disrupts the ecology of the local languages. A relational view of language policy and language learning is necessary, it would seem, to restore ecological 'harmony'. Jonathan Crichton and Neil Murray's chapter considers the notion of harmony—or rather its converse, dissonance—from a different, if related perspective. They reflect on the real tensions that surround globalisation and the consequential shift from a monolithic to a plurilithic view of English, seeing it primarily as a tension between variation and standardisation that is manifested in teaching, learning and assessment. Anne Pakir considers the notion of 'glocal English' in Singapore, where English is used as the working language in a country where the population is distinctively multilingual and where, rightly, policies are in place for maintaining and developing the local mother tongues. Joseph Lo Bianco examines the long-standing debate about 'Asia literacy' in Australia, a country torn in complex ways between its linguistic and cultural base in English and its desire to be part of the Asian region. Based on detailed interviews with the range of students that populate the University of Hong Kong, Amy Tsui analyses in a nuanced way the perceptions of students in relation to their use of diverse languages (Putonghua, English and Cantonese), the meanings that the use of these languages hold for them and the conflictual nature of language use in the context of the internationalisation of universities and the education that they offer. Yuko Goto Butler's study examines the zeal for learning English in Changzhou, China. She looks, in particular, at the impact of this trend both in social and educational terms (specifically, the increasing disparity in levels of achievement between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds) and in terms of its potential impact on the rich existing linguistic ecology. Zuraidah Mohd Don offers a more historically anchored piece that considers the case of an ongoing shift in policy settings for the use of English and Malay as mediums of instruction in Malaysia, with enormous impact on teachers' work and, most importantly,

students' progress in learning. As with many of the volume's other contributions, she highlights how ideologically and politically charged policy decisions in this area tend to be.

In each of the papers, in Part 1, there is evidence of disruption and tension surrounding the role of different configurations of languages in different countries of the region—a disruption that emerges from the politics and economics of globalisation and especially relates to the role of English. This state of affairs is highly consequential for language learning and learning in general in the region.

The papers in Part 2 examine the shift towards Asian languages in Australia, where notwithstanding government support for Asian languages, tensions remain around policies, educational provision and the nature of Asian language teaching, learning and assessment. Angela Scarino foregrounds the complexity of assessing and describing students' achievements in diverse Asian languages (Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian and Korean) in a context where the framing of assessment has for decades generalised across languages, across learners (who have diverse trajectories of language learning experience at school and at home), and across important conditions such as time-on-task in language learning. She describes the findings of a national study that examined student achievement in Asian language learning (K–12), arguing for the need for context-sensitive descriptions of achievement that respect the diversity of learners. Andrew Scrimgeour, Michelle Kohler and Robyn Spence-Brown depict the challenges involved in making provision for and promoting learning in Chinese, Indonesian and Japanese respectively, in Australian education. Those challenges are fundamentally related to the ideology of monolingualism, notwithstanding Australia's claim to be a multilingual country. Michael Singh and Cheryl Ballantyne describe experimentation with making the teaching and learning of Chinese feasible through a sustained and well-supported partnership. What is clearly evident is that a good deal more experimentation will be needed in Australia if the languages of the region are to be made available and learnt more widely and successfully.

In Part 3, Tony Liddicoat reflects on key themes emerging from the 12 chapters of the volume, highlighting in particular the tensions and possible ways forward in offering opportunities to learn English and Asian languages in ecologically-sensitive and successful ways in the region. Fundamental to success will be a relational view of language learning that is respectful of local ecologies. The gradual unfolding of how that view ultimately comes to be manifested in the years ahead is an enticing prospect indeed.

References

- Australia in the Asian Century Taskforce. (2012). Australia in the Asian century: White Paper. Canberra: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. <http://asiancentury.dpmc.gov.au/white-paper>. Accessed 19 Aug 2013.
- Blommaert, J., & Rampton B. (2012). *Language and superdiversity*. MMG working paper 12-09. Göttingen: Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity.

Dynamic Ecologies

A Relational Perspective on Languages Education in
the Asia-Pacific Region

Murray, N.; Scarino, A. (Eds.)

2014, XI, 233 p. 14 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-94-007-7971-6