TOKENS of EXCHANGE

The Problem of Translation in Global Circulations

Edited by Lydia H. Liu
The Question of Culture in Global English-Language Teaching:

A Postcolonial Perspective

This essay considers the pedagogical issues of language, knowledge, and cultural encounter in the new global condition of cross-cultural contact within and across national borders, the worldwide circulation of cultural products in commercial forms, and the rise of the notion of a global village facilitated by transnational capitalism and information technology. In particular, it examines what foreign language educators, as a type of "cultural worker" in our own playing field, need to know about the learning and teaching of culture.

The significance of the cultural dimension in foreign-language education has been slowly recognized by the profession in the past two decades. The demands for and difficulties in the teaching of culture in the language curriculum have been observed, and foreign-language educators have begun to reconsider the relations between cultural study and the language classroom. For example, the notion of global competence has gained wide circulation in the European continent in response to increasing integration of the economic systems of the European nation-states in order to stay competitive in the global market. A number of cross-cultural educational programs have been established to "open up national institutions of education and training to their counterparts in other countries, create networks of cooperation and overcome the linguistic and cultural obstacles by educational exchange and study abroad — mobility as ex machina for the economic, political and cultural integration of Europe." This growing realization of the need to address the cultural dimension of language education is also witnessed by the efforts undertaken by the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages to determine and classify the elements...
on a scale of cultural proficiencies for the purposes of instruction and assessment. Yet Kramsch points out that the heavy emphasis on the pragmatic values of education, the transmission or information-processing model of learning, and the striving for immediacy facilitated by electronic media in the American educational culture tend to impede the development of critical understanding of native and foreign cultures. In an article detailing the ways in which foreign-language textbooks reflect the ethnocentric views and ways of the American educational culture, Kramsch arrives at the conclusion that the integrative discourses and culture-learning strategies presented in the majority of textbooks serve to reinforce mainstream American culture, and can be deemed useful only to the extent that they teach linguistic skills and some reified cultural facts.

Indeed, foreign-language educators now realize that the presentation of factual information about foreign cultures serves only to produce the tourist-and holiday-maker type of knowledge, and has little effect on helping students develop cross-cultural sensitivities. Even efforts to teach culture in a comparative/contrastive fashion, as exemplified by the collection of articles in Cultur Beund, also fail to promote a higher level of synthesis and critical understanding of cultural facts presented in an anecdotal manner. All of the above point to the need for the development of a theoretical understanding of the role of culture in the foreign-language curriculum. In this essay, I explore four characteristics of cultural identity, knowledge, and encounters in the postcolonial world: the formation of cultural identity in dialectical relationships, culture as historical process, culture as border experiences, and emerging realities. These aspects of cultural study are placed in the context of English-language teaching as an educational endeavor in various countries around the world.

The Question of Culture in English-Language Teaching

Initiated by colonial domination in the past and propelled by commerce, science, and technology in the present, the spread of English in the world has always been facilitated through instruction in the classroom, as witnessed by the rise of the English-Language Teaching (ELT) profession. However, the past two decades have seen an increasingly wide range of criticisms being launched against the teaching of English as a second or foreign language, which has caused many in the profession to reconsider the cultural dimensions of ELT. In the following, I lay out some of the major concerns and arguments regarding the question of culture in ELT: cultural imperialism, native resistance, bilinguism versus biculturalism, and the diversification of linguistic and cultural norms.

The pervasiveness of English in today's world is certainly not new, as is clear in the following statistics published in the Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language:

English is used as an official or semi-official language in over 60 countries, and has a prominent place in a further 20. It is either dominant or well established in all six continents. It is the main language of books, newspapers, airports and air-traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science, technology, medicine, diplomacy, sports, international competitions, pop music, and advertising. Over two-thirds of the world's scientists write in English. Three-quarters of the world's mail is written in English. Of all the information in the world's electronic retrieval systems, 80% is stored in English. English radio programmes are received by over 150 million in 120 countries.

A recent article, "'Cultural Conflict' or 'Cultural Invasion,'" in the popular Hong Kong news magazine Cheng Ming, portrays the rather heated debate on cultural imperialism currently taking place in China. This is sparked, in part, by the Westernization of various cultural commodities, such as goods and in services in shops, restaurants, hotels, and apartment buildings, whose surface forms include foreign terms and translations. Prodromou provides a concrete example of the relation between language and cultural imperialism in his discussion on the phenomenon of the term "supermarket" in the socio-economic context of Greek society:

The word "supermarket" sums up more than any other what I mean by Granglais as a linguistic phenomenon—but as a cultural and political phenomenon, too. Here are the distinctive features of a Greek "supermarket": (1) "Supermarket" is an English word. (2) It is also a Greek word now (my mother-in-law, who doesn't speak English, does not use the available "Greek" word, but "supermarket" instead). (3) It is an imported concept and institution. (4) It sells lots of desirable goods, both Greek and imported. (5) It is a sign that Greece is a modern consumer society, buying and selling on a large scale. The fact that a large percentage of the goods sold in Greek supermarkets are foreign is, on the one hand, a sign that the country is culturally and economically developing in that it has money to spend on fulfilling a wide variety of material needs which it shares with the Western developed nations that export the goods. But this "development" is ambiguous. The word "supermarket" captures this ambiguity perfectly.
Hence, to call English a “world commodity,” as Phillipson has done, is perhaps not too farfetched. The marketing of this world commodity has been actively undertaken by various governmental and private agencies of the major native-English-speaking countries. Some of this is in the form of “aids” to developing countries to expand educational activities, for example, in the setting up of schools and programs, many of which use English as a medium of instruction or include English as a subject of study. A considerable part of the active promulgation of English as a world language is undertaken through sending expatriate English teachers and ELT specialists and spreading ELT methodologies and materials around the globe. For example, in recent years, the communicative pedagogy, which promotes students’ verbal expression and group work in the classroom, has been exported to many parts of the world in the forms of curricular materials and teacher-training programs. Both the ideology of human relationships that is endorsed by this current teaching methodology and the instructional activities derived from it are sometimes greatly incongruent with the local cultures of the people adopting it.

Regarding cultural imperialism in general, and educational imperialism in particular, as it is related to English teaching in Hong Kong, a number of educators have criticized the long-practiced colonial policies of creating and maintaining a small group of local elites as “intermediate leaders,” educated in a Western or modified-Western system, and denying the validity and competitiveness of educational certification from Taiwan and Mainland China. Although close to 99 percent of the population in Hong Kong are native speakers of Cantonese, a widely used Chinese dialect in the Guangdong Province of southern China, English is an important medium of instruction in the formal education system and is used to various extents by the citizenry in their daily economic activities, especially in academic and business transactions.

British English was instituted as an official language and remained the primary means of oral and written communication in the Hong Kong government since the inception of colonial administration in 1841, even though Chinese was given official status in 1974. English-language education in the early colonial period of this fishing economy began with the educational work of Christian missionaries in the 1840s. These Western schools received small amounts of financial and administrative support from the colonial government. In the following decades, the government set up and assisted in the development of various kinds of elite schools, often called Anglo-Chinese schools, to provide a bilingual and bicultural education, strongly modeled after the Western academic traditions, to a select group of Chinese who could then act as middlemen for the British in their transactions with Mainland China. This initial colonial educational policy was followed by a period of strong promotion of English-language education, until the first half of the twentieth century when there was a growing movement toward the expansion and vernacularization of education in the lower grades and for the grassroots populace.

Even so, there was in actuality little change in the power and prestige of English and the aspiration of the local Chinese to master this language for the economic and educational prospects it provides. Besides being the official language, English was also an important medium of business transactions in the expanding commercial sectors of the colony. For the Hong Kong Chinese, attending university in the People’s Republic of China was unrewarding in economic terms and even “dangerous” in the political scenario, and English literacy was a prerequisite for higher education locally or abroad in English-speaking countries. Hence, the language has been considered the key to social mobility and greater political security for the average citizen.

Against this political and economic backdrop, it is not surprising to see the following statistics on the growth of English-medium schools (Anglo-Chinese schools) in comparison with Chinese middle schools where Chinese is the primary medium of instruction and English is taught as a separate subject (see Table 1). With the reversion of Hong Kong to China’s sovereignty in 1997, the percentage of English-medium schools is currently reduced to about 25 percent, but English remains prevalent in most tertiary institutions (colleges and universities), which are seen as the city’s bridge to the outside world. An important reason for using English as the medium of instruction is to maximize

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Chinese Middle Schools</th>
<th>Anglo-Chinese Schools</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>57.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>39.0</td>
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<td>1975</td>
<td>21.3</td>
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<td>1990</td>
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exposure to and thus "mastery" of the English language. However, one could surmise that, in making English the primary medium of instruction, it also becomes inevitable to adopt textbooks written by native-English-speaking authors or English-educated locals, to employ more expatriates as teachers or teacher trainers, and to adhere more closely to a Western academic culture. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in the hiring of expatriate English teachers to provide more "native" models of the language to students whose proficiency in English has been widely considered inadequate in meeting the requirements of higher education and the workplace.20

The hegemony of English and the implication of language teaching in the processes of cultural invasion have been met with some resistance in the host countries. One form of resistance can be seen in the ways English is taught and learned in the classroom. In many countries where English is taught as a foreign language—for example, Japan, China, Korea, other parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America—the focus of language teaching is on the grammatical code rather than on its functional use in cross-cultural communication settings. This has been interpreted by Alptekin and Alptekin as a way to protect the ethnolinguistic identity of students from the need to acculturate to foreign models in a world marked by persistent unequal relationships among cultural groups.21 In Malaysia, for instance, some Malay Muslims have felt the threat to the values of Islam of Western cultural influences perpetrated through the teaching of English.22 Yet the acquisition of English is still considered an important tool for personal and national development in a globalized world. Some students seek to reconcile these conflicting feelings by separating language learning from cultural learning. As secondary students in Dan et al.'s study said, "Western culture does not necessarily mean negative culture. We can learn English but not copy the 'Western' way of life. . . . To be influenced by Western values will depend on an individual's personality. Learning the language doesn't mean adopting the culture. . . . In learning English, the Western influence seeps through without us realizing it, but through 'imani' and 'taqwa,' the influence can be obstructed."23

In an ethnographic study of English-language teaching in a Sri Lankan classroom among Tamil students, Canagarajah finds that resistance to cultural domination manifests itself in students' disregard for the cultural elements in the reading passages and the learning styles and strategies suggested (or dictated) by the American-language textbooks imported for use in the country.24 For instance, they wrote disparaging remarks about the text passages in the margins of their books, and some even refused to follow the textbook instructions to engage in the interactive/cooperative group activities with their peers. Yet

the students showed great concern for their success in acquiring the language and tended to concentrate on mastering the language code and passing the mandatory English tests in the university system.

Canagarajah interprets the students' focus on grammar as a way for them to resolve the conflict between the threat of cultural alienation and the pragmatic necessity of learning English. Concluding from his research findings, Canagarajah observes:

Grammar learning enabled the students to be detached from the language and the course, avoid active use of the language which could involve internalization of its discourse, and thereby continue their opposition to the reproductive tendencies of the course. At the same time, this strategy enabled them to maintain the minimal contact necessary with the language in order to acquire the rules of grammar—which in their view was the most efficient preparation for getting through the examination. This strategy while enabling them to preserve their cultural integrity (however tenuously) also enabled them to accommodate the institutional requirement of having to pass English and thus bid for the socioeconomic advantages associated with the language.25

The growing resistance to cultural dominance at various levels of society in the host countries of English-language teaching has been one of the critical factors in spurring the efforts of some researchers and practitioners in the ELT profession to eliminate culture from the teaching of language.

Due to its widespread use in international business, communications, academic research, science, and technology, the English language is believed by some to have universalized to the extent that developing proficiency in an international form of the language does not require a concomitant knowledge of the culture of any of the countries where English is used as a national language. In "deculturizing" English (alternatively, de-Anglicizing and de-Americanizing) or promoting an international variety of the language, it is hoped that ELT will rid itself of the stigma of cultural imperialism and still be able to meet the needs of the masses of people around the world for whom the English language is one of the keys to a successful career, or even a necessity for survival in the school system. Alptekin and Alptekin put it this way: "If EFL [English as a Foreign Language] instruction in non-English-speaking countries is to become effective and realistic, care must be taken by the ministry of education of each country not to let it either turn into a tool of Anglo-American sociocultural domination, or take on ethnocentric features in order to isolate itself from such domination. In practical terms, this means that less attention should be paid
to teaching models based on native-speaker norms and values, and more to developing 'culturally neutral, non-élitist, and learner-oriented' EFL programs (George 1981: 12).”

In Hong Kong, as mentioned above, where English has long been an official language of the colonial government and remains a key institutional language in many formal arenas of life, but has never taken root as a primary language of social/interpersonal communication, popular culture, or ethnic and national identity, some language educators have proposed setting up a policy where the most universal characteristics of formal English would be the target of instruction in order to avoid negative ethnolinguistic reactions.26 Among them, Johnson has attempted to identify the features of “international English” (IE) with a view to more effective planning and design of “a core curriculum in English for international use, which is clearly differentiated from either an L1 or L2 (first language or second language)”27 For instance, in terms of sociocultural features, IE suggests that IE should exhibit no social distinctions nor a sense of group identity and solidarity. Moreover, it is necessarily learned in classroom settings and symbolizes the condition of “modernity.” The textual feature of IE is very much context-reduced and its discourse style largely analytic, both of which correlate well with the primarily ideational and transactional functions that it is expected to fulfill. In other words, it is what is said or written that matters, not interpersonal or communal relationships. Johnson has proposed IE as the norm for English education in Hong Kong, the reason being that this is the language that teachers are competent in teaching and students will find useful in their academic and professional lives.

In a survey of student interests and classification of authentic texts used for reading instruction in English, Crewe and Tong find that many university undergraduate students in Hong Kong exhibit little knowledge and interest in texts that contain foreign cultural themes, topics, and information (i.e., all that is not Hong Kong-, China-, Japan-, or to a lesser extent, U.S.-oriented).28 Based on the findings, they conclude that reading instruction in the second language would be most effective when carried out with texts that are more culturally neutral or familiar to the students and do not require understanding of a foreign culture. After all, they quote, “The use of English in Hong Kong and China is an economic and political statement of citizens of the world, not a cultural orientation towards Britain or the U.S. (Paulston 1987: 70).”30

The proposals to adopt IE and culturally neutral materials for instruction are reminiscent of the efforts behind the spread of Basic English in China merely half a century ago, as seen in Q. S. Tong’s essay in this volume. They reveal the tension between global orientation and national identity in the modern era, exemplified in both the contemporary Hong Kong scenario and the clash between the linguistic universalism of Basic English and China’s modern national identity. This contradictory logic of modernity shows how the global status/power of a nation is created through the production of universalism and its appropriation, whether as an imperialist agenda or a statement of world citizenship. Any form of universalism encodes its own ideology forged in cross-cultural encounter.29

Hence, it is important to note that in stripping English of its cultural baggage, the profession runs the risk of forfeiting the opportunity to help students develop the critical language skills for evaluating the ideology behind the continued flow of information and cultural products wrapped in the English language. Working in Morocco, Hyde rightly points out:

Moroccans, along with people all over the world, are living in an age in which a global information technology revolution is taking place. Information, mostly in English, is flooding the world, through advertisements, magazines, newspapers, books, instruction manuals, satellite television, films and rock music, videos, radio, telephones, the post, fax and telex machines, computers and information technology in general, tourism and migration for economic and educational reasons, and business relations. All of these make it very doubtful that the outside world could be kept out of Moroccan (or any other) society... On the other hand, if [English teaching] involves focusing students’ awareness on the ideology behind English discourse, by developing a critical language awareness in students (Fairclough 1992), it becomes more viable.32

In view of the controversy over language and culture in the teaching of English, some educators advocate a local approach to the integration of language and culture, particularly in places where the language has been appropriated or “nativedized” to the extent that a distinct indigenous culture of second-language users of English can be found. Braj Kachru is one of the leading scholars in the field of applied linguistics who have elucidated the distinct varieties of English-language forms and uses in what he has termed the norm-developing “Outer Circle,” countries that are mostly former British colonies and have adopted English as one of their official languages (e.g., India, Nigeria, and Singapore).33 In its acculturation to a new context, the English language is modified in its formal features, for example, via nativedized lexical items and codes of politeness, to fulfill certain culturally specific communicative functions. Kachru has called attention to the distinctive features of intranational registers of English and the multiple dimensions of creativity they exhibit: mixing language elements
from various languages; switching registers within languages and varieties; rearranging high and low styles of language use; and readjusting culturally dependent acts of interaction. In regard to the practicality of adopting local cultural norms for language instruction, he notes, "The strength of English lies in its multicultural specificity, which the language reveals in its formal and functional characteristics, as in, for example, West Africa, South Asia, and the Philippines." 34

Adaskou, Britten, and Falsi report a large-scale textbook project that was undertaken to design the cultural content of a new national English course for Moroccan secondary school students. The aim of the project was to make the cultural contexts represented in the English textbooks more relevant to the lives of the students, that is, that involve the kinds of people and settings in which English is actually used in the country. The result was the creation of Moroccan characters who are "educated urban dwellers, mostly students or young professionals and English-speaking." 35 Even though the characters are not representative of all the secondary students, the researchers assert that "this mise-en-scène presents a world to which Moroccan secondary learners can reasonably aspire and with which they can identify without alienation." 36 In a sense, this project can be seen as a way to create a "national variety" of English-speaking Moroccans through the educational system, as much as it reflects the reality of the use of English in the country.

The need for a local approach to merging culture and language in English teaching has also been proposed by ELT researchers and practitioners in other non-English-speaking countries where there are no recognizable indigenous norms of English use. 37 Instead of emptying language of its cultural components, they suggest that students can most profitably use their developing skills in the language to describe their own culture. Prodromou advocates juxtaposing the local and "target" cultural phenomena when designing pedagogical materials to facilitate comparison between the two cultures. 38 Moreover, to help students become world citizens, he proposes broadening the cultural content of language instruction to include other cultures, and English, being "at the center of international and global culture," is eminently suited for the job. 39

With the renewed interest in developing pedagogical approaches to address the cultural component of language learning, it is important to heed the call of Kramsch and Byram to develop a theoretical base for the study of culture in foreign-language education. 40 How can the study of culture counteract the threat of cultural imperialism from either side of the encounter, respect the local culture but not be constrained by it, and go beyond the learning of cultural facts or the simple comparison of facts, to engage students in developing the knowledge, skills, and moral responsibilities for cross-cultural understanding and communication that involve critical reflection on the self and other? The question of culture is indeed a large and complicated one. In the rest of this essay, I explore a few ways to rethink the cultural dimension of foreign-language education, particularly in the field of English-language teaching.

A Postcolonial Perspective on Culture and ELT

It is now little disputed that the formation of personal identity is largely a social process, and the “writing” of personal biography requires a considerable amount of joint authorship. The same can be said of ethnicity, gender, and national culture: there are no intrinsic ethnic, gendered, or cultural characteristics that can be objectively described, but understandings or “definitions” of characteristics develop through contact with and in relationship to the others around one. The sense of being an Indian in the state of India is radically different from that in the Caribbean. 41 The big waves of historical changes that have swept through the Chinese landscape, which include encounter with Western imperialism, political revolutions, and the Chinese diaspora in the modern era, have produced immense fluidity, ambiguity, and complexity in the definition of Chineseness. 42

The work of cultural and literary historians has shown us that admitting the interdependence of people or groups of people, or that one’s identity is defined in relationship to others, is not an easy process. In the creation of hegemony and racial or cultural superiority, the tendency has been to distance and radicalize others for the sake of legitimating and facilitating the acts of domination. As eminently argued and detailed by Said, the study of Oriental cultures in the West had proceeded as a series of “transformation” of the other that served to produce an alter ego for self-gratification and symbolic and material domination. It is not hard to identify some commonality between the following remarks by Said and the way we study culture in foreign-language education today: "It is perfectly natural for the human mind to resist the assault on it of untreated strangeness; therefore cultures have always been inclined to impose complete transformations on other cultures, receiving these other cultures not as they are but as, for the benefit of the receiver, they ought to be." 43

However, the reality of the impact of colonialism has spoken otherwise, as witnessed by the different ways Western cultural institutions and practices changed in the history of imperialism. For instance, Pratt argues that the glorification of the natural world by European explorers in the colonized African and Caribbean territories was instrumental in developing the Romantic tradi-
tion in Western literature. Moreover, Viswanathan shows that the study of English literature did not become an institution, or an organized cultural and political endeavor, until it was developed as a method by the British Empire to exert moral and social control over its Indian subjects. In regard to both the material realities and the cultural imagination of the metropolis, the processes and consequences of cross-cultural encounter have never been unilateral or unequivocal.

Hence, it is important to conceptualize the study of culture as an engagement between the self and the other in dialectical relationships, where knowledge production becomes a process of constant realization of and battle against the projection of oneself onto the other, the persistent striving to understand more about the other through his or her eyes, and an opening to the discovery of oneself through the eyes of the other. Working in the field of cultural anthropology, Fabian proposes a hermeneutic framework for understanding self and other in the study of culture. This involves a recognition of both parties as the subjects for analysis and interpretation and an emphasis on self-reflection: “A praxis that does not include the one who studies it can only be confronted as an image of itself, as a representation, and with that, anthropology is back to the interpretation of (symbolic) forms... More insidious than individual moral failure is a collective failure to consider the intellectual effects of scientific conventions which, by censoring reflexions on the autobiographic conditions of anthropological knowledge, remove an important part of the knowledge process from the arena of criticism.”

In the study of culture in foreign-language education, Kramsch has proposed a hermeneutic approach to understanding both the native and the foreign cultural imaginations and realities. The aim of this approach is to help students develop a more comprehensive understanding of another culture by experiencing different levels of interpretation of both cultures; that is, understanding one’s perception of the other culture (often, images of oneself) and realizing how these perceptions are affected by the cultural imagination or popular perception of themselves by the people of each culture. The process of this approach to the study of cultural texts takes into consideration both the native (local) and foreign (original) contexts of reception for the texts and explores how the self-perception of each culture determines how it views the other culture. It is hoped that a more complete understanding of native and foreign cultures would be developed through the confrontation of these layers of interpretation.

However, for English-language teaching in the postcolonial world, it is important not to lose sight of the impact of persistent and new forms of power inequality in cross-cultural relations. The attempt to critique the dominant voices in a cultural text can be a truly agonistic dialectical process. (For example, as a teacher of English to second-language learners in the United States, I sometimes find it difficult to form another perspective on American culture through the eyes of my students when some of them have already taken the dominant American views as the norm.) Hence, to construct the condition for a more equal confrontation of viewpoints and perceptions, it is necessary to encourage a counter-discursive stance and a wider set of reading and writing practices in relation to cultural texts.

Drawing on Freire’s work on critical pedagogy, JanMohammed argues for the “denystification of social-political-cultural structuration,” which involves the understanding of how one is culturally encoded under terms of domination. As he notes from Freire’s work, “Culture, as an interiorized product that in turn conditions men’s subsequent acts, must become the object of men’s knowledge so that they can perceive its conditioning power.” This critical understanding of culture necessitates a certain amount of interpretive knowledge of the historical processes of cultural formation. I discuss this aspect of culture next.

We take culture to be the semantic space, the field of signs and practices, in which human beings construct and represent themselves and others, and hence their societies and histories... Culture always contains within it polyvalent, potentially contestable messages, images, and actions. It is, in short, a historically situated, historically unfolding ensemble of signifiers-in-action, signifiers at once material and symbolic, social and aesthetic. —John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, Ethnography and the Historical Imagination

Understanding culture through a study of the historical processes in its formation and transformation through contact with other cultures has constituted a new praxis for cultural anthropologists. For instance, in their study of the changes that took place in the sociocultural systems of a number of African societies in the period of colonialism, Comaroff and Comaroff point out the contradictory elements of the inner workings of the societies, and how they interact with the outside forces of the colonial enterprise to produce new fluctuating social orders. They illustrate in detail the dialectical nature of the historical encounter between the local society and the imperial powers, where change was not a one-way process of domination and subjugation of indigenous ways. Instead, the diverging ideologies of the colonizers—embraced variously by the empire state, the industrial-capitalist colonial settlers, and the nonconformist Christian missionaries—entered into contests with each other during the colonial encounter, which resulted in a reconfiguring of the relation-
ships among the different groups of colonizers. In a way, the colonial territory became a field in which the social conflicts inherent in the colonizing country were played out in relation to a subordinated group of people.

The concept of culture as a “shifting semantic field” characterized by the appropriation and reinvention of meanings is explored by Lydia Liu in a different context. In studying the formation of the national culture and literature of China in the past century, Liu remarks that “to draw a clear line between the indigenous Chinese and the exogenous Western in the late twentieth century is almost an epistemological impossibility.”52 Instead, she proposes the following for cross-cultural analysis: “My point can be stated simply: a cross-cultural study must examine its own condition of possibility. Constituted as a translational act itself, it enters, rather than sits above, the dynamic history of the relationship between words, concepts, categories, and discourses. One way of unraveling that relationship is to engage rigorously with those words, concepts, categories, and discourses beyond the realm of common sense, dictionary definition, and even historical linguistics.”53 In tracing and analyzing the historical process of the formation of the notions of “national character” and “individualism” in early-twentieth-century China, Liu details how these words were borrowed from the West initially through translation, which allowed them to become incorporated into the Chinese language as neologisms. These neologistic constructions were then conceptualized and deployed by the new generation of intellectuals to reform the society. For instance, the concept of “national character” was used by May Fourth writers to create a new narrative voice that was able to analyze and critique the traditional culture. Moreover, the discourse of “individualism” was instrumental in liberating the individual from traditional bonds to the family and repositioning him or her in connection to the state.

All of the above illustrate the need to problematize the definition of cultural identity in today’s world. In understanding the subject positions of oneself and others in cross-cultural situations, it is important to be aware of the multivalent and global influences in the historical formation of cultural identity. By studying the multiple appropriations of the words and meanings of various cultural constructs, students may become more sensitive to the indeterminacy of meaning and the mutual influences of the different cultures of the world. However, in view of the fact that the construction of meanings in history is saturated with unequal terms of power relationships, it is necessary, as Giroux points out, to have students read alternative historical accounts, which can challenge the sanitized and monologic portrayals of cultural characteristics and help them reconstruct a more comprehensive and critical view of society.54

In proposing an ethnographic approach to intercultural education in foreign-language study, Byram and Kane stress the need to gather various kinds of texts and cultural artifacts from the foreign culture for analysis and interpretation, and ultimately to yield a comparative understanding of two or more cultures.55 As valuable as this “fieldwork approach” or “ethnographic technique”56 may be in learning the “native” (there is a predominance of the singular native in their discourse) or insider perspective on a foreign culture, this orientation to cultural study is predicated largely on a “national” model of culture and the perception/presentation of cultures as distinct from each other. I would add that one avenue for engaging in a historical analysis of cultural constructs may be located in the “hybrid semantic fields” of cultural contact. This is noted by Comaroff and Comaroff—“global forces played into local forms and conditions in unexpected ways, changing known structures into strange hybrids”57—and is constitutive of the third aspect of cultural study discussed here.

A prominent feature of today’s global cultural landscape is the intermingling of customs and lifeways and the presence of multiculturalism within national borders. The movement of peoples on a massive scale across territorial boundaries, set forth by the colonial disruption of relatively closed communal living in various parts of the world, has served to problematize the definition of “native” and “authenticity.” As Chambers portrays in poignant terms but with an exulting tone, the uprooted “native” cultures and transient nature of the electronic age are characterized to a large degree by a sense of “homelessness” and have transformed the notion of authenticity to “an authentically migrant perspective,” which is open to multiple possibilities and transmutations.58 So where is the “native” in today’s world? This is a futile question both for the sinologist who searched feverishly for a “pure” version of national Chinese poetry (uncontaminated by Western influences) and ended by lamenting the loss of the Chinese national heritage, and for the contemporary student of European cultures who still sees as fringes the numerous diasporic communities and the massive “coloring” of the white landscape.59

Said has noted that this transmutation and hybridization of cultural identity, and the syncretic perspective that arises from it, can constitute a new space for the study of culture.60 The colonial subjects, having their precolonial nature unsettled by imperialism, developed a “second nature” in the midst of cultural contact and living under domination. However, neither of these identities fully describes the legacy of colonialism; it is necessary “to seek out, to map, to invent, or to discover a third nature” wherein resides the potential for better
understanding the experiences of the postcolonial subjects. In the same vein, Bhabha reacts against the polarization and simplification of culture that recent critical theories dwell on in the binary opposition of self and other, center and periphery, oppressor and oppressed. He uses the metaphor of “a third space” to signify a new frame of reference and process of signification that occurs in between cultures as a result of contact and the clash of difference. For Bhabha, there is no simple definition of “nation” in a world where the movement of peoples and cultures has been occurring on a massive scale. Many of us are forever dwelling in the “in-between space” at the margins of nations. For Bhabha, hybridity is never an admixture of established cultures or identities, but the elusive conditions where signs and meanings can be “appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew.”

In recent anthropological thinking, the notion of culture as an analytical concept has been problematized to take into account the destabilized relationships of people, language, space, and culture. Working from a transnational perspective on cultural flows and social networks, these theorists have called into question the comparative approach to culture and proposed that we may better understand cultural identity as the choices of affiliations that people make in their social practices, which often stretch beyond the national boundaries. On this, Appadurai writes, “Culture becomes less what Bourdieu would have called a habitus (a tacit realm of reproducible practices and dispositions) and more an arena for conscious choice, justification and representation, the latter often to multiple and spatially dislocated audiences.” Here, Appadurai points to the partial dissolution of the bulwark of national culture in people’s imagination and signals the degree of maneuvering within existing sociopolitical structure and changes in the structure, for example, as brought forth by economic globalization.

Hence, it is important to think “across borders” in our attempts to learn about the nature of postcolonial cultures in general, whether in the so-called first or third world, and to understand cultural encounter and the emergence of difference in a deeper sense. The fears that arise in some quarters when faced with the widespread hybridization of culture have motivated some people in positions of power to fuse culture with national identity, citizenship, and patriotism. This describes well what the Mainland Chinese government has been undertaking as a benign way to gain allegiance from the Hong Kong Chinese people in the transitional period both preceding and following the official exchange of colonial sovereignty. This is also why the new spaces of hybrid cultural identities and the shifting borders of race, gender, and ethnicity in the United States have created a certain amount of panic among people whose interests are served by the traditional boundaries. All of this has made it even more critical for us to foster a practice of language learning and cultural study in the borders of representation, where intermixing serves as the most legitimate area of inquiry, where multiple voices speak out from history to dialogue with each other, and where difference is not only acknowledged but cultivated in the acts of mixing.

Giroux proposes the notion of “border pedagogy” to represent the educational endeavor to struggle against the dominant powers of representation that tend to normalize structural inequalities by maintaining a sanitized and rigid version of cultural pluralism. Kramsch also points out the need for the study of culture in foreign-language education to become “a systematic apprenticeship of difference,” and for foreign language study in general to become a form of “boundary study.” I suggest that the study of culture in ELT focus on border experiences and identities as important sources for learning about cultural differences, cross-cultural encounters, and the languages of representation. The global spread and indigenization of the English language, together with the ever more pressing need for cross-cultural communication in the “language,” necessitate a turning away from the study of the “national cultures” of the metropolises and from simply using the language to describe “local” lifeways. It is the meeting of cultures in the border experiences of many people around the world, be they in the first or the third world, the target or the native country, that should constitute a center of cultural analysis. And it is also in this new center that culture is remade and identity is negotiated and redefined.

Every interaction takes place within specific social, institutional, and historical coordinates, all of which color the interaction at the same time as they are reshaped, to a greater or lesser extent, by that interaction. — Bruce Mannheim and Dennis Tedlock, The Dialogic Emergence of Culture

A number of theorists whose works I cited earlier—John and Jean Comaroff in the field of cultural anthropology, Lydia Liu in literary studies, and Iain Chambers in cultural studies—all point to the generative and open-ended nature of cross-cultural encounter. In studying the history of the colonial enterprises in Africa and the Caribbean, Pratt proposes the concept of a “contact zone” to capture the creative aspects of colonial cultural encounters. Besides domination and subjugation, the contact zone spotted the complexity of new ways of life and cultural categories: an intermingling of lifestyles among settlers and natives, transracial love stories and sexual alliances, and the emergence of autobiographical writings of ex-slaves who inserted themselves into the European
print culture with the help of the abolitionist movement in the last decades of the eighteenth century. These early slave autobiographies marked the beginning of African American literature; instead of constituting an authentic native voice, they were characterized by a transcultural and dialogic mode of expression. As Pratt notes, “In very elaborate ways, these early texts undertook not to reproduce but to engage Western discourses of identity, community selfhood, and otherness. Their dynamics are transcultural, and presuppose relations of subordination and resistance.”

The notion of culture as proliferating and always in the making, especially under conditions of contact and confrontation, is taken up by recent theoretical thinking on the methodology of ethnographic fieldwork, which emphasizes the heterogeneity of culture and the discursive nature of its constitution. One form of praxis that has emerged out of this awareness can be found in the work of some anthropologists who seek to integrate insights from anthropology, linguistics, and literary theory. Ethnography is reconceived not only as a form of one-sided data gathering and interpretation, where knowledge is gleaned from the “natives” and interpreted through the expert eyes of the anthropologist, but as an “emergent cultural phenomenon” and “a form of culture making.” In their dialogical approach to the study of culture, they aim to relocate both participants in the cultural encounter, or multiple narrators of shared cultural experiences, in the production of ethnographic knowledge. And dialogue becomes a primary means of fostering this multiplicity of voices and their confrontation. As Attinasi and Friedrich point out, for dialogues (and, I would add, joint narration) to lead to the remaking of culture and the transformation of reality, they need to be ruminated on and also interpreted in light of subsequent experiences. Hence the importance of action, reflection, and reinterpretation in the “dialogical emergence of culture.”

The potential for an intercultural education in foreign-language study to open up “new horizons” for students has been acknowledged by some in the field, but the notion of “new” tends to remain on the level of existing phenomena waiting to be discovered by students. In other words, the concept of (re)making culture in the language classroom tends not to be fully recognized and practiced in the profession. Kramsch proposes the broadening of classroom discourse (i.e., beyond explicit language instruction to develop accuracy or practicing language skills in discussing familiar topics to develop fluency) to exploit its multiple potential for cross-cultural dialogue and confrontation in the increasingly multicultural student population of the U.S. foreign-language classroom. The differences in cultural values and practices, as revealed in students’ reasoning and discourse styles, can be pointed out and negotiated through the joint construction of (new) meanings in dialogue.

In the teaching of English as a second or foreign language around the world, the language classroom has also been characterized, in the majority of cases, by students coming from various cultural backgrounds, in terms of ethnicity, gender, class, religion, geographic origin, political views, or differences of another nature. The classroom can thus be seen as an arena in which a cacophony of voices coming from the cultural texts of foreign or local origin, from the different subject positions of the students, and from the teacher as a more experienced intercultural speaker, enter into dialogue with each other for the continual process of (re)interpreting, (re)representing, and (re)making cultural realities.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have addressed the question of culture in English-language teaching by examining the place of postcolonial cross-cultural study in foreign-language education. In view of the many changes that have swept across the globe—the ever increasing need for cross-cultural contact, the inexorable movement toward a greater recognition for difference, the growing hybridization of culture, and the constant reemergence of cultural domination in various guises—it becomes all the more important for foreign-language educators in general, and ELT in particular, to critically reevaluate the cultural dimensions of both the theory and practice of our profession. The widespread use of English, in its diverse forms and functions in various parts of the world, need not become a deterrence to the study of culture, thereby relieving us of our political, educational, and ethical responsibilities. Instead, it can be seen as a particularly rich source for inquiry into the relations between language and culture for cross-cultural understanding and communication. In reconceptualizing culture as constituted in dialectical relationships, historical processes, border experiences, and emerging realities, it is hoped that the teaching of culture will become less of a sheer accumulation of cultural “facts” or a simple comparison of these facts, whether derived from native or foreign countries, and more of a critical engagement with our students to develop the ability to interpret and remake our cultures through language.

What I have proposed and outlined so far is indeed heavily theoretical in nature, and although the theoretical base for cultural study still needs to be strengthened and continually reworked, the house of practice are also urgent
questions to be explored, both in light of theory and to inform theory. The everyday practices that the above concepts and ideas seek to capture need to be discovered and created in the field through the collaboration of theorists, practitioners, and students. Cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural forms of teamwork are necessary, where scholars, teacher trainers, teachers, and students can come together to inform and work with each other to create educational curricula. It is here, again, that the confluence made possible by the spread of English can become a place for the exploration and cultivation of difference and respect for one another.

Notes

2. See, for example, Gisela Baumgartz, “Language, Culture and Global Competence: An Essay on Ambiguity.”
3. Ibid., 444.
4. See American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), Proficiency Guidelines.
7. See, for example, Michael Byram, “Foreign Language Learning for European Citizenship.”
10. B. Wai, “Cultural Conflict” or “Cultural Invasion.”
13. Ibid.
15. See, for example, Educational News (Hong Kong), March 1995, 112.
17. See Bernard H. K. Luk, “Chinese Culture in the Hong Kong Curriculum: Heritage and Colonialism.”
18. See W. O. Lee, “Social Reactions towards Education Proposals: Opting against the Mother Tongue as the Medium of Instruction in Hong Kong.”
19. See Educational News (Hong Kong), December 1997.
22. See, for example, W. C. Dan, H. A. Haroon, and J. Nysmith, “English and Islam in Malaysia: Resolving the Tension”;
24. Cited in Dan et al., 230.
25. A. Suresh Canagarajah, “Critical Ethnography of a Sri Lankan Classroom: Ambiguities in Student Opposition to Reproduction through ESOL.”
26. Ibid., 622.
27. Alptekin and Alptekin, 18.
28. See, for example, Nigel Bruce, “EL2-Medium Education in a Largely Monolingual Society: The Case of Hong Kong”;
31. See Lydia Liu’s introduction and essay in this volume.
33. See, for example, Brui B. Kachru, The Other Tongue: English across Cultures; “World Englishes and Applied Linguistics”; and “World Englishes and English-Using Communities.”
36. Ibid.
37. See Alptekin and Alptekin, and Crewe and Tong.
39. Also basing their argument on the “global” nature of the English language, some language educators and researchers have proposed the development of a European variety of English to express a transnational “European culture.” See, for example, Margie Berns, “English in Europe: Whose Language, Which Culture?” Bern writes: “An outcome of de-anglicizing and de-Americanizing is a common language useful as an expression of their ‘Europeanness’ (however defined), and as a means of mutual communication.” (16).
40. Claire Kransch, “The Cultural Component of Language Teaching”;
41. Byram, “Background Studies in English Foreign Language Teaching: Lost Opportunities in the Comprehensive School Debate.”
42. See Lee Drummond, “The Cultural Continuum.”
See, for example, Wei-ming Tu, ed., The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today.

Edward W. Said, Orientalism, 57.

Mary Louise Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation.

Gauri Viswanathan, Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India.

Johannes Fabian, Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object, 137. 95.

See Claire Kramsch, Context and Culture in Language Teaching.

See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures, and Pennycook, The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language, for discusions on counterdiscursive practices in literary work and language teaching, respectively.


Ibid., 245.

John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, Ethnography and the Historical Imagination, 27.

Lydia Liu, Translingual Practice, 29.

Ibid., 20.


Byram; and Lawrence Kane, “The Acquisition of Cultural Competence: An Ethnographic Framework for Cultural Studies Curricula.”


Comaroff and Comaroff, 5.

Chambers, Minority Culture, Identity, 14.

Chow, Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies, 22.

Said, Orientalism.

Ibid., 216.

Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 27.


Appadurai, 18.

The notions of “national consciousness” and "patriotism" are heavily propagated in the pro-PRC (People's Republic of China) public media in Hong Kong. In the educational arena, there is a movement toward redesigning and expanding the civic education curriculum, and some educators have proposed making "patriotism" a centerpiece in the reform of civic education. See, for example, Educational News (Hong Kong), October 1996, 10.


Giroux, Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education.

Kramsch, Context and Culture in Language Teaching, 235.

Kramsch, “Redrawing the Boundaries of Foreign Language Study,” 214.

Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation.

Ibid., 102.