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BOOK REVIEW

L. Ellis. (2016) *The plurilingual TESOL teacher: The hidden language lives of TESOL teachers and why they matter*. Walter De Gruyter Inc..

Reviewed by Phiona Stanley (UNSW Sydney)

Scenario 1: A TESOL teacher on a Siberian train strikes up a conversation with the man across the aisle. He starts by addressing her in Russian, which she does not speak. She shakes her head, smiles ruefully, and tries to communicate in slow, graded English. He looks momentarily confused then tries German. Again, she smiles, saying *Ich sprache kein Deutsche*. Then she asks in Polish, in which she is fluent although she rarely gets to use it and it's rusty, *gdzie pan jedzie?* She is confident: she spent four years in Poland and by the end had friends who did not speak English. She can read a Polish newspaper, debate Polish politics, laugh about Warsaw gossip. But is Polish close enough to Russian to be intelligible? He tilts his head, muttering *куди ти йдеш, kuty ty ydesh*, seemingly surprising himself with his own understanding: *where are you going?* He replies in Ukrainian, says he's going to Moscow, and tells her that his grandmother ("*babusya*", he checks, and she replies in Polish, confirming the cognate, "*babcia*") was from Lviv and that he remembers some Ukrainian. Thus, they pass the journey in a hybrid of Polish-and-Ukrainian, gestures, the odd written word, and, of course, some goodwill.

Scenario 2: A TESOL teacher on a Brazilian bus struggles to communicate with Argentinians. She speaks basic Spanish and thinks Portuguese sounds like French but also a bit like Japanese, in which she is fluent; *obrigado/arigato*, she compares later. She self-evaluates, in English, as achieving "only 10% communication with these beautiful people" but she says she "had so much fun in translanguaging, and [that] English as an international language is a myth".

Quiz question for ARAL readers: which of these TESOL teachers is plurilingual? If you answered 'both', you are correct according to Ellis's (2016) definition:

Someone who considers themselves as 'speaking' two or more languages to the extent that they can use them confidently to achieve their communicative ends ...It does not necessarily include specialized uses of the language ...and does not imply 100% accuracy. (Ellis, 2016, p. 52)

However, if you believe the *de facto* definition, such as that promulgated by the 2015 (38/3) ARAL special issue on teachers' plurilingual identities, in order to answer the question, you would need to know that the TESOL teacher in Scenario 1 is a Scottish-Australian 'native speaker' of English (indeed, the train passenger

was me) whereas the TESOL teacher in Scenario 2 is a native user of Japanese (Mochizuki, 2017; my friend and colleague).

According to the definition of plurilingualism all too commonly assumed in the applied linguistics literature, the teacher in Scenario 1 may be labeled, erroneously, as ‘monolingual’ (which she clearly isn’t) whereas the teacher in Scenario 2 is considered ‘plurilingual’ (which, of course, she is). Liz Ellis’s book sets out to correct this common misunderstanding, and to explore the complex, often atrophying, and rarely recognized plurilingualism of many TESOL teachers, including putative ‘monolinguals’, the native speakers.

Chapter 1 introduces the book, and includes an autoethnographic component in which the author’s own discomfort is explored through contrasting assumptions often made of native-speaker English teachers: that we ‘must speak lots of languages’ or, conversely, that ‘you don’t need to speak any other language in order to be an English teacher’ (p. 5). Both assumptions are as damaging as they are wrong. But both are widespread. While ‘friends and strangers’ may assume the former, teachers’ own plurilingualism is all but elided in teacher advertisements, training-course requirements, and the social imaginaries of the profession. The book, as a whole, is a call to change our thinking on these important issues.

Chapters 2 and 4 review related literature on the TESOL profession, especially in what Holliday (2005) calls the BANA countries (Britain, Australasia and North America) and on the nature of bilingualism. Here, Ellis rightly critiques the tendency in the scholarly debate to try to repair the damaging ‘non’ label worn by ‘non-native’ teachers by applying euphemisms such as ‘bilingual’ teachers of English, ‘plurilingual’ teachers of English, and even ‘internationally educated teachers of English’ (Schmidt & McDaid, 2015). But instead of healing the rift, such relabeling serves only to confuse. As Ellis points out, the problematic use of the ‘plurilingual’ label:

[M]isrepresents both [native and non-native teachers] as well as preventing clear-headed discussion of issues pertaining to monolingual and bilingual teachers, and monolingual and bilingual teaching.

This is a call for a redrawing of the ‘dividing line’ in TESOL: instead of differentiating teachers by the language in which they are ‘native’, we should instead divide the profession into those who can ‘confidently [use another language] to achieve their communicative ends’ and those who cannot. As English-as-an-additional-language students aspire to be plurilingual, it should be axiomatic that their teachers *themselves* should be plurilingual. Problematically, this is not (yet) the case. As a result, it is still possible for someone who has never been successful in learning an additional language to teach an additional language. Metaphorically, this is like asking someone who failed high school mathematics and who, as a result, sees the subject as impossible (and perhaps also useless, and other rationalizations of

failure) to *teach* mathematics. Comparably, many monolinguals are failed plurilinguals charged with creating new would-be plurilinguals. This situation is absurd.

The teachers' stories throughout the book show why this causes problems, and Chapter 3 sets out the background to these, explaining the multiple, connected research projects that generated the data on these teachers' languaged lives. Through analysis of teachers' stories, in Chapters 5–9, Ellis proposes further a division within plurilingualism: elective versus circumstantial. This is hugely helpful, as illustrated by the 'Lidia' and 'Stan' vignettes, which show the value of a teacher's own formal, classroom language study in allowing for comparative language awareness but also humility, empathy, and advice for students: elective plurilinguals have both the benefit of a different language with which to compare English *and* a learning experience akin to that of their students. Next best is circumstantial plurilingualism, which offers a comparison language if not a conscious language learning process. And monolingualism is least useful of all.

And yet some teachers continue to defend the 'monolingual monolith' (Chapter 11), around which the industry, arguably, still orbits, despite 25+ years of *Linguistic Imperialism* (Phillipson, 1992) and other critiques of the direct method and similar nativist conceits. Ellis's book makes a significant case for moving beyond both the monolingual model and the native/non-native binary. Is it therefore the case that prospective English language teachers, whether applying for jobs or teacher education courses, should be asked to demonstrate proficiency in at least one additional language (preferably including at least one learned in a formal, classroom setting)?

Well, ideally yes. But several problems remain. As Ellis points out, the issue is as much structural as individual, with teachers' own plurilingualism largely atrophying as they are still expected to teach English 'monolingually' (indeed, plenty of language schools that I visit in Australia still have 'English only' signs on classroom walls!) This is particularly likely where the teacher's own language/s are not shared with students. For instance, although I have sometimes used Spanish (usually receptively and comparatively rather than productively) with Spanish-native students, I am yet to encounter many Polish users in Australia. And neither my Spanish nor my Polish gets much of a workout compared to how a teacher might use Mandarin or Arabic, both of which are well represented among the English-language students often encountered in Australia. So, as well as *valuing* teachers' additional languages, the industry needs a way of helping teachers *maintain* their own plurilingualism. Ellis suggests counting additional language maintenance as language teacher professional development, which would be a great beginning. To this I would add that, when language teachers ask me what they can do to develop as teachers, my advice is always to start from zero in an untouched language, in a class, and to consciously reflect on the process.

The other issue, and my only critique of Ellis's book – which is less a critique and more a request for a sequel – is the question of what teachers might usefully *do* with their plurilingualism in English language teaching. Beyond motivating the students and suggesting language-learning strategies, teachers likely *use* their own plurilingualism in class, and Ellis provides tantalizingly brief data as to what they actually do (pp. 257–258). But I wanted to know more: *how* do already-plurilingual teachers teach would-be-plurilinguals (regardless of the additional or first languages of all concerned)? Beyond teacher identity, knowing the specifics of how teachers' plurilingualism works in class and why it matters would go some way towards helping us slay the monolingual dragon that still stalks the TESOL industry.

References

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