Negotiating the Multilingual Turn in SLA: Response to Stephen May

In a recent essay, May (2019) suggests that the Multilingual Turn has not fully delivered on its promises, pointing out SLA researchers' continued focus on parallel monolingualisms rather than dynamic bi/multilingualism, the lack of theorization of historicity in sociolinguistic research on the latter, the balkanization of academic knowledge preventing transdisciplinary scholarship, and West-centered methodological nationalism. While I agree with his points, I believe the solution requires more than critical reflexivity, reading beyond our areas of interest, and relinquishing fast-held methodological principles. Scholarly hegemony and disciplinary elitism exist because we are more than minds touting theories and epistemologies. We must acknowledge how we, as researchers, seek cultural prestige and economic well-being by affiliating with the global North and its mechanisms for knowledge production. Given this, I discuss what scholars in both the global North and South can do to reform the discipline to address May's concerns, in terms of one action those in the global South must consistently attempt, and four responsibilities of those in the global North.

Keywords: Multilingual turn; bi/multilingualism; critical applied linguistics

In a recent issue of the *Modern Language Journal*, May (2019) questioned whether the postmodernist movement called "the Multilingual Turn" had really reformed the discipline. He pointed out several areas of concern:

1. the continued lack of communication between SLA researchers and sociolinguists,[1]

2. SLA researchers' practice of doing experimental studies on "the weirdest multilinguals in the world" (p. 124)—middle-class university students who have not done much language learning except in the classroom. They generalize findings about SLA from this highly accessible

population to people in general, rather than studying naturalistic language learners, who became multilingual without formal instruction, and often use their languages *simultaneously;*

3. sociolinguists' embracing of dynamic bi/multilingualism, in which multiple languages are mixed in real life contexts—even though sociolinguists do not adequately consider *historicity* (Kramsch, 2018), which means there is a focus on language practices in place rather than the history behind them. This research, while celebrating dynamic bi/multilingualism, often dodges any negative social consequences of speaking certain languages due to colonialism, linguistic assimilation and standard language ideologies;

4. "methodological nationalism," which means that most research recognized as "revolutionary" comes from the global North.

In short, May argues that the promises of the Multilingual Turn, from a more accurate knowledge of how languages are learned to a deeper understanding of multilingual communication, have not been met. In response, I suggest that the problems above exist because academics are more than minds at work; they are people who seek cultural prestige and economic well-being by affiliating with the global North and its mechanisms for knowledge production. Therefore, in this essay I outline one action that those in the global South must consistently attempt and four actions of those in the global North needed to address the situation.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE STRUGGLE

As someone born in the global South, I ask myself: would I return to my country of birth to research under-studied contexts of bi/multilingualism (even if such research was received just as well by prestigious international journals as research in my present location), and in light of the struggles my parents went through to get us out? This is not to say that I am not a proud member of the diaspora, but as a language teacher, I have encountered many reasons students

and their families move to the global North, such as to escape religious persecution, drug-related violence, or environmental devastation. The "disruption and subversion" (p. 127) that May (2019) describes as necessary to reform the field cannot be achieved unless we researchers decide that we would like to live anywhere, notwithstanding compromises to the salaries we make, the air we breathe, the political freedoms we can exercise, the health and social services we benefit from, the educational opportunities for our children, and the quality of our lives at present and in our old age. Besides, even diaspora scholars moving back to "ancestral areas" may be agents of neo-colonization, with the supposed expertise they bring from abroad. While there have been calls for more reflexivity about the life circumstances of research participants, few have turned the lens of scrutiny onto ourselves (cf. Kubota, 2019).[2]

If we accept that we *will* prioritize self-interest over knowledge advancement, we can take more realistic actions to address the problems May identifies. I describe some of these below.

Greater recognition of geographic and economic materiality

First, we should be honest regarding where "Turns" like the Multilingual Turn come from. Academic revolutions spring as much from economic trends—immigration flows, growth and stagnation of different industries—as scholars' intellectual discoveries and conversations.[3] We get our Turns from the Zeitgeist, the cultural manifestation of large-scale economic processes. Lei and Liu's (2019) survey of the changing research agenda in SLA shows how such economic turns have impacted this field since Chomsky's time. Thus, more attention must be paid to the economic backdrop of knowledge production.

Responsibilities of scholars in the global South

Since research from the periphery of knowledge production is often seen as "less generalizable" as research from the center (Kubota, 2019), only if a study truly adds something new to the field would others be motivated to cite it. A case in point is the *TESOL Quarterly* article that helped launch Canagarajah's career (Canagarajah, 1993). In this study of 22 students in a first-year university EFL course in Sri Lanka, Canagarajah questioned the dichotomy between colonial and local interests in language teaching. On the one hand, students rejected their textbook, which reflected the then-popular Communicative Method, in favor of a decontextualized grammar-translation pedagogy. The reason they sought grammar pedagogy was to pass a high-stakes university exam. Canagarajah concluded by distinguishing between "opposition" and "resistance": just because students oppose a colonial curriculum does not mean they resist it in a way that reflects Freirean critical consciousness, as his students had internalized an oppressive third-space culture in which English led to social stratification in Sri Lanka. Only one student, a young man named Supendran, saw the need to teach English for purposes that would be locally useful, such as English for agricultural engineering. While the situation is uniquely Sri Lankan, it is not difficult to see parallels in many Outer and Expanding Circle countries of English users (Kachru, 1986).

In another original study, this one from Peru, Zavala (2015) presented the case of Silvia, a teacher in a Quechua-Spanish bilingual program for elementary students. Similar to many countries, Peru has undergone indigenous language revitalization that has created a "'dogmatic' or 'expert-type' bilingualism" (p. 25) in which people who are academically fluent in indigenous languages and the standard variety of the national language act as gatekeepers for emergent bilinguals. Zavala laments that these people represent the ideal bilingual speaker as "two monolinguals in one body," sanctioning translanguaging, engaging in strategic essentialism (e.g.,

"Quechua topics" should be discussed in Quechua), and doubting Quechua can be taught by second language speakers. In addition, Quechua language revitalization policy discourse refers to a Spanish-speaking urban population and a Quechua-speaking Andean population, though both groups know some of both languages. Although Silvia was eager to learn from Quechua experts, she was intimidated by them. She also tried to implement total Quechua immersion when she first began teaching, but as time passed, she developed a translingual pedagogy that raised the cultural capital of her Quechua-dominant students, while Spanish-dominant students appreciated that she taught them Quechua with patience. Although Silvia engaged students in critical discussions about language, asking students what Spanish colonizers did to speakers of Quechua, her main daily strategy was a flexible bilingual pedagogy in everyday interactions: "Instead of emphasizing the interrogation of dominant language ideologies, she actively dismantles them" (Zavala, 2015, p. 25).

In an innovative study from India, Mathew (2017) pointed out that non-elites need a functional literacy in English but have little use for it for oral communication. Hence, valorizing English as oral communication positions these people as deficient and devalues their (mostly) receptive textual skills. This could be seen in the reforms that took place in an elementary school in Kerala. Mathew interviewed seven textbook writers and state project officers associated with two national education projects, and attended four teacher training programs. Her main conclusions (p. 5) were that (1) "reforms urged teachers and students to resist locally relevant literacy practices, which were the primary linguistic resources available," and (2) "reforms explicitly defined linguistic and pedagogic expertise and morality around oral proficiency but implicitly retained expectations of literary proficiency." Although opportunities to practice reading were severely limited, on a national standardized test, students had to write an imaginary

conversation, write thoughts on a protagonist, write a picture description, and write a rhyming poem. Ultimately, teachers were left to deal with the following paradox (p. 21): "(1) oral interaction in the classroom is the primary teaching method and (2) student proficiencies in English can be documented only if they are written." Mathew wrote in defense of a local practice called the daily morning news activity, in which students took note of a few newspaper items and shared these with the class. She argued that the normalization of literacy practices that were common in more privileged contexts devalued the more viable and effective practices in her own. Her case speaks not only to the relationship between "professional development" handed down from the global North to the global South, but such "development" handed down from more and less privileged schools in the United States.

I present these examples to illustrate the originality called for from scholars in the global South, beyond becoming well versed in theories, epistemologies, and pedagogies from the global North.

Responsibilities of scholars in the global North

For their part, scholars in the global North should practice temperance. Four ways of doing so are discussed below.

Avoiding revolutionary rhetoric. Pavlenko (2019) points out that "superdiversity" only became a popular construct in sociolinguistics due to the increasing diversity in Western European countries that had relatively homogenous populations united through nationalist discourse from the 18th to the 20th centuries—even though such levels of cultural and linguistic diversity have existed elsewhere for centuries. Moreover, she notes that in some of the former Soviet States, mass emigration has led to less diversity. Thus, intellectual movements may be more of a reflection of the global North's evolving economic and cultural concerns than a

reflection of the progression of knowledge. If so, instead of presenting our studies couched in revolutionary rhetoric, we should spell out in what ways the frameworks we draw on are appropriate to our contexts and what contexts they would likely be inappropriate for, supporting our claims with research by scholars worldwide—and citing these studies.

Limiting citations. Scholars in the global South face the daunting task of keeping up with research from the global North, which must be used to frame studies submitted to prestigious journals, also based in the global North. In order to enter the disciplinary conversation, a scholar in the global South or a teaching professional must (1) download 50–70 sources that would cost thousands of dollars if these downloads are not made free by a well-resourced university's library subscriptions or Open Access publishing, and (2) read about a thousand pages of text. This is not to mention journal reviewers, who may abuse their broker status by forcing author(s) to mitigate claims that challenge the reviewers' theories (Lillis & Curry, 2006).[4]

The very least that scholars in the global North could do is curb bibliographic inflation: is it possible to write the same study with two thirds of the references? While background knowledge is required to enter a disciplinary conversation, there is no need to "crank up the treadmill speed" to the point that those who do not have easy access to the literature, or those who lack time to read full-length articles, find it overly hard to do so.

Bending genres. In case studies of three doctoral students at an American university in Japan, Casanave (2010) argued that advisors need to facilitate innovation and not only academic acculturation. Examining exemplary dissertations, she found that they did not follow a standard format and showcased the authors' voices, or individual writing styles. Further, she argued that resistance against formulaic writing did not only operate on the level of engagement but was key

to making an academically sound argument.[5] The ability to negotiate academic conventions, especially in scholarly writing, can only be achieved with good mentoring.

Redefining "quality work." Journal editors expect familiarity with the existing knowledge base, methodological rigor, and clear writing. I do not dispute that these are essential. However, going beyond intuiting whether an author is a disciplinary insider who, if they are not obviously a seasoned scholar, must be a well-trained graduate student, editors should also inquire: "Does this study yield trustworthy information about an under-researched population or context?" If the population or context is frequently researched, editors can ask: "Did the author(s) at least address under-asked research questions and front these in their study?" Notwithstanding the social constructionist paradigm in the social sciences, our job is to construct *tentative knowledge* and share it as widely and effectively as possible for a range of audiences— not to produce mere *discourse* for the appropriation of university administrators, politicians, or even members of the public to acquire grants and pay raises for ourselves. Even the graduate student living paycheck-to-paycheck has an enormous degree of privilege compared to some of their research participants, such as elderly immigrants or refugee children. We might also consider how some of our friends and family outside of academia are serving society in practical ways, and let that inspire our research ethics.

CONCLUSIONS

In this essay, I have sought to highlight connections between theories, epistemologies, and methodologies and researchers' quest for cultural, social, and economic capital (Norton, 2013). Only by recognizing these, and how they affect our work, can we make more realistic calls for reform to address the concerns put forth by May and others. While a collective effort is important to implement the practices described above, each can be performed at the individual

level as well. It is my hope that future years will not only produce more turns like the

Multilingual Turn, but turns of critical reflexivity unto ourselves.

REFERENCES

Canagarajah, A. S. (1993). Critical ethnography of a Sri Lankan classroom: Ambiguities in

student opposition to reproduction through ESOL. *TESOL Quarterly*, *27*, 601-626.

Casanave, C. P. (2010). Taking risks?: A case study of three doctoral students writing qualitative

dissertations at an American university in Japan. *Journal of Second Language

Writing*, *19*, 1-16.

Flores, N. (2013). The unexamined relationship between neoliberalism and plurilingualism: A

cautionary tale. *TESOL Quarterly*, *47*, 500-520.

Kachru, B. B. (1986). *The alchemy of English: The spread, models and functions of non-

native Englishes.* New York: Pergamon.

Kramsch, C. (2018). Trans-spatial utopias. *Applied Linguistics*, *39*, 108-115.

Kubota, R. (2019). Confronting epistemological racism, decolonizing scholarly knowledge: Race

and gender in Applied Linguistics. *Applied Linguistics*. Advance online publication.

https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amz033

Lei, L., & Liu, D. (2019). The research trends and contributions of *System*'s publications over

the past four decades (1973–2017): A bibliometric analysis. *System*, *80*, 1-13.

Lillis, T., & Curry, M. J. (2006). Professional academic writing by multilingual scholars:

Interactions with literacy brokers in the production of English-medium texts. *Written

Communication*, *23*, 3-35.

Mathew, L. (2017). Mandated resistance, embodied shame: The material and affective contours

of a TESOL method. *TESOL Quarterly, 52,* 748-771.

May, S. (2019). Negotiating the Multilingual Turn in SLA. *The Modern Language Journal*, *103*

(Supplement 2019), 122-129.

Norton, B. (2013). *Identity and language learning: Extending the conversation*. Bristol:

Multilingual Matters.

Pavlenko, A. (2019). Superdiversity and why it isn't: Reflections on terminological innovation

and academic branding. In B. Schmenk, S. Breidbach & Lutz Küster (Eds.),

Sloganization in language education discourse (pp. 142-168). Bristol: Multilingual

Matters.

Zavala, V. (2015). "It will emerge if they grow fond of it": Translanguaging and power in

Quechua teaching. *Linguistics and Education*, *32*, 16-26.

---

[1] SLA (Second Language Acquisition) researchers study how languages are learned through input, output and interaction, often controlling variables in lab- or classroom-based studies. Sociolinguists study a wide range of social contexts of language use that may lead to language acquisition.

[2] As one reviewer pointed out, such reflexivity exists in anthropology, for instance questioning one's process of "going native," even though that is also contested terrain.

[3] This is not to deny that there are scholarly trends—as May (2019) and others (e.g., Flores, 2013; Kubota, 2019; Pavlenko, 2019) have pointed out, there is nothing new about multilingualism, transnationalism, and diversity. Multilingual Turn scholarship simply challenges the first two generations of SLA research, which focused on discrete languages since it mainly concerned university learners of foreign languages. That is, the research agenda was narrow, but the theoretical paradigm fit the context. (I am grateful to the reviewer who clarified this historical point.)

[4] While transactions with unfair gatekeepers are not unique to scholars in the global South, they are disadvantaged due to their weaker authority to initiate scholary fads and their limited access to the latest publications.

[5] One reviewer noted that Casanave (2010) might have imposed "a liberal American qualitative research approach and genre on a group of students in a country (Japan) where such approaches and genres are not well understood or valued—potentially putting those students' future careers at risk." Even if this were the case, it is not this approach that I am advocating but the negotiation of conventions as an important skill to develop in novice scholars.