Transfer and Translingualism

Rebecca Lorimer Leonard and Rebecca Nowacek

The happy coincidence of our collaboration belies an unhappy truth about the divide between work done in the areas of transfer and translingualism. Rebecca Nowacek began her dissertation thinking about interdisciplinarity but shifted some years ago to understanding her work as focused on transfer of learning among various disciplinary and co-curricular studies. Rebecca Lorimer Leonard began her research tracing the movement of immigrants’ literacy practices among languages and geographical locations, finding in the process how porous the boundaries are of both language and location. It was only the serendipity of a mutual friend suggesting that we three might form a panel on the implications of transfer of learning in writing centers (which we all direct) that brought our work together. Both of us, we are a bit ashamed to admit, were initially slow to see the rich connections between our work—but once we did, neither of us could see our own projects in quite the same way again.

We are not alone in our earlier inability to see the connections between transfer and translingualism, a situation exacerbated, perhaps even created, by overlooking the multiple meanings redolent in both terms. In what follows, we start by identify-

Rebecca Lorimer Leonard has been an NCTE member since 2002 and is an assistant professor in the Department of English at University of Massachusetts Amherst, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on literacy studies, language diversity, and research methods. She also currently directs the UMass Amherst Writing Center. Professor Lorimer Leonard has published in *Written Communication, College English, WPA: Writing Program Administration, and Research in the Teaching of English*. In 2014, she received the Promising Researcher Award from NCTE. Rebecca S. Nowacek joined NCTE in 2000 and is associate professor of English at Marquette University, where she directs the Norman H. Ott Memorial Writing Center. Professor Nowacek’s research focuses on transfer of learning and writing across the disciplines. Her publications include *Agents of Integration: Understanding Transfer as a Rhetorical Act, Literacy Economy and Power, and Citizenship across the Curriculum*; her work has also appeared in *College Composition and Communication, College English, and Research in the Teaching of English*. Rebecca was a Carnegie Scholar with the Carnegie Foundation’s CASTL program and the recipient of Marquette University’s Robert and Mary Gettel Faculty Award for Teaching Excellence.

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In the confluences between definitions of these terms, then continue by reflecting on the ways in which emerging translingual perspectives might inform, as well as be informed by, studies of transfer of learning.

Over the last several years, questions about transfer of learning initially taken up by scholars studying first-year writing have gathered attention throughout the field of rhetoric and composition: conference sessions devoted to transfer have skyrocketed, the Elon Seminar on Critical Transitions facilitated multi-institutional research projects as well as an international conference, and a special issue on transfer appeared in Composition Forum. In everyday usage, the term transfer suggests a process of application, of carrying knowledge and skills from an earlier experience and employing them, to greater or lesser effect, in a subsequent context. When colleagues, parents, and employers worry about transfer of learning, that anxiety most often focuses on whether students are using what they have already learned (or at least been exposed to) to succeed in a new context. Within transfer scholarship, a more dynamic understanding of transfer has emerged, one that emphasizes the potential for disruption and transformation. The term transfer also has a terminological history in applied linguistics, especially in second language acquisition and English for academic purposes (see for example DePalma and Ringer; James, “Learning Transfer”; James, “Motivation”; Leki and Carson). For some scholars, the term transfer carries behaviorist notions that a known language can negatively “interfere” with the acquisition of another. For these reasons, some scholars prefer using “cross-linguistic influence” over “transfer” to explain how knowledge of one language can affect the knowledge and use of another (Jarvis and Pavlenko; Sharwood Smith and Kellerman). That the word transfer resonates so differently is neither surprising nor troubling—but it does suggest the value of bringing into dialogue the multiple ways the term has been valued, interrogated, and even deromanticized.

Translingualism’s multiple meanings come from recent work within composition studies that reminds the field of the fluidity of language use in writing (Alvarez; Canagarajah, Literacy; Horner et al.; Lu and Horner), as well as scholarship in adjacent fields that highlights the agentive and ideological qualities of writers’ language repertoires (Creese and Blackledge; Garcia and Wei; Makoni and Pennycook). We elaborate these layers of definition to illuminate the connections between transfer and translingualism but also to add a note of caution: though transfer and translingualism both index movement among contexts, practices, or meanings with their shared trans prefix, neither suggests a neutral carrying over of knowledge from one context or language to another. In fact, the definitions here offer a reminder that composing is an activity carried out in language varieties that bring their sociopolitical histories to any given writing context.

For example, etymologically, transfer invokes a process of “carrying across,” suggesting a simple movement from one location to another. However, research shows
that transfer of writing abilities involves much more than the mere application of writing skills and knowledge to a new situation; Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak, to take one example, offer a typology of how writers employ prior knowledge, including assemblage, remix, and critical incidents. A translingual perspective similarly emphasizes communicative practices as agentive negotiation, as in Canagarajah’s and Young’s work on code-meshing (Canagarajah, “Place”; Young). Indeed, in both areas of study, writing practices are viewed not as static possessions that can be carried and applied, but as emergent and in-process activities sensitive to an immediate context.

Transfer and translingualism, then, share definitional aspects that make their potential alignment clear, yet each could still benefit from considering the other’s research questions, theoretical frames, and methodologies. More specifically, transfer scholarship might be informed by a translingual approach to composition in two main ways.

Because a translingual approach focuses on the ideological status of language in writing—emphasizing that writing in standard English is never neutral, for example—it foregrounds and complicates issues of power in communication. This reminds transfer scholars to also account for language ideologies in the writing skills, knowledge, and contexts studied. For instance, a scholar studying the transfer of writing-related knowledge from first-year composition (FYC) to writing in the disciplines might ask how a more tolerant attitude toward language varieties in FYC might affect a writer’s sense of options and actual choices in subsequent classes. This scholar might further ask how the varieties used in these multiple settings endorse certain language beliefs and values that are assessed by instructors in any given instance of transfer. Such teacherly values and beliefs are not about the writing skill alone but also about the language varieties and rhetorical strategies used to make that writing skill visible and valuable to an instructor. While transfer studies in composition have devoted a great deal of thought to double binds, dispositions, and the role of reflection, they have not yet attended in sustained, systematic ways to language negotiation, despite the fact that such choices and navigations are indeed being made, even among primarily monolingual students and instructors. More intentional interplay between transfer and translingualism is poised to open new directions of research.

But it’s not just that a translingual approach would promote more exploration of the role of language in transfer, important as that contribution may be. More fundamentally, translingualism might challenge some persistent assumptions about how to recognize and evaluate transfer in ways that could profoundly influence the work of instructors as well as researchers. Because a translingual approach treats language difference as a locus of meaning rather than a problem, transfer researchers might reorient their understanding of what has caused a transfer attempt to fail—and what, in fact, constitutes failure. Translingualism asks what a language difference or deviation does, how it functions “expressively, rhetorically, communicatively” and
“for whom, under what conditions, and how” (Horner et al. 303–4). Both transfer and translingualism acknowledge that writers do make mistakes and do not always have complete control over communicative production. But under a translingual approach, language deviations in writing can be considered not always failure to transfer standard writing knowledge, but instead a norm of language-in-practice, one of its meaning-making functions. Sometimes what looks like a messy text—riddled with errors, seeming to ignore the assignment—might be a textual manifestation of the intellectually adventurous, rhetorically challenging work of negotiating the overlap of knowledges, identities, and languages.

This stance toward linguistic diversity challenges dominant frameworks for studying transfer. If difference serves as a source of meaning, then it is not always a problem to be eliminated with more effective strategies for “teaching for transfer” (an idea also suggested by Nowacek’s transfer matrix and similar to Bawarshi’s claim in this issue that genre difference is not “deviation . . . but . . . the norm of all genre performance” [244]). Quite understandably, most studies look for evidence of transfer; it is their raison d’être. Sometimes, though, they are forced to identify instances of what are generally called zero and negative transfer. As instructors and colleagues, we worry when students don’t seem to make use of what they’ve learned from high school in college or from FYC in their other coursework; worse yet, we are haunted by the possibility of prior learning negatively affecting or interfering with subsequent coursework (much as research cited earlier investigated interference on a target language to be acquired).

But a translingual approach—one emphasizing differences as a locus of meaning—might ask some critical questions of the search for evidence of transfer. Where, for instance, does the evidence of transfer (or zero transfer, or negative transfer) lie? In an instructor’s grade? In a writer’s retrospective account given to an interviewer with an agenda that may seem more or less transparent to the writer? In analyses of texts guided by the criteria set by instructors and/or researchers? None of these sources of evidence of transfer are inherently flawed; but they are, a translingual approach points out, inevitably limited, because these processes of data collection and analysis tacitly assume that the goal is a visible application of knowledge from Context A in Context B. A perspective that embraces the meaning-making nature of differences and ostensible “deviations” might encourage transfer researchers to attend more carefully to when ruptures exist, how they function, and for whom.

For instance, a translingual approach to zero and negative transfer might look something like the work of Reiff and Bawarshi’s study of boundary crossers and boundary guarders. This study begins to shift, subtly but significantly, the ways in which researchers conceptualize “negative transfer.” Importantly, the construct of boundary crossers and guarders directs attention back to the motives, resources, and identities of the individual writers who are making (and sometimes resisting) these
connections. A translingual approach to transfer might continue to alter the lens of inquiry in this way, turning attention toward the racial, gendered, institutional, economic, and class-based components of linguistic diversity: beyond recognition of difference to the matrices of power that regulate that difference; beyond individual writing subjects to relationships among subjects and the writing contexts they enter.

Moving in the reverse direction to consider how a translingual approach might benefit from transfer research, we are inspired most by the methodological possibilities suggested by the transfer literature. Although the need for other types of research (e.g., multi-institutional studies) has become increasingly clear, a review of the transfer literature demonstrates the value of fine-grained, long-term, naturalistic studies of writing (Beaufort, Carroll, Herrington & Curtis, McCarthy, Roozen, Sternglass, Wardle, Yancey et al.)—a value that might be productively taken up in research on a translingual approach.

When we turn our attention to composition scholarship that adopts or promotes a translingual perspective, we primarily find theoretical (Horner et al.; Horner, Donahue, and NeCamp; Ray) or single-writer or single-classroom case studies (Canagarajah, “Codemeshing”; Lu and Horner; Lueck). While foundational, much of the theoretical work could benefit from the descriptive examples “that document the efforts of students” (as called for by Gilyard in this issue) provided by methods taken up in transfer. And while demonstrative, the single-writer or single-classroom focus can inhibit a sense of relevance to broad classroom or institutional settings. The longitudinal and cross-classroom methodologies often seen in transfer research could make a translingual approach more immediately relevant to those who might otherwise dismiss it as not applicable to their students or institution. Moving forward, both transfer and translingualism could consider how the movement suggested by their prefix blurs rather than reinforces boundaries writers are crossing. To do this, research in both areas might need a more robust understanding of how writing moves across both time (longitudinal) and space (cross-contextual).

Thus, these seemingly separate areas share much. Both transfer and translingualism are experiencing significant currency and burgeoning debates, with each seeming to speak to contemporary puzzles encountered in our daily work. Both have origins in but depart from long conversations in cognitive psychology, second language writing, and integrative learning. Moving forward, perhaps both transfer and translingualism might be best understood not as prescribed pedagogies or policies, but as terms with explanatory value: small theories that help open up changing practices in our writing lives.

Works Cited


