

Foreword: Intercultural and Conceptual Translatability

ESBB is a forum that attempts to cultivate the notion of ‘intercultural translatability’. In this foreword, I will attempt to summarize what we mean by this notion that we have been developing over the years. I feel this is important in an ESBB foreword because the notion helps us rationalize what we are able to translate, adjust and apply in our own contexts from those insights that our ESBB interlocutors have shared from their own very different cultural setting. I also feel that it is a useful metaphor in a broader sense, as it may help us understand the complex processes of intercultural communication, whether in academic or other contexts.

In this issue we present a very diverse range of papers. John Unger (A Usage-Based Approach to Sentence-Level Writing and Critical Thinking with Digital Video) develops his work on transitional literacy (See also his traditional literacy webpage <https://transitional-literacy.org> which is an excellent resource for anyone teaching university literacy classes.) Neslihan Bilikozen (Academic Literacy Development and Identity Construction Interrelations: The Freshman Experience) looks at the needs of freshman students from a different perspective, raising important issues about their identity construction during this transitional period. In my own contribution with Caroline Brandt and Tanju Deveci (Transparency, Subjectivity and Objectivity in Academic Texts), we investigate the notion of ‘subjectivity’ and ‘objectivity’ in academic text. This also relates to the inevitability of the authors’ identity influencing the (scientific) text context. All these topics require an effort of ‘translation’ across contexts by those teaching university writing classes. Ahmet Acar (Devising Classroom Activities for English as an International Language Pedagogy) shares practical teaching activities that work in his context, a monolingual context in Turkey in which Ahmet wants to encourage an international perspective in an ELT context. In his African context Mzukisi Kepe (Teaching English as a Social Practice: A Practical Guide) shares another practical guide devised in one context that is translatable across contexts. The context is unique but the way this approach to teaching a language as a social practice was put into practice under difficult circumstances can inspire us beyond its context. Danny Courtney (“Is there a she?” and “Do you play sex?” The importance of Conceptual Fluency for Japanese Learners of English) deals with an issue that is rooted in the Japanese context, but is eminently translatable beyond borders. In this paper the students are supported in their need to translate *conceptually* across languages and cultures.

In Nunn et al. (2011) we summarized the conceptual notion of translatability in relation to our own research into project-based learning as follows:

Our notion of intercultural ‘translatability’ is based on our experiential assumption that no approach can be transferred directly from one local context to another. However, we also assume that we can all find something from an approach designed in one context that is ‘translatable’ to enhance our own local context. (Nunn et al., 2011, p.10)

We elaborate on this point in relation to our principles of critical argumentation. We provide evidence that these are usefully applied in our own context, but warn readers that principles do not

allow automatic transferability, or to maintain the metaphor of translation, they do not allow literal translation:

We do not assume that our own ten principles are automatically transferable to other contexts or other courses. The notion of ‘translatability’ best represents our view. In other words, the principles – whether for critical reasoning or for SLA- will need reinventing in every new context in which they are used. Similarly, it should not be assumed that students will automatically reapply these principles in other courses even in the same institution. Transferability is more complex than that. In other disciplines, concepts such as analysis have something in common but have subtly different meanings, possibly even radically different meanings. Skills gained in one context can soon lie dormant if not needed and emphasized in others. They need reinforcing, reapplying and reinventing within a framework that both requires and encourages their use. (Nunn et al., 2011, p.47)

This is similar to the notion of ‘transferability as defined below in terms of intercultural communication:

Transferability is the ability to use, adjust or develop knowledge and skills learnt in one context in unknown and often unpredictable contexts. All communication can require us to deal with the unpredictable but Intercultural Communicators need to be even more prepared for the unexpected. (Nunn, 2011, p. 11)

In the ESBB 2016 foreword, I argued that knowledge is continually reconstructed in each new and unique context in which it is applied. It is from this perspective that participants in our non-blind review approach present their papers in this 2018 issue. We learn about other contexts and we reevaluate our own. They are less impervious to innovation than we may sometimes think. The ideas and activities in this issue are all created to be shared and applied... assuming the effort of appropriation through conceptual translation. Something may be lost in translation, but something valuable will be added too.

References

Nunn, R. (2011). Introduction. In R. Nunn & S. Sivasubramaniam (Eds.), *From defining EIL competence to designing EIL learning* (pp. 4–30). Published by the Asian EFL Journal Press for the EIL Journal.

Nunn, R., Brandt, C. & Deveci, T. (2016) Project-Based Learning as a Holistic Learning Framework: Integrating 10 Principles of Critical Reasoning and Argumentation. *Asian ESP Journal* 12 [2] Special Issue: Sun Ya and Haiying Feng Eds), pp. 9-53.