

Episode 42: Eunjeong Lee

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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In this episode I talk with Eunjeong Lee about multilingual writers, teaching second language writing, critical approaches to language and literacy studies, multimodality, and translanguaging practices.

Eunjeong Lee is an Assistant Professor of Linguistics and Rhetoric and Composition at University of Houston. Her research centers around literacy practices of multilingual writers, the politics of language, language ideologies and equity issues in teaching of literacy and literacy teacher education, and decolonial language and literacy education. Her work has appeared in *Composition Forum*, *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, *World Englishes*, and *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, and in edited collections such as *Crossing Divides* and *Translinguistics*.

Eunjeong, thank you so much for joining us.

SW: I want to start with your teaching and research interests involving multilingual writers, specifically your attention to embracing a critical approach to language and literacy studies. Do you mind talking more about what this critical approach to language looks like and how this approach applies to teaching second language writing?

EL: First of all, I'm really honored to be recognized as somebody who can talk about critical approach to language and literacy studies. I strive to working towards that goal and following many scholars, their footsteps in both applied linguistics and language research, broadly conceived, and also literacy studies, including composition and rhetoric. I think for me, a critical approach to language and literacy studies, really the key is centering the issue of power and ideology and how that's intersected and more specifically going to reproduce through structure. So these are also tied to the social ecologies and inequalities and inequity, right? And kind of the role that language specifically plays in them. So the basic idea to me is always to reveal that our language and literacy use or practice or evaluation is not neutral and it reflects and reproduces the power difference, in differential social categories whatever that may be.

Particularly for teaching second language writing, I think, broadly speaking, my understanding of second language writing and who is often discussed as part of the second English writing. I guess students discuss many writers who have different relationships or form different relationships with English in different ways. I'm specifically talking about English because that's my focus in terms of second language writing. But these writers often, in a different way, are positioned under different oppressive systems that focus on monolingual ideology and operates along other ideologies like standard language ideology, racial linguistic ideology, and...so, you know, Asao Inoue has most recently termed as "white language supremacy." So this to me works in many different ways, including how we think about...kind of influencing how we think about what "good writing" is and who can be a "good writer" and who is considered as "legitimate writer."

So for me, taking this approach in teaching second language writing particularly is helping, thinking along with our students, basically to be more sensitive to this aspect of language use and be more mindful in their performance or in their positionality as a writer in writing. I think that's for me, that's how it looks.

SW: So you emphasize how language is connected to social systems and structures. In short, how language is linked to power. You talk about how ideologies inform how language is perceived, and you value linguistic justice and language equality. How do you frame these conversations in class? What practices do you use to invite students to think through inequalities and inequities attached or associated with language?

EL: I think the key thing is to opening up a space or creating a space with students to talk about this. How these ideologies work in different ways in real life and what experience and practices they...what experience and practices are out there. And we ourselves actually go through that, that has been always important, but in doing so more importantly for me, one thing that critical approach has taught me is over the years, along with different frameworks, I think taking this approach meant foremost what experience and practice I am able to provide or rebuild together as a class, rather than focusing on what kind of form or final product they will be producing. So if I...when I switched my mind to more of process and practice, it made me be less concerned about, "Okay, here is the three assignments that they're going to complete, and here's the three jobs that they're going to do."

Of course they're important, but I think I prioritize more of experience and practice. So how do I produce that? How do I provide that? Or how do we create that together? And as a result, byproduct of that will be a particular form of writing, right? So that kind of connection between experience and embodiment and product has been core to me. But more specifically, this allowed me to kind of think about the core principle of language and literacy learning, which is any good language or literacy learning as any human beings learn has to be contextualized and embodied, right? So it's not just learning skills, but you are experiencing it and you have your form of sincere and genuine embodied relationship with the thing that you're learning. So just to be more

specific in my own class right now at Queens College, I have a privilege of designing my class the way I want in terms of same or assignment.

I mean, there are general specific departments, but what I do with my students with that is I focus on multilingualism and navigating multilingual realities in a context here in Queens. So my students talk about language ideologies, different language ideologies that shaped the way we think about writing and we understand and value different language and literacy in certain ways. And a lot of my students have...they themselves are trans-nationals in different ways and immigrants in different ways. So they bring a lot of experience, firsthand experience of inequalities and inequities they experienced through school or outside school. I try to get them to reflect on their experiences and be able to kind of articulate what it is that influenced their experiences and why they had to experience those moments both individually, but also kind of tied to the structure that thrust into their whole life experience, both here and also other parts of the world that they have ties to because these ideologies are not just in the U.S. Right? These ideologies are not unique to English only.

So they continue this conversation. They first begin this conversation by looking inward, kind of telling the moments where they noticed these ideologies, how they impacted them. And the first assignment, often times, is a narrative, literacy narrative. And then they continue this conversation by extending this with other community members. So they interview them and they collect literacy artifacts from them. They do this empirical inquiry, borrowing from ethnography methods. So they look at the firsthand primary data and analyze them in class and write a report. So if I talk in terms of the genre, they write this kind of research paper, right? And then the final reflection that evolving reflection oftentimes culminates in the form of multimodal remix project, where they kind of frame it as a response to everything that they have learned and share it with the public.

I think those are usually the sequence that I have built over the last two or three years. To start from within and really engage in reflective practice throughout the semester, but kind of expanding out so that they kind of start this conversation, not just with themselves, but with others and ultimately have something really...share something that they would like to say about that in a context bigger than the classroom, engaging in different language and modalities.

SW: You center student experiences to talk about language politics. So you draw on these lived experiences to deconstruct systemic ideologies. Is that right?

EL: Yes, absolutely. And, I got to read their reflections, and it was really interesting to see how they all commented in one way or another that they realize their stories are not just individual: "So it's just something that I experienced." And then, period, it's not that...they listen to each other, they collect stories from their community members or friends or families or somebody they admire. And they noticed that this there's a pattern, right? I think there is some power to that. The first, it gives a language for them to talk about. It's not just individual, it's much bigger than that. There are things that people have actually studied. This is an academic topic, which

goes to the second point, which is this personal experience and academic inquiry are not something separate. So that's something that they are surprised by a lot.

I think starting with their individual story first makes them feel like I don't have anything interesting to say. But then they ultimately see how that's not just individual, but also this is academic inquiry, too, that people want to hear lived experiences, and sometimes all the knowledge in academia actually doesn't represent what they're going through as sharp as it can. I think that's something that I have been trying to hone over the years, like starting from students' stories, but how do we go beyond just sharing your individual story? And just to me, I mean, individual stories are really good and they need to be cherished the way they are, but I think it can be powerful if we go beyond that and kind of say something at the structure, because that's something that really needs to change, right. To go beyond the status quo.

SW: It seems like you're also embracing a multimodal approach to teaching and using technologies to do this work as well.

EL: Yes, absolutely. And this is something that me and my colleagues, Sarah Alvarez and Amy Wan discussed. I'm glad that I got a chance to talk about this. Technology is absolutely important at this point. Now we are under the pandemic where remote learning has become the essential way for all of us, both students and educators and practitioners, to learn and is deeply connected to the inequities and inequalities that we have witnessed more in an amplified and magnified way. I think the important thing is that our students already bring so much sensitivity and rich writing experiences. Also, the labor that goes into these experiences, both in kind of alphabetic texts, of course, over multiple languages and different modalities while kind of interacting and navigating with different writing apps that they already have on their phones. And I think, like anything, our job as a writing teacher...I think it begins with the recognizing and honoring richness and complexity in what our students already do with language.

And we should foster and foreground these opportunities of writing beyond a monolingual and monomodal way because often these platforms allow us and also students to kind of experience language and writing much more expansive and embodied ways. It also shows that our students...both us and our students, the different possibilities of languaging and writing to kind of transform "academic writing." We oftentimes have a very fixed understanding of what "academic writing" should be. These are great opportunities for us to kind of engage in, to see the way we write is actually a lot more embodied. And these platforms allow us to kind of show that. But also importantly, it's important to think that it is possible to do all this work with what's available in our own institutional structure. Although, unfortunately, oftentimes with limited materialities, this means we have to engage in a lot more labor, more explicitly and more conscientiously...because of the inequitable structure, I think this work becomes even more important.

SW: So I want to focus back on second language writing. What are some key issues in the teaching and research of second language writing?

EL: Yeah, that's a really great question. One issue that we go over and over, especially these last few years, has been, where the kind of balance between how we work against white language supremacy or monolingual ideology while also helping students to expand their language repertoire. I think where's the line or choosing one over the other. I think that has been the key issue because oftentimes working against monolingual ideology, monolingual English ideology, or a standard language ideology in general has been taken to mean that all we value, plurality in the way people use language and pick up language and negotiate creatively, use language error to communicate their positionality and standpoint right. But at the same time, I think one of the things that people worry about is you need to know enough about the language to be able to engage in that.

And that's one side of...one comment that people make. Therefore, we need to teach standard English, for sure. That's important. That's limited, but that's for the language the students to be able to function in. I think that's one kind of comment on the other. I also am aware that's not enough. We just need to change the way we think about what's the "legitimate" language that we can make meaning. And we can function as a citizen and also in the 21st century and in multilingual realities. So I think in second language writing people are often kind of caught between these kind of two ideas and oftentimes aligned words. We need to teach them English or we don't need to teach English. So I think that's a key issue.

I don't think that these are necessarily mutually exclusive. It doesn't have to be, but that's...I mean, this conversation has a serious consequence, right? On both the individual level, but also as a field. Because academics definitely...academics are definitely one of the groups that benefit from acquisition or near mastery of standard English, because we publish in standard English, standard written English and we produce standard written English in the way we talk about it right. I think this is a really fine line that I wish we continue to talk more about. Because I'm not sure if we have worked, maybe I shouldn't say, "have worked," we are trying to encourage and engage in this cross-disciplinary or transdisciplinary conversations about this. But when it comes to what's reality, people don't always work together, right? I mean, schools work in their own local setting and each state has its own standards.

This is going to be a huge conversation that we need to continue to kind of work together, but how we are going to materialize in policy and actual standards and state testing and in any way that we use writing to evaluate students. That's all, that's a really, really big issue. At least in the classroom level, I think there are ways, particular principles, to be more encouraged and discussed more explicitly. When we talk about change, I think people want to imagine, "So what this looks like, right?" That's the first question that you asked, what does this look like?

We need to be able to picture this kind of together. This is what it looks like. I think we have a lot of principles, but maybe we haven't painted the picture clear enough. There's always concern for that because that may look like this is the way, right. But I think we need more work that shows this is how we can look at teaching English, that doesn't necessarily mean that your

demanding monolingual ideology. I think we need more of this work that shows the possibilities. So translation of principles doesn't look just theoretical.

SW: Maybe we can talk a bit more about practice and your co-authored chapter, "Translingual Practice, Ethnic Identity, and Voice in Writing." You talk about your experience as a graduate student and how you "became keenly aware of [your] ethnic identity" when a teacher asked for your interpretation of a text because your ethnic identity. After, you also share your experience as a teacher in the writing classroom, how students perceive your identity, and how you have conversations with them about identity. Do you mind talking more about how translingual practice helps us better understand ethnic identity?

EL: That piece was written such a long time ago. Ever since I wrote that piece, I continue to think about that, and you were just asking that question, made me realize, "Huh? How am I...do I still think the same way or differently?" If differently, "What else have I learned, or do I interpret the two incidences the same way?" But I mean, in reflecting back, I think my contribution to that piece was mainly the issue of essentialization and how translingual practices kind of help us to think beyond that, and I still do think that, but I think maybe I'll go back a little bit. I think that particular story that I shared was to show the people of the essentialized view of ethnic identity, that kind of reinforces the idea of one language and one ethnic ethnicity or nation, which is also the pillar that operates monolingual ideology, right.

It's problematic because that connection very much simplifies the multiple forms of connection that one person has to the country and to the ethnic identity. Because as soon as you put the label on it, then it kind of erases all the other complexity...kind of draws a line as it's a fixed thing and static thing. I think this gaze operates within the monolingual ideology to me and with the interaction with my students. I think it's interesting because they did want to confirm whether I was Korean or not. But I think that gaze was not necessarily the same as the one that I felt in the classroom with my professor who wanted my interpretation. It's mainly because, to me, the students came from a different place than the professor. They came from a place of desire to connect and care and co-exist. I think one point to be made in this is that my translingual practices, although I'm technically the same person, if somebody would put a label on me, I would remain the same, right.

I was an international student. I was Korean and an English speaker, and I was a graduate student. I was female, Asian, but my translingual practices across these two different spaces were interpreted differently and appreciated differently in different spaces. And in that particular setting with my students, I feel like my translingual practice was...I interpret, as a nod to them. That I am with you, I hear you, I co-exist with you, I understand. But with the professor, it wasn't interpreted that way because even after that conversation when I actually tried to fully adapt, I guess, now I can call that a translingual practice, because I really tried to fully adapt all the different backgrounds that I have as a person, and tried to write a paper and it wasn't welcome at all. So I only existed in a way that he expected me to exist in that space, right?

I think that was one point we made that translingual practices are always appreciated and valued differently. Given the positionality, and what particular dominant gaze, that we are functioning under. Another point, on another level, I think this point is maybe what you were asking me, in the original question. Translingual practices helped me kind of think about ethnic identity that emphasizes the fact that it continues to evolve and be more fluid, compared to the way that ethnic identity is understood in the monolingual lens, which was the gaze that I got from the professor, right. You're Korean. You think about this particular issue from a position that I subject you to. Translingual practices give me a language to think about ethnic identity in a different way, think about identity...the connection between identity and language in a much more open-ended way.

One example I still think about is, it's not from this chapter, but the conversation that I have with my students...“Spanish is my language, but would I call myself a Spanish speaker or what would...my parents are from Peru, but would I say I'm Peruvian?” It's a lot more complex than your heritage and your ethnic identity, I guess. There's a lot more going on than just simply saying, “I am Caribbean and of course I speak Spanish, right?” So the connection is a lot more fluid and the connection is a lot more discursive and very performative, which also ties back to your lived experience. I think in that sense, translingual practices kind of push the way that we often think about ethnic identity and language use.

SW: Thanks, Eunjeong. And thank you, Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.