

Translanguaging and Public Service Encounters: Language Learning in the Library

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This article explores the information desk of a city library as a site for language learning. Using a linguistic ethnographic approach, the interactions between a customer experience and information assistant and the many library users who approach her information desk were analysed. Findings are that, in addition to providing information about library resources, information desks are sites at which bits and pieces of different languages are taught and learned. Such language teaching and learning episodes created interactions of inclusion and welcome that went far beyond purely transactional information. Rather, language-related episodes created moments of human contact and engagement, which were upheld through the translanguaging practices of interactants, the disposition and workplace competence of library staff, and the spatial ecology of the information desk. Furthermore, the article contributes to ongoing theoretical debates about translanguaging by noting that normativity and pressure toward uniformity are as much a part of languaging processes as creativity and flexibility. Our definition of translanguaging recognises the opposing pull of centrifugal and centripetal forces. The article ends by asking what schools, and language education, might learn from public libraries in creating arenas that maintain communitarianism, diversity of expression, and the development of civic skills.

Keywords: translanguaging; spatial repertoire; materiality; disposition; competence

LIBRARIES HAVE BEEN DESCRIBED AS meeting places (Audunson, 2004) where people from across the social spectrum encounter one another, exposing them to the diversity of the city. The information desk is a place, in the first instance, for transactional exchanges about library membership, loans, and resources. However, it is also a site where assistance may go well beyond the instrumental, creating moments of inclusion, welcome, and comfort (Johnson, 2012). In this article, we consider the information desk as a setting for language learning and teaching. Our interest is not on the teaching and

learning of any one particular language, but on lessons that teach bits and pieces of languages. We argue that language teaching and learning episodes function as speech events of welcome, performed through a supportive disposition, professional competence, and material and spatial repertoires.

During a 4-month ethnographic study of Birmingham's new city library we focused on one bilingual member of the staff who had worked for Birmingham library services for more than 20 years. Originally from Hong Kong, and since 1996 living in Birmingham, the United Kingdom's second largest city, Winnie worked as a customer experience and information assistant. Her role required her to answer the public's queries at a number of different information desks around the library. In our field notes, we noted the various reasons people have for visiting the library:

Some people come here with a purpose, looking for specific information. Others come to study, using the space as a place of scholarship. Others come out of

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curiosity, visiting one of the city's great sights. Some, without doubt, come to get out of the cold. (Field notes, 11 March 2015)

The article commences with a literature review in three parts. First, languaging and translanguaging frame the theoretical orientation to the study that informs our analysis of the teaching and learning event. Second, there is a discussion of crossover studies in which scholars have investigated multilingualism in work domains and considered their findings in relation to educational settings. Third, we discuss spatial repertoire and materiality to frame information desks as objects that 'make people' (Miller, 2005). Here we reflect on how space and design construct relationships between strangers and shape languaging practices. The methodology section will describe the research in greater detail, providing information about the linguistic ethnographic approach adopted, as well as the method of data collection used. The remaining sections of the article analyse interviews, field notes, and audio recordings to reveal how Winnie's translanguaging practices, disposition, and competences set up learning possibilities of benefit to migrant library users. We also explore how the material structures of the information desk shape relationships and languaging practices. A final section considers implications for the language classroom.

LANGUAGING AND TRANSLANGUAGING

Coming in for increasingly heavy criticism, Saussurean linguistics is condemned for its limited synchronic concern with linguistic categories and for reducing language to an object. Rather than viewing language and people as inextricably linked in "perpetually incomplete processes" (Cowley, 2017, p. 44), or producing accounts of language action as inescapably diverse (Agha, 2007), Saussurean linguistics is accused of a marked tendency to "freeze as dogma" its subcategories that "rip language away from its history and living beings" (Cowley, 2017, p. 47). Analysing language narrowly at the syntactic and referential level cannot be relied upon for interpretation of social action (Silverstein, 1981) because it results in a linguistics that is extractionist (part replaces the whole), restrictivist (boundaries of discipline define object studied), and exclusionist (excludes other relevant disciplines) (Agha, 2007). A linguistic perspective on language has become abstracted and is not fit for purpose in describing people's actions with the world (Thibault, 2017).

Instead, what is required is "changing the idea of language" (Cowley, 2017, p. 43) to one

that is about languaging (Becker, 1995) and not language (Tannen, 2007). Languaging is a process in which "people and language are inextricable from each other" and together "shape a perpetually indeterminate and incomplete processes" (Cowley, 2017, p. 43). Rather than focusing on "reified abstracta" such as "languages" and assumed entities such as phonemes, words, and sentences, languaging describes how people are animated in interactivity with one another (Thibault, 2017, p. 80). While discrete linguistic features may still prove useful in analysis, languaging scholars suggest attuning to the interactivity of the "body dynamics of vocalizations, facial expressions, eye movements and so on," and paying attention to "living, feeling, moving bodies" in "inter-individual" activity (Thibault, 2017, p. 80).

Translanguaging refers to the communicative practices in which people engage as they bring into contact different biographies, histories, and linguistic backgrounds. We understand a translanguaging repertoire to include aspects of communication not always thought of as language, including gesture, dress, humour, posture, and so on. Translanguaging differs from scholarship on languaging in that it explicitly points to languaging practices in linguistically and socially diverse environments. We adopt translanguaging because it focuses on people's experience of managing ideological tensions in relation to languages and languaging in context. In our ethnographic studies of translanguaging practices in public domains such as libraries, schools, and markets, it is apparent that languages attract significant attention. Emically, people very much believe in them. They attract a good deal of commentary. We argue that the very naming of languages is resourceful in the negotiation of difference, and this is especially the case when people display an interest in finding out more about one another.

At the same time, people actively display a disregard for language boundaries in their flexible translanguaging practice. Several translanguaging scholars highlight this feature. According to Otheguy, Garcia, and Wallis (2015), translanguaging is characterised by the speaker's ability to deploy their full linguistic repertoire "without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named languages" (p. 281), while Canagarajah (2017) refers to people's application of "diverse verbal resources unrestricted by their labels" (p. 7). Our definition departs somewhat from these because we examine the ideological and tensional interplay between languages as products and languaging as process. Indeed, we are interested in

capturing the very restrictions and watchfulness referred to by Otheguy et al. In ethnographic research, we have found that ideological tensions allow for creativity and criticality, so that social and linguistic differences play out, for the most part, convivially.

Our definition of translanguaging recognises the opposing pull of centrifugal and centripetal forces (Bakhtin, 1981). Whereas the centripetal force constitutes a pull toward the unitary language, homogeneity, standardisation, and correctness, the centrifugal force pulls toward heteroglossic disunification and decentralisation. These forces are rarely free of each other. In order to understand the dynamics and dialectics of translanguaging, we need to note that normativity and pressure toward uniformity are also part of language use (Pietikäinen & Dufva, 2014). Translanguaging is an ideological orientation to the study of social and linguistic difference, which views flexible and separate bilingualism in a constant dialectic (Creese & Blackledge, 2010, 2011, 2015). Separate bilingualism finds itself under constant pressure to shore up its boundaries against the polyphony of languaging practices, while flexible bilingualism encounters hostility and a pressure for standardisation and correctness at every turn.

WORKPLACE MULTILINGUALISM

Recent collaborations and collections have asked what language education might look like through the prism of multilingualism (Byrnes & Duff, 2019; Douglas Fir Group, 2016; Leung & Valdés, 2019) and how trans perspectives can inform language theory and practice (Hawkins & Mori, 2018). Kramsch and Whiteside (2007) suggested making greater use of naturalistic and workplace data in multilingual settings to study language acquisition and classroom practice. Two studies that have made use of naturalistic and workplace data in multilingual settings to ask questions about the classroom are Kubota (2013) and Canagarajah (2016). In her study of Japanese managers working in China, Kubota found that professionals valued the ability to communicate about work-related issues in a straightforward and polite manner, much more than they did about grammatical correctness. Work competence described the ability of office workers to communicate effectively in workplace settings through a range of proficiencies in different languages. Kubota's (2013) analysis of interview transcripts showed that managers displayed a "communicative disposition" constituting "a willingness to

communicate" (p. 11) even in the face of difficulties. Success was predicated on mutual accommodation in the building of trusting relationships. Here, Kubota drew on the work of Lippi-Green's (2012) study of English with an accent. Accommodation is central to this research, which describes people sharing the "communicative burden," and seeking the "communicative middle ground" (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 70). Most of the time, as suggested by Lippi-Green, we agree to carry an equal share of the communicative burden, but sometimes we will accept a disproportionate amount of the burden if the social configuration is especially important to us. Linking her findings to the classroom, Kubota noted a "perceptual gap" (p. 16) between language educators and transcultural workers. While language educators pursue formal teaching and assessment, office workers follow different goals. She highlighted their ability to communicate despite limited proficiencies, and asked, "what constitutes being able to use a language?" (Kubota, 2013, p. 16) and argued for further "pedagogical innovation" (p. 16) in language teaching.

In his study of African professionals in English-dominant countries, Canagarajah (2016, 2017) also highlighted particular kinds of competences and dispositions. He found that the professionals were strategic in their collaborations, building relations through "solidarity, reciprocity, tolerance, patience, and willingness to negotiate" (Canagarajah, 2017, p. 59). What helped them succeed was not primarily their grammatical correctness but their ability to work with others. He described the professionals as using a "little of many different languages" (Canagarajah, 2017, p. 43) in joint enterprise. This cooperative disposition (Canagarajah, 2013) is characterised by a mutual willingness to communicate, requiring ethical sensitivity and critical reflexivity. Like Kubota (2013), Canagarajah (2017) contemplated the relevance of his study for the classroom, prompting a consideration of "how the communicative practices, language ideologies, and learning styles of multilinguals can be brought inside the classroom and formal learning contexts" (p. 6). He suggested a pedagogy designed "for communicative and normative unpredictability" (Canagarajah, 2016, p. 59), in which students learn about interactional practices for negotiating difference. Such a pedagogy, he argued, needs to contest the accountability, productivity, and standardisation demanded of education systems in late modernity.

Both Kubota (2013) and Canagarajah (2016, 2017) studied professionals in managerial settings, with a shared interest in a disposition and

competence that accommodates social and linguistic difference. While Kubota and Canagarajah oriented differently to the consequences of their findings in relation to globalising capitalism and neoliberalism, both agreed that much more than languages alone are required to communicate in multilingual environments. A strategic competence and a cooperative disposition to linguistic and social difference were identified by both as crucial to acts of communication. In both studies, dispositions were regarded as shaped through individual biographies, but also dependent on socialisation into a professional competence. In the next section, we consider how work competence in the library is predicated on institutional histories and material structures.

THE LIBRARY INFORMATION DESK: SPATIAL REPERTOIRE AND MATERIALITY

Unlike other public institutions invaded by market forces, public libraries are still viewed as trusted community organisations (Johnson, 2012). Libraries are said to be ‘partisan’ public institutions because they advocate for democracy. Their remit is the prevention of social fragmentation and the maintenance of communitarianism (Audunson, 2004). The history of the public library, according to Audunson, was born out of multiculturalism and immigration over 150 years ago in the United States and the United Kingdom. They were designed to endorse a political culture that supported social diversity and created arenas where people belonging to different cultural groups could meet and communicate, providing access to different networks of communication (Busch, 2009). Library policies are developed to govern acceptable use of facilities and services, ensure fair and equitable access for all, and encourage an environment that is respectful to all present (Aabø & Audunson, 2012).

Like many public institutions, the library has undergone rapid change, especially in relation to information technology. The move to information commons and the development of highly fluid digital environments poses questions for libraries about space. In the evolution from print-based traditions to digital environments, libraries have had to reorganise their physical workspace (Beagle, 1999). Beagle argued that the information desk is central to these changes. Library information desks are locations of “first response,” which function as initial points of contact and “general help centers” (Beagle, 1999, p. 85). The information desk in the digital environment is not designed as a place for library users to access spe-

cialist services, but as points where informed referrals take place if necessary. They are typically staffed by paraprofessionals. Some staffing models speak of “20 minutes per patron, if needed, for consultation” (Bailey & Tierney, 2002, p. 7). Successful information desks support a “collaborative attitude among staff,” and the “creation and nurturance of a broad, informal team” (Bailey & Tierney, 2002, p. 17). Johnson (2012) found that the information desk provided a human connection that resulted not only in instrumental help in gaining access to useful information resources but also in emotional help that contributed to a sense of individual well being.

The library information desk is historically configured. Its material presence determines expectations and normative behaviour. Miller (2005) pointed out that mundane objects often go unnoticed by people and remain peripheral to their activity. Nevertheless, such objects set the scene, shape social relations, and prompt the kind of interactions which occur there. Objects are repositories of social practices and can be relied upon to support particular kinds of relationships. A defining feature of the public realm are relationships between strangers. The information desk is a place at which strangers encounter one another. People who meet there are typically biographically unknown to one another. Such ‘strangerhood,’ argued Lofland (1998), is crucial in producing a civility toward diversity. As Lofland put it,

To be civil toward diversity is not necessarily to act in a manner that will be defined as nice or pleasant. The crux of this principle is evenhandedness and universality of treatment, not demonstrations of friendliness or fellow-feeling. (p. 33)

The information desk is a site that has been designed for such evenhandedness. The interactions which occur there are highly routine, covering predictable topics, and structured to include greetings, question and answers, thanks of appreciation, and farewells. The desk is a secure, reliable, and solid site. People know what is expected there.

Objects are located in social space that likewise is instrumental in sustaining social activities, relationships, and interaction. Canagarajah (2017) argued that communicative resources “find coherence in particular spatial ecologies” (p. 36). Pennycook and Otsuji (2015) understood spatial repertoire as the dynamic between language and urban space that links the repertoires formed through individual life trajectories to the particular places in which these linguistic resources are deployed. They proposed that by taking a

spatial orientation, we can start to envisage an interaction between the resources brought to the table by individual trajectories (with all the social, historical, political, economic, and cultural effects this may entail) and the resources at play in a particular place. In our own work on spatial and semiotic repertoires in a fish-and-meat market, also in Birmingham, we described how the material setting was itself a communicative act (Blackledge & Creese, 2017, 2018). In order to pay more attention to how space and materiality structure social life, Miller (2005) argued for an anthropology that considers not just what makes people, but also what people make. That is, “how the things that people make, make people” (Miller, 2005, p. 38).

METHODOLOGY

We characterise our research approach as linguistic ethnography, in which we look in depth at the situated discourses and social practices of key participants. We observe, participate, audio- and video-record, interview, and collect other field data relevant to research questions. The question that directed our overall study is: How do people communicate in contexts of superdiversity? (<https://TLANG.org.uk>). Our design and research team was multilingual, working across varieties of Arabic, Cantonese, English, Mandarin, Polish, Portuguese, Slovak, and Romani. The full research team consisted of 33 participants. Two researchers were involved in collecting data at the Birmingham research sites. Our interest is in social contexts where linguistic and social diversity is the norm.

The collection of data in the library took place in the second year of a 4-year research project. The city of Birmingham opened its award-winning building in 2013, shortly before our field work started. However, due to severe financial problems, the City Council made the decision to reduce its opening hours by almost half, which involved making redundant about half of the 188 library staff. Our field work took place during this 2015 period of staff reduction. All three researchers were local residents in Birmingham at the time of data collection and over many years have made use of different Birmingham libraries.

Before the 4-month period commenced, we selected a key participant. The criteria for selection was employment in a professional, public-facing role in the library; a willingness to participate; and bilingualism in a Chinese language and English. Winnie Lateano, a customer experience support assistant, met the criteria. Support from Winnie's

line manager was also gained. The researchers shadowed Winnie 2–3 days a week for 12 weeks, noting observations as field notes. In all, the researchers wrote 29 sets of field notes, amounting to 101,225 words. In interpretation of field notes, the emic significance of languages and language learning for Winnie was identified as particularly salient. This observation carried through to analysis of audio recordings. We audio-recorded Winnie over a period of 8 weeks, both at work and at home. Analysis of the home recordings is not included in this article. As we observed her at work, Winnie wore a small digital voice recorder, which she kept in her pocket. A tie-clip microphone was secured to her clothing close to her throat. This meant that we were able to audio-record Winnie's speech and, in most cases, the speech of those with whom she interacted. Winnie recorded herself at the Library of Birmingham for 42 hours, including recording during break times. We also interviewed her both ethnographically during our daily observations, and more formally at the end of the project. Winnie gave us access to a selection of her work emails and SMS messages. We took photographs, video-recorded some observation sessions, and made a short film.

The ethnography we report on here can say little about the many thousands of individuals who came through the doors of the library daily. We cannot comment on their languages, educational backgrounds, nationality, or legal statuses, because we did not stop to ask them questions during their visit to the library. All Winnie's interactants remain anonymous in this article. While signs were posted around the library and at the information desk to let library users know that recordings were taking place, we did not know them as individuals, other than through their anonymous conversations with Winnie. The research project was not designed to measure language learning in any cognitive sense, because we did not set out with those questions. Indeed, we did not expect language learning and teaching to appear as a salient topic in our analysis. On the whole, library users were unaware of Winnie's pedagogic interventions, and any language learning that took place was informal and incidental (Marsick & Watkins, 2001).

ACCOMMODATING AT THE INFORMATION DESK

Audunson (2004) described public libraries as meeting places that can promote cross-cultural contact and communication. Winnie described how working in the library opened up different

connections for her when she first moved to the United Kingdom:

I am grateful I got a job in the library. It gives me an opportunity to connect with the society that I feel I needed. I accept and learn different culture and values. For example in English society people respect you as an individual, abilities and ideology. They respect your privacy. When the Chinese person told me they can't speak English I always encourage them. It never too late to learn. I tell them to make an effort to learn, it will benefit for their independently and sense of belonging. (Interview, 27 July 2015)

Evident in this extract is the importance of the library as an arena where people belonging to different cultural groups meet and communicate with others. Audunson, Essmat, & Aabø (2011) found that libraries provided migrant women with the information they needed to adapt to their new circumstances. Winnie described the library as a place for accepting and learning, and she passed this onto other Chinese people. She also promoted learning English because it results in independence and belonging. Learning to speak and understand English in the library, and specifically at the information desk, was highlighted by Winnie as a corollary of her work experience:

And for me like a frontline worker, you have to deal with so many inquiries, even just say, where is the toilet, you have to direct them, and tell them where the toilets are, on which floor, turn left, turn right and things like that, day in and day out, and all year long, just, it just helped. Because is not only what you speak, it is to understand what's the question. Sometimes I do muddle up, because depends on people their way to speak, sometimes, because sometimes I just guessing. (Interview, 27 July 2015)

Winnie believed that without the experience of hearing many different Englishes, her own English would be poorer. While she was sometimes muddled by the way people speak, she seemed prepared to accept that the burden of communication should fall on her, or her colleagues (Lippi-Green, 2012). The social configuration of the information desk demands a professional competence characterised by positive engagement with difference. However, Winnie took this one step further. She explained how she developed professional competence by educating herself:

I always say 'no place is perfect.' You have to make most of yourself to live in a foreign land. To make myself belong here I made effort to make friends. To develop my personal growth and interest I read books about English politics, to understand my surrounding, and to understand how the society works. (Interview, 27 July 2015)

While it is noticeable in this extract that learning takes place in one direction only—that is, toward dominant structures—nonetheless Winnie shows a disposition founded on an interest in the culture of self and other, contemporary politics, and cultural differences (Kubota, 2013). Indeed, we found evidence that she was greatly interested in foreign lands. It was not uncommon for Winnie to show an interest in where people came from and which languages they spoke when she interacted with strangers at the information desk, as illustrated in the following excerpts (W = Winnie Lateano; LU = library user; see Appendix for transcription conventions).

EXCERPT 1

WL where are you from?
 LU Eritrea
 WL eh?
 LU Eritrea
 WL eh? where's (xxx)
 LU Africa
 WL ah Africa I've never heard of that it's a
 LU it's part of Ethiopia
 WL oh they speak French
 LU no, Amharic
 WL ah?
 LU Amharic
 WL oh, so the language they speak. so this your full member. eh, this is the new opening hours

EXCERPT 2

WL where are you from?
 LU from Iraq
 WL Iraq. OK yeah so you know now what to bring yeah

EXCERPT 3

WL so what's your native language?
 LU my home language is Polish
 WL Polish is more harder to learn than English
 LU yes harder it's true. you don't think. but it's true. yea it's true. hehehee our grammar is really difficult and you know our pronunciation for most English people our pronunciation is very hard. eh can you say dobje. try dobje.
 WL dobje
 LU you see it's very hard

EXCERPT 4

-
- WL So where are you from?
 LU Italy.
 WL Italy, oh. you can teach Italy. Teach, teach Italian. Are you, are, are you, um, good for teaching?
 LU Um, I don't know. I never done so... but I [inaudible]
 WL Maybe you can train, isn't it?
-

Questions of the *where are you from* genre were a common communicative strategy deployed by Winnie. We might consider them as acts of “layered simultaneity” (Blommaert, 2005, p. 237), in which a simple speech act compressed time and space across biographical and professional scales in the interactional moment. Winnie’s own migratory background, her interest in others’ ways of life, her engagement in contemporary politics, were compressed into a simple question.

LANGUAGING AT THE INFORMATION DESK

Information desks were located throughout the library, across its several public floors. They were usually staffed by pairs or teams of customer experience and information assistants. Field notes recorded the many different groups of people visiting the desks:

A group of about ten girls in Muslim head scarves just arrived at the desk, with an adult who asked whether they can take pictures. The answer was yes, no problem. (Field notes, 7 March 2015)

A very tall African Caribbean man in a tracksuit arrives and asks Winnie a question. He looks at the computer screen himself. He chats to her and smiles. She writes something on a Post-It note for him, and continues to check the computer screen. He leaves, slinging an Adidas bag over his shoulder. (Field notes, 11 March 2015)

An older man in a suit and tie arrives at the desk, wearing military medals and wearing a cap which is adorned with a prominent red and white feather. He is asking for information. (Field notes, 25 March 2015)

A man of Chinese appearance with two small children arrives at the counter. Once Winnie is free she answers his questions in detail, turning her computer screen so that he can look for himself. She writes down some information for him. (Field notes, 9 April 2015)

A family comes to the desk and asks for information. Winnie comes out from behind her counter and

points, giving them directions. Then she walks with them over towards the lifts way across the other side of the ground floor area. She chats with them as she goes. My impression, from this distance, is that they are an immigrant family. She is generous with her time and trouble. (Field notes, 18 April 2015)

I have moved to the second floor and met up with Rachel and Winnie. This is an entirely different environment. Whereas the archive section was almost exclusively occupied by older white males, I am now sandwiched between three young women of about 16 to 18, all of Asian appearance, two of them in headscarves. (Field notes, 30 April 2015)

Each information desk indexed particular networks and knowledge. People actively used floor space to build relationships. However, the information desks operated as a communicative sign “rich in association and steeped in sentiment” to indicate that people could expect a universality of treatment in their encounters there (Lofland, 1998, p. 64). Through processes of objectification, the information desk came to represent the library’s quintessential social territory. It is iconic of the “rational project of enlightenment” that integrates migrants “into the dominating culture” (Audunson, 2004, p. 429).

The desks were open plan in design, set in the middle of the library’s expansive floor space, and approachable from different directions. Staff computers were available on each desktop. The computer screens swiveled easily so that library users could look at the same screen as staff.

For around five minutes Winnie has been dealing with an enquiry from an older man with a white beard and flat cap. They are both peering at Winnie’s computer screen. The man thanks her, and she says ‘no, no, no trouble at all’, before reiterating the information she has given him. ‘Thank you,’ he says again. ‘You’re welcome.’ (Field notes, 13 May 2015)

The swivel of the computer screen made digital literacy a collaborative exercise. It brought bodies physically close, created moments of touch and redirection, and allowed eye gaze to move between screen and person in coordinated ways (Blackledge & Creese, 2018). The movement of computer screen, and the openness of the desk, meant that library resources were available through modalities other than speech, namely through computer screens that were jointly mediated by staff and patrons. The open design of the desks meant that staff could easily leave them to assist customers.

A middle-aged man comes to the counter and asks, cheerily: ‘hello, can you tell me how to take a book out, I’ve only just joined and I don’t know how to do

it.' Winnie says 'oh you've only just joined, you need a pin number.' Winnie talks to him for a minute or so, and he says 'but how do I do it, what do I do?' She takes him over to the computers where customers can issue books themselves, and shows him how to do it, taking him through the process. (Field notes, 14 May 2015)

The boundaries of the information desk were indeterminate. Because it functioned as a place of first response, it was a space that could be extended to meet additional needs, as staff moved away from the desk into other library spaces to find specific information. This was made possible by staffing schedules. When a staff member left, another remained, as library user and staff member walked together into other library spaces.

Interactions at the information desk could be brief but also extended:

The counter could be really busy, and almost every two or three minutes new customers would come and ask questions. (Field notes, 14 March 2015)

Winnie is on the business desk with two other staff. One of them is engaged in supporting a middle-aged man with a job application. I am constantly impressed by the amount of time staff spend with individual library users. (Field notes, 26 May 2015)

Libraries played an important role in relieving social isolation. The information desk was a place for conversation about adapting to new circumstances and developing individual confidence. The time that Winnie and other customer experience assistants spent with library users could be slow or fast. But slow time was another aspect of the information desk's spatial repertoire. The desk eschewed the "cult of speed" where the "advantage of going fast vanishes" (Honoré, 2004, p. 11) and supported an ontology of slowness which shaped the relationships between staff and patrons (Ulmer, 2017).

The openness of the desks, the fluidity of movement around them, the swiveling of computer screens on their surfaces, and the rhythm and regularity of time spent at the counters, were all elements of the way the configuration of space and objects guided professional behaviour (Kirsh, 1995). The desks set the scene, and supported relationships that were for the most part fleeting, but that could be extended when further negotiations were required. Library users and staff were aided by the desk, even if they were unconscious of its capacity to support them. Spatial structuring facilitated action by simplifying choice (Callaghan, 2018). The library users received a

first response from the customer experience assistants, who mediated access to other needs.

The library information desk was a normative space at which staff were expected to be personable, accessible, and convivial. The desks allowed for a type of languaging that could easily be attuned to the dynamics of body, voice, face, gesture, and movement. Queries were patiently resolved, and there was freedom of movement around the space. Knowledge was distributed among teams of colleagues. Both library staff and patrons relied on the information desk's "spatialisations" (Shields, 1999, p. 146), which were built on library's history of welcoming newcomers into dominant mainstream society.

TRANSLANGUAGING AT THE INFORMATION DESK

In the interaction shown in the following excerpt, a young Brazilian woman, newly arrived to the country, approached the enquiry desk for help in becoming member of the library (WL = Winnie Lateano; LU = library user; C = colleague; see Appendix for transcription conventions).

EXCERPT 5

-
-
- | | | |
|----|----|---------------------------------------|
| 1 | WL | are you ok? hello |
| 2 | LU | I need, I need code |
| 3 | WL | ah? |
| 4 | LU | temporary code |
| 5 | WL | temporary card? |
| 6 | LU | temporary card yes yes |
| 7 | WL | what's the number? |
| 8 | LU | [says her name] ah number? |
| 9 | WL | number here |
| 10 | LU | ah ok |
| 11 | WL | six six seven |
| 12 | LU | one seven six |
| 13 | WL | no no no no no |
| 14 | LU | one seven si |
| 15 | WL | no no no six seven |
| 16 | LU | yeah |
| 17 | WL | one seven six |
| 18 | LU | one seven six yea? |
| 19 | WL | so you speak Spanish? (xxx) Spanish? |
| 20 | LU | I am Brazilian |
| 21 | WL | but you speak Spanish ahh oui oui oui |
| 22 | | sí sí ah |
| 23 | LU | but I still understand Spanish, but |
| 24 | | English no! [laughter] |
| 25 | WL | [laughter] so in Spanish very good, |
| 26 | | good whatever. hola, not hola ok |
| 27 | LU | sí hola |
| 28 | WL | but I said very good |
-

29 LU very good muito bom ['very good';
 30 Portuguese] muy bueno ['very good';
 31 Spanish]
 32 WL ah?
 33 LU muy bueno
 34 WL muy bien muy bien yea very good muy
 35 bien yeah. [to colleague] so can I
 36 have this side?
 37 C yeah, hang on can I just quickly take
 38 this security off?
 39 WL yea yea yea of course, for you
 40 [laughter]
 41 C thanks very much
 42 WL ok ok so this is your pin number ah
 43 the ah, the, are you are you staying
 44 here long or just temporary? are you
 45 stay in England long?
 46 LU for four months
 47 WL four months yea. temporary card. you
 48 can eh teach Spanish here
 49 LU yeah?
 50 WL hmm a lot, a lot of people want to
 51 learn eh, Spanish, I want Spanish,
 52 um no, not OK, oh, hola hola [laughs]
 53 LU muy bueno [laughs]
 54 WL so muy bien, yeah, muy bien
 55 LU mm-hm
 56 WL muy bien is good, muy bien, eh, what's
 57 the name? [spells out name]
 58 LU [confirms name]
 59 WL [name checked]
 60 LU [name confirmed]
 61 WL ok, yeah? ah, th [address stated] and
 62 then, this is the temporary address?
 63 LU [address confirmed]
 64 WL sí, you you. the card only temporary,
 65 last until twen end of July.
 66 LU sorry I don't understand
 67 WL this card, only temporary card, ok?
 68 LU ok
 69 WL only last until 29 of July
 70 LU ah ok, válido
 71 WL voilà?
 72 LU um?
 73 WL not voilà. after 29 of July, finish,
 74 no more
 75 LU ok ok
 76 WL unless you bring a full address,
 77 address like this one [address] yea?
 78 LU mm-hm.
 79 WL you bring, bring, bring the one, then
 80 you can change the full member
 81 otherwise you'll be finished yea on
 82 the the yea
 83 LU ok
 84 WL ok can you sign here you c- sign sign
 85 signature
 86 LU ah, ok, firma

87 WL firma, la firma?
 88 LU yes
 89 WL firma, firma. muy bien, muy bien, so
 90 muy bien good, ok? so you
 91 you still can erm use the our computer
 92 LU mm-hm
 93 WL yea use our you want to take books out
 94 you can, only two,
 95 two books, ok?
 96 LU mm-hm two books for a week?
 97 WL from here for twenty eight days yea
 98 LU mm-hm, ah, ok
 99 WL ah, you can, only two, but you can use
 100 our facilities, you know to erm, to
 101 use, most people come here use the
 102 computer, you can, (xxx) mobile phone,
 103 you can ok?
 104 LU ah, I don't believe, I understand,
 105 right! [laughs]
 106 WL hola. muy bien, muy bien, adios
 107 LU adios querida <darling/sweetheart>
 108 [laughs] gracias!
 109 WL gracias ahh, no gracias, [both laugh]
 110 ciao, ciao
 111 LU ok thank you

We labelled this as a *language-related episode*, because Winnie and the library user comment about “the language they are producing, question their language use,” and “correct themselves or others” (Swain & Lapkin, 1998, p. 326). According to Swain and Lapkin, language-related episodes occur in dialogues between people who have different levels of proficiency in the language being learned. While proficiency is salient here, which language is being taught and learned is not always clear. However, we nonetheless view the exchange as language teaching and learning, as both inter-actants show a desire to learn new vocabulary, a willingness to comprehend new information, and an orientation to ‘target-like’ forms.

Winnie and the library user both engage in naming languages. In line 19, Winnie responds to the library user's accent, guessing at and naming Spanish. The library user herself names English and Spanish as languages in line 21. In line 20, the library user implies, but does not name, Portuguese. The act of naming languages, like the earlier question *where are you from?* becomes a useful resource to both women. Indeed, the naming of Spanish reframes the interchange from one that has not started well (1–18) to one that shifts to become a supportive interchange (Goffman, 1971). A change of topic occurs when Spanish is named in line 19. The conversation turns from

being one solely about membership of the library, to become one about the library user's skills and her ability to teach Spanish. The encounter also shifts from one that is about providing information to become one that is about forging a deeper emotional connection.

The naming of languages also precipitates a comment about language proficiency. The library user self-assesses first in line 23 ("I still understand Spanish, but English no! [laughter]"), then again in line 66 ("sorry I don't understand"), and finally in line 104 ("I don't believe, I understand, right!"). In each utterance, the library user comments directly on her English language proficiency, which she views as in flux, but developing in a positive direction. She shifts from somebody who views herself as not speaking English (21) to someone who temporarily does not understand (66), to someone who, to her surprise and delight, does comprehend (104). Her proficiency adapts to the shifting context and the developing relationship. The centripetal pull to standardisation and correctness is evident in the library user's self-assessments of named languages, and her desire to comprehend English is apparent.

But there is also evidence of nonunitary, heteroglossic, and centrifugal processes at work. On determining that her interlocutor might speak Spanish, Winnie introduces bits and pieces of languages. These are signs which index a broad constellation of Romance-based languages. Signs such as *que*, *sí*, *hola*, *muy bien*, *ciao*, *adiós*, *gracias*, are deployed strategically by Winnie to construct a translanguaging space (Wei, 2011), a space that incorporates signs across language boundaries. Of particular note is the use of *muy bueno*, a refrain (repeated 15 times) that Winnie and the library user return to throughout the interaction. While *muy bueno* may not contribute much to information about library membership, it does oil the wheels of social interaction. Its repetition is an involvement strategy (Tannen, 2007). *Muy bueno*, *adiós*, *ciao*, and *gracias* all serve to close the interaction in a civil and friendly manner. The term of endearment the library user utters at the end of the encounter, *adiós querida* 'goodbye darling/sweetheart,' probably not referentially understood by Winnie but nevertheless correctly interpreted as positive, confirms the affirmative translanguaging space they have established in their short-lived relationship.

Translanguaging is also evident in Winnie's approach to translation. When Winnie first asked for a translation of *very good* in line 25 she was unsatisfied with *muito bom* because she did not recognise the Portuguese. While the library user's sec-

ond effort of *muy bueno* was more acceptable and recognisable to Winnie, it did not result in Winnie adopting it. Winnie insisted on *muy bien* throughout the interaction, while the library user stuck to *muy bueno*. The correctness of standard forms was not her primary interest. The library user's translation of *last until* as *válido* in line 70 appeared to delight Winnie, who replaces it with the seemingly more familiar *voila* (line 71).

Indeed, it is their languaging across language boundaries that is a resource for producing good-natured laughter and involvement in the interaction. In lines 86–89, when Winnie notices another new word, this time *firma*, she repeats it several times, even embellishing it with the definite article in *la firma*, regardless of its accuracy. The two words, *válido* and *firma* have themselves been introduced by the library user as translations of Winnie's key vocabulary. *Last until* is translated as *válido*, while *signature* is translated as *firma*. Translanguaging practices therefore drew on both the construction of named languages through paying attention to the language boundaries of Portuguese/Spanish and English while simultaneously erasing the same boundaries in favour of shared communicative resources unfettered by these languages. Translanguaging created a dynamic intervention for sustaining their fledgling and fleeting relationship.

What constitutes language teaching knowledge is also implicated in the interaction. Winnie suggests the library user might be a teacher of Spanish:

EXAMPLE 1

Excerpt 5, Lines 48–53 (Ellipted)

-
- WL you can teach Spanish here
 LU yeah?
 WL hmm a lot of people want to learn Spanish. I want Spanish. hola hola [laughs]
 LU muy bueno [laughs]
-

In making this assertion about the library user's ability to teach Spanish, Winnie constructs her as being in possession of a valuable skill set that many people want, including herself. Winnie becomes the learner, praised and complimented by the library user for her good Spanish. The tables have been turned. Moreover, in asking for initial translations from English into Spanish, Winnie has opened up the space for translanguaging, which draws on their bilingual past and present. The spatial repertoire of the library, built on histories of inclusion, incorporated the two women's "translanguaging instinct" (Wei, 2018,

p. 24). Winnie’s disposition is to communicate with whatever resources she has to hand.

Winnie employs several strategies to avoid communication breakdown (Long, 1983a, 1983b). During the interaction, she appears to take up a position of teacher educator. First, she slows the pace. There are several examples of this in the excerpt: “this card is only temporary” (64), “only last until 29 July” (69), “unless you bring a full address” (76). Second, she decomposes sentence structure, placing the most important information first: “finish, no more” (73–74), “this card, only temporary” (67). The use of these two strategies point to Winnie’s awareness of the need to accommodate to the English proficiency of the library user. Winnie attempted to make her language comprehensible to the library user, while shouldering the lion’s share of the communicative burden.

Also typical is the way Winnie uses repetition to provide feedback (Swain, 1985). In line 4, when the library user erroneously asks for a “temporary code” rather than a “temporary card,” Winnie corrects her, using repetition to signpost the error. In line 6, the library user repeats Winnie’s utterance, and the output becomes more target like.

EXAMPLE 2

Excerpt 5, Lines 2–6

LU I need, I need code
WL Ah?
LU temporary code
WL temporary card?
LU temporary card yes yes

Winnie triggers a clarification request (Pica & Doughty, 1985) with *ah?*, indicating that all is not well. This feedback results in the two phonemes being more carefully distinguished by the library user. These strategies allow Winnie to treat the customer with the same courtesy expected of all service encounters (Goffman, 1967). The interaction illustrates Winnie’s translanguaging competence and cooperative disposition. She shows a willingness and ability to draw on various linguistic and semiotic signs to resourcefully establish a multilingual environment. Translanguaging practices lead to opportunities for language development for both parties in the interaction.

The information desk served as a meeting place where linguistic difference was welcome. It hosted encounters where language teacher knowledge transferred readily between parties, where linguistic proficiency was conceived as bilingual, and

where cultural difference was positively employed as a resource. While Audunson (2004) pointed to the library’s history of enlightenment, and the promotion of bourgeois knowledge, culture, and literature, he also explained that dominant high culture was “taken down from its pedestal and placed on an equal footing with other cultural expressions” (p. 432). He explained that the library took on a new role as “cultural animator, by giving people access to a diversity of expressions” (p. 431) that backgrounded judgements and selections of worthiness. What we see is Winnie giving access to a diversity of expression through animating the library space as multilingual.

DISCUSSION

There are three analytical strands to this article: disposition/competence, space/materiality, and languaging/translanguaging.

Frontline library staff were imbued with a certain knowledge base built on years of institutional history and on established professional knowledge. Work competence included the ability to welcome people and establish their needs, even in the face of communication difficulties. The notion of the information desk as a point of first response meant staff were socialised into comprehending even when communication proved difficult. The ability to communicate with all library users in a fair and equitable way was highly valued. Work competence at the library required a cooperative disposition (Canagarajah, 2013), and an ability to work with many different Englishes, opening up the space to a range of communicative resources. While the rituals of welcome and information exchange were obvious at the information desk, staff were disposed to go beyond the purely transactional to establish a connection with visitors. In the case of Winnie, this involved drawing on her biography as a bilingual migrant who valued the library as a space for learning about difference. She brought these personal qualities to her professional competence. Over many years, she had been socialised in Birmingham’s multilingual, socially diverse environment, which she found valuable in her own settlement trajectory. Her disposition was one of mutual accommodation. Winnie built relationships with library patrons that displayed solidarity and reciprocity. Symbolically, she used bits and pieces of languages, strategically ignored linguistic correctness and standard forms, and built trusting relationships through a persistent effort to communicate (Kubota, 2013). For Winnie, a transcultural communicative and

cultural competence and disposition were more important than standard grammars.

Winnie adopted a translanguaging repertoire which mobilised valuable resources in the library's multilingual environment. She regularly showed an interest in which languages her interlocutors spoke and where they came from. She named languages as a way to engage convivially with social and linguistic difference. Languages were of great interest to her. Naming languages was an ordering strategy that allowed Winnie and her interlocutor to categorise and explore difference further. In fact, language naming led to linguistic diversification, as bits and pieces of languages were deployed in nonbounded ways. Language naming also led to language creativity. As symbols of Romance languages, words were used as stereotypes to deliver a professional competence that demanded fairness and respect for social and linguistic diversity. The naming of languages was a resource for social inclusion.

The naming of languages also led to discussions about language teaching and learning. Winnie skilfully moved between learner and teacher as she attempted to learn a few new words—namely, *válido* and *firma*—as well as competently use iconic phrases such as *gracias*, *adiós*, *ciao*, *muy bien*. We have suggested that putting herself in learner mode shifted the interchange from remedial to supportive. Moreover, her willingness to become the learner also allowed her to become the teacher. She skilfully provided the library user with an opportunity to practice more target-like English pronunciation, and improve her comprehension. Winnie achieved this through strategies such as repetition, slowing speech, fronting key vocabulary, providing corrective feedback, and negotiating new understandings. Particularly effective language teaching strategies were translations and translanguagings, which had the effect of not only sustaining the conversation, but improving its quality, making it convivial and light-hearted.

Library floors and information desks were evident in supporting a code of practice that valued communitarianism, social diversity, and the development of civic skills. Communicative resources found coherence in a spatial ecology that valued conviviality. Resources such as translanguaging, translation, repetition, slowness, pacing, and movement around the desk were all features of the spatial repertoire. In the library, staff had mastered a professional competence supported by the history of the information desk. It provided a meeting point at which patrons could expect information and human contact, regard-

less of their background. The library information desk represented a space in the city that stood in stark contrast to other city spaces where neoliberal discourses of market competition, speed, and profit dominated. As a public institution, the library worked to cohere and prevent social fragmentation. The desk made its staff as much as the staff made the desk.

IMPLICATIONS

In this final section, we consider how the multilingual, culturally and linguistically diverse, public city library might be relevant to schools and to language classrooms. But such a discussion must come with some considerable caveats. An obvious point is that the physical spaces of classrooms are very different from the physical spaces of library information desks, and so care should be taken in drawing up any simple implications in relation to language classrooms. Throughout we have stressed the centrality of physical spaces in shaping social activities, relationships, and interaction. Indeed, we heed Leung and Valdés's (2019) warning of a tendency to assume that the conditions that govern language instruction are broadly similar across settings and contexts when in fact they are deeply susceptible to the influences of the sociocultural and political environment in which they are situated. With this caution in mind we nevertheless consider what might be learned about language teaching and learning by juxtaposing the two contexts. In order to make this analogy we must accept the library interactions we have examined in this article challenge previous models of bi- and multilingualism in much the same way that translanguaging research on language education does. That is, in the library like the progressive classroom, the research being advanced here "gives legitimacy to the practices of multilingual speakers" (García & Kleyn, 2016, p. 14) and in doing so, elevates "the status of individuals and peoples whose language practices have been traditionally minoritised and labelled as being 'nonstandard'" (Vogel & García, 2017, p. 4). Winnie's languaging practices provide evidence of a translanguaging approach which sees linguistic diversity as both commonplace but also resourceful. How might a critical look at this library context assist in new directions for the classroom? Specifically, what can be gained by manoeuvring between the two domains where an openness and welcome is the default of the library while restraint and control is more normative of the classroom? Some tentative considerations follow.

First, if we are serious about adopting a practice-based theoretical model (Kramsch, 2015; Wei, 2018) to language education, this requires in-depth sociolinguistic and ethnographic case-study descriptions of multilingual people languaging in the real world. As Kramsch (2012) argued, “multilingualism challenges the very goals” (p. 109) of language education that have typically imagined homogeneous, monolingual environments in their pedagogy and curriculum design. Ethnographies that reveal the heterogeneity of modern city life and critically engage with histories and social structures could serve as resources for language teacher education. Hawkins (2011) observed that critical issues are rarely part of the curriculum in language teacher education. Eskildsen and Theodórsdóttir (2017) suggested a new curriculum where learning “concerns the ability to navigate competently in locally contextualised settings, socially and linguistically” (p. 160). Ethnographic accounts could provide these resources for teachers.

Second, if we are “changing the idea of language” (Cowley, 2017, p. 43), we need to concentrate more on people and their relationships, and less on languages and modalities. If our starting point is human contact, relationships, and interactivity, and not the “clear benchmarks of grammatical, pragmatic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competence” (Kramsch, 2012, p. 115), language education will require radical revision. A language arts programme could replace initial foreign language instruction to study multilingualism in everyday life. This would require the arts having a much greater role in language education. Translanguaging provides ways forward to explore creative and dynamic elements of languaging in our multilingual world.

Third, if we are to support democracy, and the cross-cultural understandings it presupposes, then we need to provide public arenas where people belonging to different groups can meet and communicate. Public institutions develop civic skills, building community and citizenship. Creating such arenas is a far from trivial task. Public schools, like libraries, have a role to play. Reminders of what educators can contribute to civic society could be further highlighted in relation to teacher development and knowledge. The need for teachers to be “responsive meaning makers in the world (...) who do not shy away from the politics (...) in which their practices are located” is one way forward (Kubanyiova, 2018, p. 2). Kubanyiova speaks of language teachers sharpening their senses as they relate to their social worlds. Teachers might be supported to focus

more on what they should become, rather than solely what they should know (Varghese et al., 2016). Other avenues speak of the creation of advocacy apprenticeships (Morgan, 2016), or conceiving of teachers as transformative intellectuals (Giroux, 1988).

Fourth, if schools are to welcome people from all walks of life into their communities, the space and materiality of that welcome should be examined. This might involve conceiving of a professional competence and spatial repertoire predicated on cooperation, creativity, criticality, and accommodation. It might also include an analysis of information points in the school. The school reception desk, or the classroom teacher's desk, might be conceived of not just as sites of transfer but as locations of inclusion and diversity.

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APPENDIX

Transcription Notes

(xxx)	Unclear speech
!	Animated tone or exclamation
?	Rising intonation
(.)	A brief interval within an utterance
((word))	Paralinguistic features and situational descriptions
[]	Contextual information, available through audio file
< >	English translation

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.