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**Translingual Realities and Possibilities in MENA Writing Programs**

**Institutional Context:**

The American University of Beirut considers itself the beacon of Liberal Arts in the Middle East. English is the medium of instruction, though students come in with first, second, and third languages predominately in Arabic, French, and Armenian. In 2019, we had an influx of Farsi and Persian speakers due to a women’s scholarship for Afghanis, and now we have an influx of students from Rwandan and Zimbabwe, meaning new dialects of French and English as well as Kinyarwanda and Shona.

I entered AUB in Fall 2023 with a goal to better understand composition programs in the MENA region and slowly motivate the writing program to develop local theories from local literacies and begin to move away from colonizing practices and hierarchies. However, finding local programmatic research was difficult, finding composition and literacy practices were in a few edited collections, and finding translingual work was nearly non-existent. My assumptions, however, were that the work was being done, but faculty were either not in positions to publish or research *or* they used the MENA university as a brief career stepping stone to re-enter the United States academia. The influence, I suppose, was to honor AUB as the beacon of the liberal arts while finding inclusive language and composing practices for their revolving door of backgrounds by seeking out the language and composing practice through WPA interviews.

**Key Theorists and Frames:**

**Translingualism:** In particular I rely on Horner and Canagarajah, who discuss translingualism in terms of labor, culture, and performance. Translingualism is a code-meshing of languages that helps the language user develop their own rhetorical choices and meaning, away from standardized English, as would be the language medium for the American-style university. With respect to rhetorical choice and meaning making, translingual scholarship suggests an increased level of student self-reflection.

**Decolonizing Writing Programs/Classrooms:** Because the MENA region lacks composition degree paths, much of the writing program sequence and writing pedagogies have been imported from the United States and retrofitted for the local university. This is witnessed in the participants’ acknowledgement of English as the language medium and the few spaces where multiple languages are present. It is also witnessed in the little “play” participants discuss with respect to language or pedagogy – writing programs maintain the model that maintains accreditation.

**Institutional Critique**: The spaces that hold multiple languages and where the hold multiple languages in the university enable increased translingual conversations, conceptions, and classrooms. However, if translingualism is relegated to one outlet, or only codeswitching is enabled in a few spaces, or highlighted as a tool, then the apparatuses negating the value of multiple languages impedes the work of the translingual composition classroom.

**Glossary**

**Translingua**l**ism:** looks at language as a practice as opposed to a system. Culture and use are are priorities in witnessing and advocating translingual practices.

**Writing Program:** in this context, a writing program is the curriculum and space where formal writing instruction occurs.

**Institutional Critique**: the mapping (and reimaginging) of where composition and translanguaging occurs.

**International American-style University**: this is a university outside of the United States with (or seeking) American accreditations. American-style universities can take many shapes: they can public or private, they can be an IBC (international branch campus), or they can be an independent institution, likely “sister” school.

Background

The Middle East and North Africa have imported an exponential amount of American style, American accredited universities since the turn of the century. While the American-style university holds some form internalized power and prestige, so does the use of “Standard American English,” though composition programs, which increase in presence with the American university, do not teach “Standard American English.” In fact, composition theorists in recent decades have advocated for a disruption of English-only and monolingual composing processes, developing translingual pedagogies to honor the multiple languages and sponsored literacies of the growing multi-national United States writing classroom.

From the standpoint away from the United States, there are two aspects of translingualism that guide how I enter this research. The first is the recognition that language and languages are always changing and “standard” carries with it signifiers of racism, classism, and elitism that the composition classrooms and writing programs actively push against (Rose, 1985, Inoue, 2019; Lee, 2023). In pushing against a “Standard English” and in recognizing that language is always moving, merging, and reinventing itself, language is always in process and is a response to the spatial and temporal. Translingualism and translingual pedagogies honor student, her content, and her language at her present, allowing all three to be both preserved and advanced (Lu & Horner, 2013). Secondly, where translingualism is a code-meshing of multiple languages, it is not a form code-switching. Code-switching a mono-lingual use of standardized forms of languages (Celic & Seltzer, 2013). Code-switching is rigid and static, acknowledging the authority within a rhetorical situation and using language as a result. Translingualism acknowledges the desires of the language user and the decisions of the grammars and word choice become entrenched acknowledging multiple tensions within the rhetorical situation (use, desire, labor, performance) of the language user and the location of the language.

Despite the regional increase in American universities, and the increase in the proliferation of composition courses and writing programs, regional output of localized theories regarding the discipline, translingualism, and writing programs have been slow to document and distribute. Entering programmatic and curricular change through a lens of translingualism has the power to connect students to their cultures and help them develop and witness rhetorical choices that are not rooted in mimicry of a dominant ideology. Importantly, it allows students to reflect back on their work in ways that allow them to witness ideological differences and see language as more than a monolingual tool for occupation. Given frames of the goals composition pedagogy and the potential of the translingual classroom, I started this project wanting to know how is translingualism in the MENA writing program enacted? What are the apparatuses that enable translingualism and what are the processes involved in these pedagogies?

**Literature Review**

American universities in the United States are seeing an increase in multilingual students both domestic and foreign. Attempts to appeal to the writing practices across languages and discover new knowledge building understanding has been motivating translingual and multilingual approaches composition and literacy theories that scholars have been wrestling with for decades. In this scholarship, compositionists have been working for more inclusive, liberatory, and use-based understandings of how differing students from differing backgrounds, set to differing futures can transfer composition work into those futures (cite). Importantly for those who laid the groundwork for inclusive composition practices was the need to reframe writing and literacy away from structural perfection and error and toward critical inquiry and knowledge production across modalities (cite). Composition studies has been anchored by the need to create meaning and communicate, and in this anchoring, there has been the championing of inclusionary methods of content creation and communication distribution.

It is from this anchoring of inclusionary communication methods and content creation that Horner (2011) develops what he calls a new paradigm of within composition studies and multiple language users. Importantly, when we think of communication and content, we also need to think of who our students will be conversing with after university. “We call for a new paradigm: a translingual approach. This approach sees difference in language not as a barrier to overcome or as a problem to manage, but as a resource for producing meaning in writing, speaking, reading, and listening” (Horner, 2011, p. 303). Horner is articulating two important aspects of composition and translingual writing for writing programs to consider: the first is the consideration that monolingual composing practices gatekeep translingual students and occupy their composing practices with monolingual perfection first, and content development second. As a result, with translingual students, championing monolingual compositions re-places composition pedagogy back into exclusionary methods of winners and losers.

As I work to intertwine translingual pedagogies into the composition practices and writing program mission in Lebanon, I am confronted with the realty that the dominant theories of translingualism (and transnationalism) are concerned with students *coming into* the United States and its university network. Horner and Alvarez (2019) make a point to document and define the history of the translingual turn:

In that ongoing move, scholars who now explicitly advance a translingual perspective have previously invoked other available terms to name what they would argue for (see Trimbur, “Translingualism”). For example, prior to Suresh Canagarajah’s publication of his book Translingual Practice and his edited collection Literacy as Translingual Practice, Canagarajah has argued for a “codemeshing,” a “plurilingual,” and a “world Englishes” approach to writing (“World Englishes”; “Place”; “Translanguaging”); Juan Guerra and Keith Gilyard have (separately) called for a “transcultural literacy” approach (Guerra, “Cultivating”; Gilyard, “Cross-Talk”); Lu and Horner, two of LDIW’s co-authors, have argued for a “multilingual” approach to resist monolingualism (“Resisting”); Horner, Donahue, and NeCamp have argued for taking a “translingual norm” to work “toward a multilingual composition scholarship” (emphasis added); and in 2002, LDIW co-authors Horner and Trimbur argued for “an actively multilingual language policy” to supplant the tacit policy of unidirectional English-only monolingualism they identified with US composition (“English Only” 597). Thus, over the course of a few decades, a variety of terms have been put forth by composition scholars to name the preferred alternative to monolingualism (see Canagarajah, “World Englishes” 273-74), inevitably causing some degree of confusion, and to a great extent adding to the conflation of other approaches more firmly associated with these other terms with a “translingual” approach. (Horner and Alvarez, 2019, p. 3).

Horner and Alvarez’s retelling of translingual terms and theory goals highlights two goals at the heart of translingual writing studies: the breaking down of social relations and the free-mixing of languages (**cut the quote down and unpack)**.

Translingual composition students both in the United States and abroad acknowledge the importance of English and Standard English. Canagarajah (1999) contends educators need to shift their mindset to how students learn English. “They will neither refuse to English or acquire it unconditionally in the terms dictated by the center. They will appropriate the language in their own terms, according to their needs, values, or aspirations” (pp. 175-176). There are two important facets to Canagarajah’s statement, here. The first of which is that educators and institutional apparatuses cannot impose language requirements uncritically and ask students to perform themselves within those parameters (Do, 2022; Gilyard, 2016. Students will likely find ways of resisting or mimic desired output without understanding genre, language choice, and cultural development through language. Secondly, while Canagarajah’s argument was published decades ago, now more than ever we can acknowledge the literacy sponsors responsible for the English(es) that students acquire (Brandt, 1998; Barton & Hamilton, 2012; Franzak, Porter, & Harned, 2019). Prior to the distribution of language through increasing technological advancements and language models, English and code-meshed Englishes could be witnessed through popular culture (Pennycook, 2008) or business and political transactions. “In a small Mediterranean country like Lebanon and small island like Singapore, both of which have no natural resources but their strategic geography location and strong dependence on trade and commerce, negotiations of conflicting language ideologies are mainly driven by geopolitical relations and economic considerations” (Bou Ayash, 2014, p. 124). For Pennycook and Bou Ayash, sponsors of English development included emerging local music and the desire to conduct business. In both of these spaces, language users have their own goals and their own dispositions with relation to the language. The use and modeling of language was not banked from an educator operating from the center of a colonizing apparatus. Instead, it was language users are invited into these spaces of culture and business and consume and produce language in ways that they each find organic and beneficial.

However, what we face in the Middle East and North Africa American-style, English medium universities is *not* the import of transnational students and their languages, but rather the import of the American university and the hierarchy of English as the language of instruction across the campus. The English-medium classroom is rife with politics that the translingual pedagogy turn in the United States classroom cannot acknowledge. Pennycook (2007) discusses multilingual English users in the music industries of multiple countries. “Where English is tied to education and middle-class opportunity, to use English as a person from an impoverished background is potentially also to call on an ambivalent class position” (p. 112). The politics of speaking English in a non-Western country, especially in the university, create more division and discomfort than as markers of linguistic hierarchy. In an interview about regarding language use in Lebanon, one participant discusses how parents will proudly respond that they are not able to read government protocols written in Arabic, distributed among the school whatsapp groups (Neiderman et al, 2025). Outside of the West, speaking, reading, and producing content in English is a political move that situates English users with the upwardly mobile, possibly emigrating classes. Refusing to use the local language, though, is also a political move designed to elevate the monolingual user, who was never in a position to need, or converse with, others in the local language.

When we look at the exportation of colonizing languages and their institutions, then, international English-speaking universities have to break down the internalized language politics to achieve translingual pedagogical aims. These internalized politics do not simply carry markers of prestige and (in)adequacy, but they also prohibit a dialogue of cultural value. Language is used as a tool and it is part of laboring (Horner, 2024; Canagarajah, 2020; Do, 2022). Moving back to Horner and Alvarez’s literature review, translingual theory is built on mixing language and dismantling social relations. I argue that translingual theory outside of the West, in areas where language hierarchies and language silencing is present, the practice must begin with multilingual users acknowledgement of how each of their languages are an apparatus to produce cultural value. It is in these moments, where they are able to analyze their language use and production away from (or alongside) markers of prestige, then students will be able to consider transcultural literacy (Guerra 2015, Kilyard, 2016) and build entrances into code-meshing usage and composing. Shapiro (2022) argues the ways in which we teach composition and language has the power to tell counter-histories about language, identity, and power, but we must be providing students with the space for critical reflection to do (pp. 217-218).

**Methods**

**Findings**

*Home Languages and Belonging*

It’s imperative to note that across the MENA region, each area has different home languages and different Arabic dialects. From a practicality standpoint, this means the languages of business, publication, and entertainment can wildly differ, though each student, across American-style universities, seems to be entering the writing classroom (and university) from the same language mechanisms.

The prevalence of the nurturing of official and home languages takes three forms among my participants: as cultivating cultural roots, as preparing students for work, and as preserving culture. In cultivating cultural roots, students mainly in Gulf countries are expected to courses concerned with their country’s principles through its history and morality. Interestingly, when considering the promotion of the work of composition in the last decade, scholars have insisted that the FYC classroom provides the time and space for students to grapple with the tensions of literacy sponsorships and wicked problems, while also developing awareness to transfer writing practices into the real world. While the presence of multiple languages is partitioned to specific spaces, participants illustrate how and why MENA region writing programs can begin weaving languages within compositions.

The desire to cultivate cultural roots was largely witnessed in the reasoning for Arab and Arabic departments in the Gulf universities. The stakeholders informing this pedagogy and cultivating the need are the Gulf governments, ensuring that local cultural roots are integrated with foreign degree standards. Karie mentions this when discussing the presence of Arabic and it belongs in her government, American-style university:

The rulers of of UAE have been very adamant that the students need to embrace their Arabic. So they had an Arabic requirement, they had Arabic classes. [Students] had to take Middle Eastern history. I don't think they took a religion course, although the guys that taught the Middle Eastern history were very much teaching religion. But no, I mean there that's one of the things Khalifa prided itself on.

Along with the Arabic requirement, the university and country promotes the contextual learning of language along with the history and religion. The requirement not only indicates the importance of the language, but learning the language in context of the region’s cultural development. The Arabic requirement illustrates the importance, or the insistence, of the cultural context in ushering in language abilities and preservation.  In a similar country, but at a private American-style institution, Nina notes:

We do have an Arabic component as part of our Gen added programme, only to address and to fulfil the cultural aspect of the general education program. But other than this we are largely an English based institution. So we have like a couple of Arabic courses that students have today just to ensure that they are because we are a liberal arts institution. So what else? General education is quite important to ensure that we, its students are exposed to multiple fields of knowledge and multiple differences and cultural aspects of their community. So they have to take two or three courses in the Arabic culture.

In each of these universities, the institutional stakeholders recognize the importance of developing both Arabic and the cultural capital of their respective countries. The departments are also siloed from the writing courses and the rest of the liberal arts, as if the interdisciplinary nature of writing, language, and culture cannot actualized.

There is an outlier in the Gulf countries, and is the branch campus of the public university. As a branch campus, this institution cannot add additional degree requirements, and it must adhere to all state laws from the branch’s home state. Arabic and Middle Eastern history courses would not be required as students are not required to take a foreign language, and the history/culture requirement at the home campus is western civilization.

Where the Gulf countries utilized Arabic and Middle Eastern studies in the liberal arts general education curriculum to cultivate cultural roots, university stakeholders in the Levant understand language use and practice as preserving cultural roots. Again, however, the work of preservation is not performed in the college writing classroom, but in an additional service space through the university’s writing center.

We've done some outreach projects, especially in my first year because I had the budget. We reached out to some Armenian schools because I know that a lot of Armenian schools don't get the type of the type of professional development that other schools can...Tnb he Armenian language, apparently in the diaspora is under threat of, you know, being lost. So she was, she was saying, why don't you pilot a writing center in one of the Armenian schools and let it be bilingual, you know, providing also support in Armenian so that students are encouraged to. So she had this brilliant idea that she pitched and I may pick up on it one of these days (Anne).

From this university writing center in the Levant, the writing center director saw the importance the institution and her role held in being a protector and disseminator of the Armenian language, especially in spaces that value a different primary language, regardless of if that primary language is Arabic, English, or French. It can be inferred, here, just as the Gulf countries attempt to instill cultural roots in its students, the bilingual writing center can serve a mission of preserving cultural roots that Anne notes are in danger of being lost.

At another Levantine university, other language preservation efforts come from parents who emigrated and raised kids in other countries. As Maria notes, many parents of her university send their children there to engage with the country and language. “Some parents of the Lebanese diaspora send their children to complete their undergraduate education at AUB and strengthen their links family in Lebanon and the Arabic language” (Maria). Interestingly, both of these stakeholders concerned with roots preservation (an Armenian university in the Levant and diasporic Lebanese parents worldwide) are those situated away from their home country, in diasporas.

*Codeswitching and Conflict*

*Occupation and Occupations*

*Stakeholder assumptions regarding language*

It can be inferred, then, that stakeholder biases are also preventing the little growth and representation of multiple language classroom and writing practices available. On the ground level, there is acknowledgement that the composition classroom, English department, and university can uphold multiple and meshed languages, but it hasn’t found ways to do so yet. In previous President Dorman’s (2015) speech at a local institution, he states “Lebanon is, at the very least, a trilingual civilization that looks both East and West, fluent in Arabic, English, and French. Thanks to its diversity, it is culturally and historically more advantaged in terms of its size than almost any country in the world” (p. 3).  In the following academic, the current president noted the trinlingualism of AUB’s students as a way to mark their exceptionalism. He states “The language of instruction was Arabic, but accepted students were expected to know or learn English and French” (Khuri, 2015, p. 1). In an Al Jazeera documentary about the university, Professor Ramzi Balbaaki argues that the university lost its culture and the culture of the country when it mandated English be the language medium of the institution (Yalla). This is just one institution’s evolution of language in public conversations, but it is clear that language is a tool to each, but it is always addressed concerning how language highlights the region, and in a way that each language operates separately, and creating different, distinct cultures and communications.

Despite glorifying that students enter university from multiple backgrounds, knowing many distinct languages, the in classroom language conversation is always a monolingual one. Maria, who is also situated in a trilingual country acknowledges “Individual instructors may welcome students’ knowledge of and command of other languages, but no program-wide recommendations are in place. Very little of this variety is acknowledged or capitalized upon in the program” (Maria). Maria’s statement, while local to her institution, indicates the larger, top-down issue, of the perception of inviting multiple languages into the English-medium classroom. First and foremost, Maria notes that “knowledge of and command of other languages,” may be allowed, but this statement assumes a neutrality to the knowledge presence. So the instructors may allow the languages in a neutral way, but, while scholars discuss the ability for language to hold culture and pasts and ideologies (Canagarajah & Dovchin, 2019; Lee, 2019), these influences are not discussed. Furthermore, it seems that outside of a few interested colleagues, Maria’s writing program is not even discussing the possibilities of how engendering the multilingual backgrounds of the students can add value to their liberal arts education or their composition experiences.

In fact, in spaces outside of the composition classroom, students are invited to compose, publish, and seek assistance with works written languages outside of English. Several participants discussed the development of undergraduate journals and symposiums showcasing the work and creativity of the student population. It is in these venues that students can play with language. However, even though multilingual work is welcome, students rarely submit non-English medium writing. “I mean, last year we only had two students out of 50 students who got published. Two of them wrote in a language other than English. One was in Bengali and one was in Arabic. So there a lot of the students, even though there's many coming from government schools where their English language instruction hasn't been particularly strong, but they are. They, I'm not sure that how comfortable they feel composing in their own language actually sometimes and they're used to being in the academic environment here. And so they think you know that writing in English is what they should be doing.” (Theresa). Theresa highlights several aspects of the MENA student, here: that their language background may not be Arabic, but it could be one of many languages, despite having spent their entire lives in the Middle East, that there are hierarchies of K-12 schools, and those schools may entrench students in English well, or they may focus on other languages and subjects, and students will also gravitate toward what they think academia *is supposed to be*, not necessarily the pedagogies and extracurriculars offered to them. As such, when we don’t teach toward a multilingual or translingual focus, students will not know how to value and seize opportunities to utilize multiple or non-English mediums.

The other area where multiple languages and compositions are worked with are in writing centers. My participants who double as faculty and writing center directors each spoke to the welcoming of code-switching in conversation at the writing center. Composing-wise, though, one director discussed how, for the first time, a student booked a session to talk through a piece written in Armenian. “And this semester was the first semester where someone had written a piece in Armenian and they needed support. And I'm not an expert in written Armenian, so, but I had one tutor who writes in Armenian. So I asked her if she'd be comfortable having the session and she said yes, of course. So they actually ended up having this session, which was about something written in Armenian, which was a breath of fresh air for the center. And it actually worked” (Anne). I love that Anne is so pleased that “it actually worked,” but it also notes how hesitant we are to try and fail and to work with and to work around our students (and our) multiple languages. Anne’s experience also illustrates the common thread of all writing administrator work: that we need access to resources. She continues on by advocating for openness while acknowledging that she does not have experts in Arabic or Armenia, which are the dominant first and second languages of her university. The writing center, as Anne notes, is the place to be open to the use and composing within those languages; however, the presence of only one non-English medium composition in Anne’s tenure illustrates the expectations of the students regarding the language of their work and the hesitance with language play.

While it is clear that each institution is able to point out spaces in which additional languages are allowed to circulate, MENA writing faculty and administrators also have to consider the attitudes of the students when developing translingual or multilingual pedagogies. As noted above, Theresa makes the point of acknowledging that students do not take advantage of composing in multiple languages in the university because they understand the university to be English-medium, and it draws discomfort and confusion to offer that opportunity, while not replicating it across the institution or writing spaces. Faculty also face isolating the student body if the goals of translingual writing pedagogy are not executed well. At Lana’s institution, she notes that there is a hierarchy of those who speak English and those who speak multiple languages in the classroom. “And I've heard conversations where, you know, some people might be criticizing professors who speak Arabic to their students in their classes” (Lana).  This isolation and criticism is a result of colonizing apparatuses which we have a duty to break down, but we also have to consider how students will respond to the inclusion of translingual writing practices.

To that end, translingualism needs to be championed by the institution to help our students accept the translingual pedagogies writing instructors bring to the classroom and writing program directors may implement program-wide. “I know that they recognize and understand you know, the translingualism of various students etcetera. But we don't have any kind of curriculum that particularly encourages or enhances their ability to, you know, compose and write of the languages” (Theresa).

**Discussion:**

The above shows us the reality of where the region stands with code-meshing and the institutional factors that translingual pedagogies are working against:

Upper Administration + Accreditation

Students and assumptions of prestige and value

The above also shows us where can increasingly navigate and how to slowly change the perceptions of university stakeholders:

Student and faculty outlets – if faculty utilize translingual abilities – the prestige will break down.

In conversations with cultural apparatuses

Developing a translingual pedagogy

Arnold

“Fighting for curriculum change through bridging the gap between language learning and actual language use in ways that attend to the dynamic sociolinguistic dimensions of language use where no language operates in isolation is yet another promising challenge for U.S. translinguals” (Bou Ayash, 2014, p. 127).

We can begin to promote translingual work. Translingual literacy narrative – which asks students to grapple with the concepts they are learning in their cultural classes and apply it to their current outlook on life.

**Conclusion (Rough Beginnings)**

Multiple language use, code-meshing, and even code-switching in the MENA classroom draws different felt difficulties and politics that the instructor must be prepared to negotiate.

As educators in English medium universities, we have an added expectation to ensure our students graduate with functional English language abilities. The maintains a bit of the need for prescriptive assessments and language hierarchies.

However, we also have a duty to our students to help them unpack the complexities of growing up multilingual and holding space for code-meshing. We have an opportunity show students that languages are not sterile and neutral, but they are actually sponsors of larger literacy practices. As we request this knowledge building of our students, we are able to scaffold knowledge making regarding language use and meaning-making. As compositionists, we acknowledge that writing is not neutral and literacy

Championing English as the only language of the multilingual, MENA classroom further removes our pedagogies from localizing, place-based capabilities.

By asking MENA participants about the languages operating within our universities, we begin to actualize the goals and work of students at the ground level, with respect to how they operate language and why.

As expected, the space most open to multiple language use is the writing center. Writing center participants consistently refer to working with the comfort of the students to ensure they are able to make connections, understand concepts, and develop content (Anne, Hala, and Theresa).

However, by relegating the work of multiple languages and meshing languages to the service sites and the extracurriculars, we are articulating that there is no space for multiple languages in the “real” work of the university, their future work, or even, the process of meaning making.