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## A Special Interview with Christopher Jenks about Language and Culture

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### Christopher Jenks

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In this volume of PASAA, we are very honoured to have an opportunity to interview Associate Professor Dr. Christopher Jenks from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Kowloon, Hongkong. Associate Professor Dr. Christopher Jenks is a language teacher with extensive English teaching and research experience in Hong Kong and many other countries around the world. He has given numerous plenary presentations at regional and international conferences, and published extensively in the area of Discourse analysis, global Englishes, translingualism, computer-mediated communication, and language pedagogy. His latest publications include *Meat, guns, and God: Expressions of nationalism in rural America* (2018, in *Linguistic Landscapes*), *Uncooperative lingua franca encounters* (2018), *Race and Ethnicity in English Language Teaching: Korea in Focus* (2017), and *Language and Intercultural Communication in the Workplace: Critical Approaches to Theory and Practice* (2017).

Drawing on his wealth of experience in world Englishes, second language learning, translingualism and intercultural communication, Associate Professor Dr. Christopher Jenks shares with us his perspectives on the relation between language and

culture, the area that has gained increasing interest among language practitioners and researchers.

**1. Thank you very much for agreeing to be interviewed for our journal. Before we start, you could perhaps tell us a bit about you and your work.**

Thanks for asking me to participate in this interview. Much appreciated. Let me first start by saying that I was born and raised in the United States. I am a bi-racial Korean American (my mother is Korean and my father is a White American). My cultural background is, I think, partly the reason why I am interested in the study of culture, identity, and intercultural communication. I spent most of my life outside of the United States, so I am very much aware that people have very static understandings of culture, nationhood, and citizenship. For example, I am always asked (and sometimes challenged!) about where I am from and what languages I speak. Some people don't accept that I am from the United States... Perhaps because I am not White? The point is, traveling and living in different countries shaped the way I think and how I approach my research.

My PhD is in Applied Linguistics, and my doctoral studies was concerned with understanding second language interaction. Although I was trained as a conversation analyst during my PhD studies, I now use a number of other theoretical frameworks and methodologies, including Critical Discourse Analysis and Ethnography of Communication. You can say, in this sense, that I am a discourse analyst, and my research is now concerned with how spoken and written discourse performs a range of communicative actions (e.g., trolling and arguing) and indexes a number of social phenomena (e.g., nationalism and race). I enjoy uncovering the discourse structure and organization of important pedagogical issues, including longitudinal learning, classroom discussions, and computer-mediated communication. I am also interested in the area of study often referred to as global

Englishes, which for me, includes investigating issues related to lingual franca encounters, language identities, student ideologies, translingualism, and transnationalism.

After completing my PhD, I worked as a professor in South Korea. I then went back to Newcastle University to work for three years. I quickly got tired of life in England (though I miss it now!), so I moved to Hong Kong. I stayed there for four years before moving back to the United States to work at a university there. I just moved back to Hong Kong last year, having completed my fifth year (in total). Again, my travels and life experiences very much shape the types of research that I do. I think it's very important to try to understand your surroundings, which is why my research has evolved over these years.

**2. Several teachers and novice researchers in our field of ELT are more familiar with the terms like *cross-cultural*, *bilingual* and *multilingual*, but nowadays more and more researchers are turning to pay attention to *intercultural communication* and *translingualism*. And some people raise questions whether the terms refer to the same situation or not. For example, *cross-cultural* is the same as *intercultural*, while *multilingualism* is similar to *translingualism*?**

It's understandable why there is so much confusion. Researchers are to blame... We need to as a discipline really think long and hard about why new terms should be introduced, and whether there are enough justifications to replace old ones. The cynical explanation is that researchers introduce new terms in order to advance their careers. Some scholars have discussed this as "academic branding" (see Aneta Pavlenko's recent arguments, for example). A more sympathetic position is that we need to engage in more "policing" and "meta-discussions" of ongoing advances in the literature.

With that said, what is the utility in using one term over another? The cross-cultural/intercultural communication issue is a bit more straightforward than the trans- prefix situation.

For cross-cultural communication, as I understand it, the term is associated with a body of work (and thus a way of thinking) that treats culture as a site of contention or challenge. Such research locates culture within the individual or an individual country (cf. Big C culture), and thus often ignores the possibility that culture can be created in and through communication (culture as a verb; see the work of Brian Street). For example, an American tourist in Thailand attempting to haggle the price of a souvenir is treated as an encounter between two individuals from different countries. Although this is not untrue, the fact that both individuals are from different countries may not be relevant to how the communication unfolds.

For intercultural communication research, culture is located in the discourse of human encounters, and as such, interculturality is a process through which individuals actively work to make sense of each other. In this sense, the American tourist is not necessarily an example of “culture” operating at the national level, but rather what gets treated as culturally-significant is tied to the discursive actions and practices used by individuals to carry out the task of communication.

In sum, both terms represent different areas of study and disciplinary interests. Using one term over the other demonstrates that you belong to a specific discipline.

The issue of translingualism is a little different. Although translingualism also represents a way of thinking (or a set of theoretical principles), the term has been used to question the utility of “older” terms, such as bilingualism. Both terms represent the same people (individuals that speak two or more languages), but possess different political implications. It is certainly a

complex issue. I'll try to keep this answer concise. I suppose the most important thing to note is that translingualism represents the belief that language boundaries, such as the linguistic differences that make Thai and English unique in form and function, do not reflect how real individuals within society use multiple languages. The belief amongst translingual scholars is that languages influence each other, are used in creative ways, and the contexts in which languages are used do not proscribe what particular language to use.

So, the benefit in using translingualism – though it's important to note that I am a cynic of this term – is that it allows you to (1) align your research with new/fashionable terms, (2) demonstrate an awareness that language boundaries are not as fixed as we like to think of them, and (3) situate your scholarship within larger paradigmatic movements in the literature that favor postmodern and poststructural ways of thinking.

Teachers and other similar language professionals should, however, approach translingualism with caution. Very little research exists that discusses how notions of translingualism can be applied in a language classroom while managing the institutional and linguistic expectations of school administrators, government officials, and parents.

### **3. What do you see as the top three challenges currently facing EFL/ESL teachers in translingualism?**

I think there is only one challenge to really think about... That is, adopting translingualism in the classroom requires us to create assessment tools that systematically and reliably test for (1) all of the language resources that are used by a student (e.g., Thai and English), (2) deviations from so-called standard forms of language usage, and (3) features that align with traditional expectations of what is right and wrong. The last assessment requirement is important because even if we accept translingualism, the world

around us has certain communicative expectations that we have to be mindful of, as students' futures are in our hands.

Let me give you a pretty clear example of this challenge. Imagine that you want to incorporate translanguaging into your assessment. How much Thai is appropriate to use in an English speaking or writing task? What if our students speak multiple languages (e.g., French and Mandarin), and wish to use these languages in their English assignments? Do we, as teachers, have the capacities and resources to assess students in languages that we don't understand? Many other questions exist, but I think you get the point. At the theoretical level, translanguaging sounds nice. In practice... Good luck.

**4. As a teacher and researcher with experiences in both Hong Kong and many other countries, can you please share with us the trends of research in intercultural communication competence?**

Intercultural communication research, including studies concerned with competence, is becoming increasingly more activist in nature. That is, researchers are increasingly understanding that we need to bring about change in the lives of those that we research. It's not simply enough to publish a paper in a good journal that no one outside of academia will read. It's important for our research to be impactful. So, we need to be thinking about both the contribution that we make to the academic community and the ways in which we can make our research feed into the lives of those we research.

**5. Are there any controversial issues or research gaps in this area that need further research?**

Historically, our areas of research point the "empirical lens" toward the researched. That is, our research tends to look at research participants with the implicit understanding that we, as

researchers, are objective participants in the entire process. This is a flawed way of thinking, as even the most positivistic and tightly controlled experimental study has some level of human subjectivity. Moving forward, we need to concern ourselves with not only “the researched,” but also “the researcher.” In other words, a big gap in the literature is understanding how the researcher’s personal and professional experiences shapes the ways in which the researched is investigated.

### **The Interviewer**

Kandaporn Jaroenkitboworn is an assistant professor at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI). She read her BA, MA, and PhD at Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. She is currently the editor of PASAA.

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