CHAPTER 5

Writing after the End of Empire: Composition, Community, and Creativity

Suppose we come across someone who looks to us subordinated and oppressed but who does not give us any signs of being in that state, at least signs that we would recognize?

Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘A Correspondence on Provincializing Europe’

Whoever teaches without emancipating stultifies. And whoever emancipates doesn't have to worry about what the emancipated person learns. He will learn what he wants, nothing maybe.

Jacques Rancière, The Ignorant Schoolmaster

Introduction

It is arguable that cultural studies as a discipline has both broadened the scope of literary studies and simultaneously placed its privilege in question. Nonetheless, the study of World Englishes, despite its institutional location in linguistics, continues to give a certain privilege to literary creativity, elevating this creativity in the classroom and in research. As evidence of this continued privilege, recent issues of key journals such as World Englishes, and also newly established programmes in relevant institutions (for example, the City University of Hong Kong’s MFA in Creative Writing, launched in 2010), give emphasis to creative writing in World Englishes. In fact, there are even efforts to transform aspects of composition along lines broadly influenced by this emphasis, and if those efforts have begun in the North American context they will perhaps flourish even more readily in the numerous contexts of World Englishes. Indeed, this continued emphasis has intuitive plausibility, with
literature seen as the natural focus for the true linguistic innovation characteristic of an owned and localized variety of English. Indeed, in an obvious example such as Indian English, its historical depth is partly exemplified by its long literary tradition, including English language writing’s acknowledgement by the Sahitya Akademi. Many of the categories of cultural studies might themselves play into this continued privilege, deriving as they appear to do from literary theories (which were, perhaps, themselves more often than not adaptations from varieties of linguistics). And, after all, in the study of World Englishes we are focusing on linguistic change, so what could seem more natural than to privilege literature? Perhaps what cultural studies can offer us when we focus on World Englishes is a series of corrective perspectives that help us understand quite why these Englishes are to a great extent not understood as continued forms of linguistic imperialism. Cultural studies perspectives, in putting the English language (and English literature) alongside other cultural forms (and priorities), help us understand World Englishes in terms of the central category of hegemony; consensus implying dissensus, globalization implying glocalization. This chapter considers how creativity and creative writing come to be understood as (and taught as) drivers of dissensus.

Such creative dissensus is clearly a challenge (however partial) to the assumption that English around the world operates as a form of ongoing linguistic imperialism. The usefulness of hegemony, central to cultural studies, obviously supplements the way commentators such as Robert Phillipson use the term. Cultural studies takes the Gramscian understanding of the term and extends it, and that extension has great relevance to World Englishes. Gramsci was interested in the counter-hegemonic utterance, an utterance that works against the common-sense understanding of the world that is produced by hegemony; it concerns, then, meaning that is supposedly excluded from our thought. For Gramsci, we are free to speak, to interpret, or to refuse to give our consent. When we respond to cultural texts, our production of meaning is not preordained, contained and conditioned by the text’s structural and semiotic elements; instead, there are alternative meanings, which we can both find and produce ourselves. If we are interested in the connection between World Englishes and hegemony, then we are interested in the reception of English; we become interested in audiences, and what they do with the culture around them. One such audience is obviously found in the classroom, where students of English around the world often find themselves faced with learning not just the language but also the literature of the traditionally English-speaking world, as well as extending their abilities through creative writing of various kinds. While it may seem that the ongoing privilege of literary studies is a problem, maintaining a gap between learners and the mighty native speaker creator (whether that speaker is a writer or not), it can instead be argued that literary studies is part of a general stress on a creativity that is implicitly political, and that the creativity of Englishes is an aspect of resistance to a monolithic and imperialist English.
Apparent paradoxically, that resistance is also directed towards the celebration of difference. The discourses of World Englishes and postcolonialism share an emphasis on the liberation of difference. When transferred to the context of composition studies, this emphasis appears to demand that, on an abstract level, composition should assume qualities associated with creative writing. Application of the postcolonial paradigm to the US composition context is under way, but this chapter makes a comparison between that context and Hong Kong in order to understand attitudes of partial resistance to the embrace of World Englishes and their processes of cultural translation. It considers possible explanations for such resistance, and speculates about wider issues concerning postcolonial theory and the legitimate application of its concepts, specifically difference and cultural translation. The potential blending of aspects of creative writing and composition is one way that the privileges of literary study might be indirectly defended in a foreign language context. In arguing for the continued importance to language students of studying literature, emphasis is clearly placed on the significance of linguistic innovation. The discourse of World Englishes invites teachers to shift (to some extent, in certain parts of the curriculum) that emphasis away from ‘distant’ creative writers (still most frequently native speakers, conventionally understood) to the students’ own creativity. Furthermore, such creativity does not have to remain confined to the creative writing course, but can also be found and encouraged in composition, as well as, by extension, critical writing about literature. In this way, the distinction between error and innovation is demonstrated to be less clear than students assume. It has even been argued by some commentators that linguistic facts imply an obligation not only on the teacher but also the student. Describing the pedagogical issues arising from English’s status as a formerly colonial language now dominant under globalization, Christine Pearson Casanave notes that English’s association with economic, cultural, and political dominance demands that its role in education is considered very carefully indeed. One aspect of this consideration is, she suggests, students’ own understanding and application of their insights into English’s roles: ‘Teachers who hold strong beliefs about the inseparability of language and politics claim that L2 writing students need not only to be aware of the ways that the English language is implicated in issues of power but also to recognize that they have the right, or perhaps the obligation, to question, resist, and challenge the status quo’ (2004, 197). I cannot see any objection to the idea of it being a right, but Casanave’s hesitation in reporting it as an obligation is appropriate, as it is obviously not the teacher’s role to dictate what should and should not be concluded, or what should and should not be then done. Nonetheless, it is often the case that postcolonial studies tends towards prescribing a course of action for students. The inseparability of language and politics to which Casanave refers can be framed in various ways, but there is no doubt that postcolonialism has become one of the most widely utilized frameworks. Furthermore, ‘obligation’ is an apt way to describe the way some commentators conceive the situation described above. According to some perspectives, postcolonialism is not only a possibility
when we are discussing creativity and composition; a postcolonial perspective appears to be a necessity, and is a perspective that students themselves hardly seem allowed to remain indifferent to, let alone reject entirely. It is not only a question of how to discuss the teaching of English around the world, or to rethink the teaching of composition. It seems to be obligatory to bend English itself into new shapes, and so to embrace the diversity of Englishes available to different audiences and writers around the world. In a way, it begins to seem obligatory not only to understand and accept World Englishes, but also to write in them.

However, this laudable emphasis on English being or becoming Englishes (i.e., potentially the ‘property’ of language students, wherever they may be) inevitably comes into conflict with the demands of local educational institutions (both universities and governments) as well as students (and also indeed parents). Against the discourse of World Englishes practising the political and philosophical assumptions of postcolonial studies, there are powerful countervailing forces that demand less liberation of difference and more bolstering of sameness; indeed, it is demanded that the distinction between error and innovation is not only maintained but also strengthened, explained by teachers in greater depth, and fully respected by students. Creativity in such a context might appear, depending on one’s perspective, a laissez-faire acceptance of the blending and blurring of properly distinct linguistic and cultural identities. These general points about the tensions deriving from the teaching and researching of World Englishes will be explored in relation to Hong Kong, understood primarily as postcolonial and a context in which English is a foreign language, even if Hong Kong is one of many contexts in which the English as a second language/English as a foreign language (ESL/EFL) distinction is less obvious than it seems. It will be compared with Singapore, a context in which a stress on creativity makes more immediate sense, in that Singaporeans (depending on age, class, and other factors) might well self-identify as native speakers, and are operating in a multilingual context in which English is termed a second rather than foreign language. It is arguable that the situation in Hong Kong is changing, and is hardly uniform across even tertiary institutions (with two of eight such government-funded institutions incorporating Chinese-medium instruction), but even so the desire to discuss its English as one of the World Englishes is symptomatic of the political and philosophical investments of postcolonial studies, perhaps telling us less about the demands and expectations of the postcolonial subjects themselves.

Fretting in the Shadow of Language

The creative writer’s expression of anxiety concerning the English language is a familiar postcolonial element. Stephen Dedalus’s soul fretting in the shadow of the dean’s language is perhaps only the most famous representation of a
postcolonial predicament in which even the most adept and innovative stylists fail to escape entirely the sense in which they should not be using the language at all. Indeed, this anxiety applies even to writers who speak only English. If even these often game-changing creative writers have wrestled with that language, it might seem strange to want to encourage all learners of English to embrace their creative capacity. That would be surely to generalize the anxiety, to deepen uncertainties in use of a language that teaching might be expected to alleviate to some extent. Nonetheless, in English studies there has been a shift from getting it right to getting it wrong in your own way. A shift of emphasis has indeed taken place, and that is one thing I want to focus on here. My focus will also be not only on how World Englishes help us understand the spread of English but also on how the category ‘World Englishes’ itself betrays its reliance on certain assumptions that can be problematic, depending on context. Those assumptions I will call ‘postcolonial’, but they are hardly shared by all the writers and critics associated with that term. Instead, they are the assumptions of postcolonial theory, even if that is itself an imprecise generalization. The discourses of World Englishes and postcolonialism share an emphasis on the liberation of difference. As I have already suggested, when that emphasis is transferred to the context of composition studies, it entails that composition should assume qualities associated with creative writing. However, this chapter assumes that transferring these qualities is often highly problematic, which becomes clear through comparing composition practices in different contexts.

Whatever our perspective on this cultural translation, it has implications for the practice of English composition in the postcolonial classroom. These implications derive in particular from the blurring of the distinction between error and innovation; in the context of widened ‘ownership’ of English implied by World Englishes, it is difficult to justify all the corrections inherent in some versions of composition studies. Needless to say, however, there is no single postcolonial classroom, and no abstract model of cultural translation can help us understand all the instances of World Englishes. It seems necessary, then, to compare instances in which cultural translation is embraced with those in which it is to some extent rejected. In order to make this comparison, we can put postcolonial theory and World Englishes in the context of composition studies, which in some traditions and in certain contexts (particularly the North American context) has in more recent times conceived its role as one of liberating potential difference rather than policing the sameness of standards. Both postcolonial theory and World Englishes have much to offer the theory and practice of such a composition studies. Indeed, it is increasingly common to find composition theorized in terms of being postcolonial (see, for example, Lunsford and Ouzgane 2004). Additionally, the acknowledgement that error and incipient innovation are inherently indistinguishable, an acknowledgement that drives certain perspectives on World Englishes, has clear relevance to any composition practice that would seek to embrace creativity-in-difference. Nonetheless, before we embrace a postcolonial composition that
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coincides with the presuppositions of World Englishes it is necessary to consider the counter-arguments that might be marshalled in the service of the same. Composition studies obviously have an institutional grounding, and a geographical location. Furthermore, composition is distinct from creative writing, and it is not something to be found in all English-language-medium tertiary institutions, not even in all native speaker contexts. The specificity of composition as pedagogical object might help us understand its political and philosophical openness to postcolonial theory and World Englishes, but might also demand that we reassess the application of these fields’ insights in other contexts.

My approach is to consider some of the arguments for a postcolonial composition studies, and then, in order to avoid context-stripping, to re-contextualize them in terms of a historically postcolonial context (what Terry Eagleton (1998) and no doubt many others would call a ‘real’ postcolonial context). That context is my own, a trilingual university in Hong Kong, which, while even in local terms atypical, is revealing when the most familiar political-philosophical postcolonial perspective is brought to bear on it. Before getting to that specific context it is necessary to be selective (but not simply partial) in order to grasp issues in composition studies. There is, of course, a huge range of material on which to draw in composition studies, which in turn draws on a range of complex thinkers, sometimes from other fields, sometimes working within composition itself. However, in order to understand postcolonial composition it is possible to pick out certain trends that have been evident for some time. Much contemporary composition, in common with thinking about pedagogy across many disciplines, owes a great deal to the work of Paolo Freire. Freire (1970) distinguished the banking concept of education, in which there is no encouragement of critical thinking (possibly even discouragement), and no place for the student voice, from problem-posing education, in which the student voice is encouraged, and the aspiration is to critical consciousness. Composition has converted this emphasis into an emphasis on process rather than product, although reintegration of the two has also been important. Much of the work relevant to a postcolonial composition draws on this emphasis on process, and frames it using a range of theorists such as Bakhtin, Derrida, and even Deleuze. For example, discussing what she calls a pedagogy of possibility, conceived in terms drawn from Bakhtin, Kay Halasek stresses the importance of student agency, resistance to norms, and holding open the possibility of becoming. Composition needs to hold open the possibility of ideological understanding and then change: ‘The student as author is an agent in her own ideological becoming, a person whose intentions and responsibility for learning determine and define what personal and cultural structures she chooses to resist and transform. Students and writing instructors who take seriously their own, and one another’s, ideological development restore the possibility for cultural and political change’ (1999, 193). Unsurprisingly, a composition drawing on Bakhtin’s work seeks to enable a diversity of voices in the classroom. Composition studies indeed appears well placed to put into
practice discourses concerning cultural change because in the composition context, as Halasek suggests, the student is an author. However, as she makes clear, the range of different authorial voices in the composition classroom is at least as important as the individual voice. Only through engagement and dialogue can the individual become, and presumably continue becoming.

To some extent, drawing on Bakhtin in this way is a way both of describing classroom practicalities and of philosophizing concerning linguistic-political fundamentals. Accordingly, it is unsurprising that composition addresses issues relevant to postcolonial and World Englishes sites that are found outside the North American institutional context. It also important to stress that the diversity of student populations has raised the question not only of different voices but also of different languages, and of code-switching and code-mixing. To the extent that composition has challenged myths concerning monolingualism, it fits well far-flung and wide-ranging discussions. As Paul Kei Matsuda suggests, however, this monolingualism is something that continues to require challenging: ‘It is important for composition scholars, regardless of specialization, to reexamine how and to what extent the monolingual assumption pervades the field and its intellectual practices, and to consider ways of moving beyond those unexamined assumptions’ (2012, 49). On one level, this challenge is necessary in order to avoid prejudice against multilingualism, which has so often been viewed as an impediment, whether to educational opportunity or cultural ‘integration’. But we can be more ‘realist’ and argue that, if nothing else, this challenge is necessary in order to rise to the demands of globalization. Students are not merely preparing for professional life within a well-bounded nation, and so composition must be partly, ‘about preparing students – both domestic and international – for the increasingly globalized world that has always been, and will continue to be, multilingual’ (2012, 36). As Matsuda implies, monolingualism has been historically rare. The question of whether or not we should be buying into the myth of language as commodity, or education as commodity, in order to educate global citizens as global entrepreneurs, is one on which I have already commented, and I am sure that Matsuda is not making that argument anyway. Even outside the realm of neo-liberal educational realism, we should continue to make the case that multilingualism is an advantage and asset. This is certainly the case for those working in North American composition, and Matsuda insists that ‘the question is no longer limited to how to prepare students from around the world to write like traditional students from North America; it is time to start thinking more seriously about how to prepare monolingual students to write like the rest of the world’ (2012, 50). And how do students write in the rest of the world, assuming he is not referring to other nations stereotyped as monolingual Anglophone contexts? Again, in raising such questions composition draws inevitably close to the concerns of World Englishes. Matsuda is alive to the need to pay attention to the differences involved in studying this broad spectrum of English language contexts: he stresses the different language situations, the different forms of English, and
of course the different politics of languages to be found in different contexts. All of these differences are directly relevant when we consider Hong Kong, as this chapter will do later.

These suggestions about composition are important, and are given shape through stress on particular aspects of class, sexuality, ethnicity, gender, and so on. What is most relevant to my concerns, of course, is the already mentioned interest that composition has shown in postcolonial studies. The collection *Crossing Borderlands* (Lunsford and Ouzgane 2004) brings together many perspectives on postcolonial studies from composition specialists (one of the complaints to which I will return is that the interest is rarely returned). In their introduction, the editors suggest that making the connection is important because both disciplines interrogate the production of a certain kind of obedient subject, and seek forms of resistance to that production. Accordingly, it is surprising that connections have been limited, although composition's struggle for institutional recognition was a distraction, and it tended to essentialize the student writer. Additionally, they suggest that postcolonial studies has focused on Europe and ignored the postcolonial nature of the US. Finally, they suggest that postcolonialism has spoken for students (at best, as students are often not mentioned at all). Seeking to make the connection more clearly, scholars cover various points of convergence, as well as divergence. In terms of convergence, and what postcolonial studies can offer composition, there are some strikingly clear statements. For example, Gary A. Olson argues for the potential benefits of adding a postcolonial perspective to composition. He suggests that it works to empower students, by giving them an agency usually denied by teachers, who, despite their best intentions, tend to marginalize students. Postcolonial theory tells us about relations of power between students and teachers, but it also illuminates, as we would expect, relations between different racial and ethnic groups. As Olson suggests, it demonstrates how colonial structures frame ‘how learning occurs, or doesn’t, how students relate to peers and to teachers’ (2004, 89). We can agree that postcolonial theory provides conceptual frameworks for understanding both what composition does and what it fails to do, often in spite of itself. While postcolonial studies may well have focused too much of its attention on Europe and its former colonies, one outcome of turning attention to the North American university context is to subject it, including composition, to rigorous critique. Olson is clearly concerned about how composition falls into various rhetorical, pedagogical, and political traps, even when it apparently already comprehends those traps all too well. So, it appears that the conceptual and political traffic is unidirectional, with composition in the position of being corrected by the superior theoretical perspective afforded by postcolonial studies. Nonetheless, as already mentioned, there are numerous moments when apparent weaknesses of postcolonial studies come under scrutiny, and these moments will be key to my discussion of Hong Kong.

One criticism levelled at postcolonial studies is that it is a species of rhetorical conflation of very different political and economic positions. Once again, it is necessary to remember that there is postcolonialism and
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‘postcolonialism’ (even if this distinction will not always be as obvious as it seems). Deeprika Bahri makes this argument in a way familiar from the discussion of cultural translation as a concept: ‘In effect, the easy recourse to postcolonial tropes and concepts dehistoricizes the local struggle and prevents the development of specific strategies to cope with the particularities of the moment, whether in the classroom or in theory’ (2004, 80). Postcolonial theory’s seductive vocabulary of the hybrid and the marginal distracts us from the necessary task of contextualization and specification. Postcolonial theorists often speak from somewhat privileged positions, something which should be recalled each time we wish to apply their vocabularies elsewhere. But, even if we accept the validity of their terminology, we would do well to heed Susan C. Jarratt’s implicit warning that there is a difference between what teachers argue that students are capable of doing, and what they actual will do or desire to do. After exploring the complex rhetorical substitutions used by Spivak and others, Jarratt writes that ‘Imagining students capable of inscribing multiple selves could be an important reading posture for teachers concerned with subject construction in a post-colonial era’ (2004, 122). The stress here is on imagining, rather than speaking for or demanding from, students. Indeed, Jarratt emphasizes that students are unlikely to employ consciously the forms of rhetoric found in the work of, for example, Trinh T. Minh-ha. There is a definite danger in imposing expectations, and being disappointed when they remain unfulfilled.

Following such critical remarks, it is clear that the connection between postcolonial studies and composition is hardly as unidirectional as it superficially seems; indeed, it might only seem unidirectional to those outside or unfamiliar with the institutional and intellectual contexts. In fact, the most trenchant discussion of postcolonial studies is found in Min-Zhan Lu’s chapter immediately following the introduction. She seeks to question composition’s position as grateful recipient of gifts from theory and literary studies more generally (and, in this, postcolonial studies’ supposedly superior position is not alone in being questioned). Surveying other chapters in the collection, she makes some very challenging arguments. For example, she contends that everyone expects you (whoever you may be in English studies) to know theory, or know theorists at least, even if you have little interest in theory as such. By contrast, no one has any such expectations regarding composition studies. Postcolonial specialists simply do not seem to have any sense of what goes on in composition teaching or research. Furthermore, by sharp contrast with composition, postcolonial studies appears to have little understanding of or even interest in the students in the classroom. Nor, Lu argues, does it have much interest in the materiality of writing (I am less convinced on this point, particularly as Lu is specifically targeting Spivak, who often gives us too much sense of materiality and too little actual writing). From Lu’s perspective, postcolonial studies has much to learn from composition, particularly when it comes to being situated and attentive to the dangers in assuming that we teachers know better than students. As she writes, ‘We cannot speak for the
student writers – legislate what they can, want, or need to do – but only to them in an imagined conversation across social, historical, and institutional divisions’ (2004, 27). This last point echoes Jarratt, in reminding us not to feel too confident that we have the political and philosophical answers that students simply need to internalize, and then put into practice. Postcolonial composition cannot in all seriousness aim to save its students from themselves, as we will explore in some detail later.

While the postcolonial tendencies in composition studies are certainly most appropriate, it is already clear that we should not conclude that composition was destined to be drawn into postcolonialism’s orbit, at least partly because composition has been on many occasions deemed secondary and supplementary, as Lu’s intervention makes clear. Discussing this apparent relegation, Sidney I. Dobrin discusses writing about composition studies in terms of ideas about supplementarity drawn from Derrida. Seeking a postcomposition, Dobrin is careful to note that it will forever remain post, and will never be realized in a future present. Composition is not something that is perfectible, and on one level cannot be conceived in terms of a checklist of concrete practices. In fact, there is a danger in postcolonial composition placing a demand on both professorial practitioners and students. Postcolonializing composition seeks to resist one hegemonic composition, but intuitively postcolonial composition might in turn appear a form of hegemony, and that is inevitable, particularly if we view it as a necessary realization of political goals, with a checklist of beliefs and consequent pedagogical activities. Disciplines come into being as a consequence of a process of stabilization, placing limits on the play of hybridity and flux. While that is inevitable, it needs to be engaged and recalled by any composition that desires to be open to possibility, as Halasek and many others understand it. Attempting to write in a manner that is appropriate to this openness, Dobrin suggests that composition is necessarily hegemonic, defining itself as open but in spite of that rhetoric retaining a divisive and exclusive institutional and intellectual identity: ‘Composition guards its places by presenting a discourse of inclusiveness, by making that discourse seem a natural part of the field’s discourse. But that diversity, that openness to dissent, must share occupation within composition’s places’ (2007, 30). For Dobrin, it could not be otherwise, but the situation he describes raises important issues about composition as an oppositional field. If we follow Dobrin’s argument, the evident problem is not solely theoretical, however abstract my discussion here. The situation he describes is partly a matter of students being expected to take responsibility for their product, however central composition studies might make the process that leads to it. But, on a theoretical level, which is the level Dobrin explicitly addresses, there is a concern that composition studies functions as a discipline with clearly demarcated territories, despite its theoretical commitments to diversity and its institutional experience of external assault (that assault coming particularly perhaps from literature departments, but also elsewhere). The theoretical issue might appear to be an inevitable outcome of both intellectual engagement and negotiation, and of
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institutional self-protectiveness. But I think the key is that it only becomes a real problem if the state of composition studies is understood to be final, or even perfected.

That danger is what drives Dobrin and others to conceive composition studies in terms of postcomposition. As already discussed, Dobrin does not believe that postcomposition can ever be brought into being; it must forever be open to revision, and always be on the verge, to come. Of course it is hardly possible to reject disciplinary stabilization, just as languages or cultures have centripetal as well as centrifugal tendencies. If nothing else, composition has, like many other disciplines, defined itself in order to defend itself. Composition has standardized itself, forming boundaries around itself, and defining a group of practitioners, students as well as teachers. As Dobrin puts it, ‘This is what We do; everything else falls outside our governance. Standardization makes validation easier, but standardization is always a reduction, not an elevation’ (2011, 103). There are various reasons why boundary formation frequently feels necessary. Composition studies has itself had moments of institutional anxiety, and such anxieties often demand a healthy dose of certainty and decisive framing. Utilizing Mark Taylor’s ideas concerning complexity, Dobrin thinks about composition in the following way: ‘It is specifically in spaces at the edge of chaos where the potential postcomposition lies, where spaces of complexity, ecological relations, and posthuman agents begin to expose the dynamic facts to the phenomena of writing. It is in and through such spaces we engage postcomposition’s becoming’ (2011, 159). Dobrin’s suggestions are again, according to his logic of the post, not spaces that would lead to a (cultural-political) realization or completion of composition. Indeed, there is something spectral about it (as indeed there ought to be in any discipline). Citing Derrida and Geoffrey Bennington, Dobrin explicitly discusses postcomposition as concerned with composition studies-to-come that will never be achieved, over and done with, in some future present. With this in mind, the postcolonializing of composition studies should be seen as no different from any other process or adaptation of composition studies; it will not lead to a product (a properly postcolonial composition, as it were) that would be the fulfilment of the political destiny of composition studies, however urgent the issues raised by global English and World Englishes. Indeed, writing after the end of empire shares something of the post-ness of postcomposition as Dobrin outlines it, and we should perhaps desire a generalization of Stephen Dedalus’s fretfulness. That generalization could only be highly abstract, and difficult to put into practice.

Bilingual Creativity and Composition Studies

We can now move on to re-contextualize the arguments in favour of a postcolonial composition studies in terms of World Englishes, and later our historically postcolonial context. The ways in which composition has been
rethought are fascinating, but such work requires specificity and location. As Powell and Tassoni remind us, ‘In each different place we have experienced, not only does the broader landscape shape specific, local academic practice – from research to teaching to service – in distinctive ways, but the academy shapes the local landscape in particular, site-specific ways as well’ (2009, 3). Site-specificity, implying the necessity of ethnographic perspectives, can help us guard against context-stripping. But if we enter that ethnographic perspective specificity can begin to seem irreducible, and it might be wondered if there is any good reason to expect perspectives developed in the context of the North American composition classroom to have relevance in a different context such as Hong Kong. Of course, there is an immediate if perhaps only superficial plausibility in attempting to apply some of composition studies’ insights in a postcolonial context, particularly now composition studies have postcolonialized themselves to some extent. Yet there are limits to that applicability, particularly given the transformations undergone by postcolonial theory in other disciplinary contexts. Accordingly, it will be necessary to make this next translation carefully, paying attention to Hong Kong’s resistance to certain implications of the postcolonial paradigm. The first thing that must be noted is that despite its relatively small number of institutions, and the superficial emphasis on English medium instruction, there has been significant diversity within the Hong Kong university system. Furthermore, that system is in a state of flux, and not entirely due to the symbolic and practical consequences of 1997’s ‘Handover’. Bolton (2003) writes optimistically about the possibilities for English in a Chinese Hong Kong, and certainly there have been developments over the last decade. They have not all been predictable, and certainly have not been consistent across different institutions. For example, writing about Lingnan University, Meaghan Morris observes its state of partial triglossia, with English increasingly ascendant, and insists that the linguistic politics of the institution must be understood as local choice rather than external imposition: ‘This Anglophone event in our institutional life is a locally motivated, practical Hong Kong response to the globalizing policies aggressively pursued by the PRC’ (2010, 188). For Morris, English may well be becoming more important at Lingnan University, but diagnosis of linguistic imperialism will take us only so far. Meanwhile, the Chinese University of Hong Kong has been, from its foundation (with moments of controversy, becoming perhaps more frequent; see Lin and Man 2011) a multilingual tertiary institution. Within that context, an English department has a peculiar role, particularly given that the university was initially partly defined by its difference from the Anglophone University of Hong Kong. Within that even more limited context, the role of English-language creativity for local students becomes rather interesting, and can act as a measure of the instantiation of values and attitudes vis-à-vis English in the Hong Kong context. According to commentators such as Phillipson (1992) and Pennycook (1998), postcolonial cultures should retain (at the least) a healthy scepticism with regard to the ongoing presence of English in their educational institutions. With
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some hesitation and uncertainty, the Hong Kong university system (at least, elements of that system) has begun to embrace a ‘realist’ vision of international or globalized tertiary education, one aspect of which is a multilingual vision of curriculum delivery (as well as other aspects of education). In embracing this vision, it has acknowledged the fact that monolingualism has been rare, historically speaking, and the further conclusion that bi- or (more likely) multilingualism will be the global norm in the relatively near future. That fact raises the question of what will derive from this multilingual education, particularly with regard to the future varieties of English. It also raises the question of the ongoing political implications of such educational practices. World Englishes, as a philosophical-political framework, tends towards celebration of the potential of such education, and in this celebration it coincides with postcolonial theory in many of its guises. Such a position appears to celebrate cultural translation as such for its inherent creativity. There are, however, possible limitations to this position that need to be considered.

Such limitations are frequently obscured by the celebration of World Englishes’ cultural translation that coincides with the basic assumptions of postcolonial theory. Returning to Kachru’s argument concerning bilingual creativity, it is one with very interesting implications for the teaching of composition, wherever the students may be. If bi- and multilingualism have at best been ignored in composition studies (specifically in the US context), or perceived as a problem to be overcome (sometimes even through teaching students in separate classes according to linguistic background), Kachru’s argument clearly suggests that we instead view multilingualism as an advantage. Again, it should be clear that in making this argument Kachru approaches a position familiar from traditions in postcolonial studies. As I have already mentioned, postcolonialism tends towards a critical view of monolingualism as convergent with or consequent upon imperialism, and I quoted Michael Holquist’s argument about monolingualism’s passion for wholes over parts or fragments. Liberationist linguistics seem bent on embracing fragments over wholes, it might be argued, and while it is impossible not to have sympathy with this position, there are clearly problems that arise when we apply this abstract perspective to specific linguistic contexts. For example, in the context of composition, there is a clash between postcolonial theory’s political pronouncements in favour of difference and actually existing postcolonialism’s often clear demand for sameness. This is to recall Bruce Horner’s point about marginality: ‘Of any seemingly “marginal” tradition we need to ask what it is marginal to, to what effect, in what social historical circumstances, according to whom. We cannot simply label cultural practices marginal or central, dominant or residual, outside history and circumstance’ (2000, 180). Of course, as many critics have pointed out over the last twenty years, postcolonial theory can be criticized precisely for embracing difference beyond history, circumstance, and context in general.

Accordingly, Badiou (2000) and Hallward (2001) offer an important
philosophical corrective, providing tools to help reconfigure postcolonial studies so that teachers do not demand difference from students, and become disappointed when it is withheld. There is no doubt that difference can go unquestioned, in the context of English studies generally, but now specifically in the study of the English language around the world. There are obvious political and cultural grounds for the celebration of difference, largely deriving from the colonial histories that enabled the spread of English. For example, Kachru writes the following: ‘The impression now is that with the diffusion of and resultant innovations in English around the world, universally acceptable standards are absent’ (1985, 242). Kachru is himself clearly identified with this position, which can be understood as a form of postcolonial linguistics. De-control removes English from the ‘tyranny’ of standards; alternatively, it could be argued that it liberates differences from the tyranny of the same. A long story, or stories; David Crystal (2004) writes in terms of the ‘kaleidoscopic diversity’ that is sadly if necessarily reduced to the sameness of ‘English’ as such. That kaleidoscope is undoubtedly often tyrannically reduced to a monochromatic sameness. We can understand such a conclusion as another celebration of cultural translation as found in the varieties of English found around the world. Of course, this celebration has been contested, with numerous commentators challenging its assumptions. Quirk writes the following about standards of English in a global context: ‘ordinary folk with their ordinary common sense have gone on knowing that there are standards in language and they have gone on crying out to be taught them’ (1985, 6). Certainly, postcolonial linguistics can be quite disappointed when (some of) the people it has liberated (in theory) to use their own Englishes demand (in practice) the perceived native speaker standard. It is not that Quirk’s comments are opposed to postcolonial theory, more that postcolonial theory ought to rethink its reading of its philosophical framework, at least partly in order to be able to think about difference and sameness together, drawing meaning from their relation in specific contexts, rather than locked in abstract immutability. Cultural translation can be something to celebrate, but not always or everywhere; indeed, postcolonial theory is missing a great deal by not really thinking about the same. This constitutes a most difficult task: to articulate ontological universality and the singular, i.e., to think together the economy of sameness and difference.

Sameness and Difference: ‘The’ Classroom

A specific example will indicate what postcolonial theory is excluding. The questioning of the postcolonial paradigm, particularly in relation to the English language, is relevant to how teaching is conducted in a postcolonial classroom, although this does not apply to all such contexts, or for all teachers. In certain contexts there is ambivalence concerning the idea of the ‘death of the native speaker’, and not all students will readily embrace challenges to the
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‘myth of the native speaker’. This resistance can lead to a kind of infelicitous performative, as I will explore in the following theoretical example drawn directly from discussion of World Englishes. Seargeant taxonomizes World Englishes studies’ nomenclature, keeping in mind the fact that ‘an act of naming can be both a theoretical and a political tool, and it is in cases of this sort where a wider dissemination of the name is necessary, so that the idea of the language can be taken up as a marker of identity’ (2010, 110). The discourse of World Englishes studies is an academic discourse, and certainly aspires to a certain level of scientific rigour appropriate to linguistics. Accordingly, Seargeant is interested in how the naming acts characterizing the discourse function analytically. However, he also draws attention to the wider circulation of such acts beyond the academic community. Accordingly, he continues to argue that ‘the act of naming in effect creates an imaginary community of the users of the variety that it identifies’ (2010, 110). This act could be an authoritatively academic one, or it could be (also) an aspect of extra-academic discourse. What strikes me about Seargeant’s discussion is the mismatch between the possibility of such acts of naming being taken up as markers of identity and the certainty that they actually do create communities of users. In terms of a specific example, he specifically discusses classroom contexts, where the users are understood from a theoretical perspective to constitute a community: ‘from the analytical perspective of the theorist, at least, they constitute an emergent community […] Within classroom contexts these notional communities can then become actual, as students are grouped together according to the variety they are considered to speak or need’ (2010, 110). As Seargeant suggests, the naming act categorizes according to linguistic behaviour, but as we find so often with categorization it also functions to frame social reality in a way that also changes it. However, we should remember the extent to which the act of naming does not necessarily lead to the creation of the community. This is because that act can be refused, especially in a classroom context, where the analytical perspective of the theorist meets hard reality. The naming act describes something that was in some sense already there, and perhaps also brings into being something that was not already there, but that second aspect of the act does not necessarily receive acceptance, and so does not necessarily do any work whatsoever, or at least not the work it was intended to do. Beyond the limits of the academic discourse (which are of course uncertain, but at least partly fall ‘within’ the classroom context), the performative can fail. Specifically, to tell a student (or a classroom of students metonymic of a community) that they are a ‘native speaker’ always might fail due to the previously mentioned, context-specific resistance or ambivalence towards the theorist’s analytical perspective.

Before discussing that resistance or ambivalence to the ‘death of the native speaker’, specifically in the context of Hong Kong, it is helpful to revisit the idea and explore how it has been understood in composition studies. Ben Rampton argues that the categories of native speaker and mother tongue have tenacity partly because ‘political interests often have a stake in maintaining
the use of these concepts’ (Harris and Rampton 2003, 108). Rampton proposes that we displace the genetic, naturalized assumptions behind these concepts with ideas of expertise and symbolic allegiance. Following a different logic, with similar intentions, Kingsley Bolton (2008) argues that by using the category of ‘native speaker’ for speakers of, for example, Indian or Philippine English, we may better comprehend the category as applied to speakers of American or British English. Clearly, then, the category of the native speaker is one that has become increasingly open to adaptation or re-invention. As an example concerning composition, John Trimbur, discussing the territorialization of language and the ‘geohistory’ of the native speaker, analyses the place of the Dartmouth conference of 1966 in the development of US college composition. In fact his analysis is relevant to and owes much to contexts outside the US–UK axis. Trimbur calls the native speaker ‘an ideological and political problem’, that implied ‘cultural and linguistic homogeneity’ and functioned increasingly as ‘an emblem of threatened national unity’ (2008, 144). Despite the spread of English, the assumption continued that it belonged in the Anglo-American centres. Native-ness was fundamentally naturalized, and while this process appears dubious outside the context of the so-called native speaker centres, it is hardly any more obvious within the US itself. Trimbur discusses Joshua A. Fishman’s contribution to Dartmouth, which argued that ‘Anglification does not amount to a simple triumph of monolingualism’ (2008, 162); he concludes that we need to remember and explore the ambivalent US linguistic history in more depth.

This ambivalence has been historical fact, and the situation today builds on this history with further immigration and necessary shifts in attitude for the composition teacher. The situation demands, Horner argues, ‘a radical shift from composition’s tacit policy of monolingualism to an explicit policy that embraces multilingual, cross-language writing as the norm for our teaching and research’ (2006, 570). Accordingly, one way in which postcolonial studies and composition might come together is to recognize difference; alternatively, we might recognize a fuzziness to the distinction between error and innovation. It is certainly possible to imagine composition studies ‘becoming’ creative writing. With the necessary qualification that ‘composition studies’ and ‘creative writing’ mean different things in different contexts, what we call composition studies might become creative writing, if not at an institutional then at a philosophical level. We might then say that composition studies, in a postcolonial context, now assumes that error and innovation are indistinguishable at the origin. This truth is evident at the level of student writing, and can be given theoretical coherence through postcolonial theory. At the same time, postcolonial theory will have to be revised and enlarged to be adequate to the level of the individual instance of writing, lest it indulge its tendency to speak for the postcolonial subject. The issue of subaltern ‘voice’ has often been considered, and postcolonial theory can seem to efface identities, or at best speak for them (as perhaps here). Accordingly, there is an urgent need to attend to some specific writing beyond literary works. In reading examples of
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this non-literary writing, of course, we might find that postcolonial subjects see no need for the postcolonial philosophy of difference. My concern is to explore the challenge to postcolonial theory embodied by the classroom experience of Hong Kong, particularly its ambivalence towards the death of the native speaker. In this ambivalence, there is resistance to a postcolonial philosophy of difference, and the assumption that cultural translation is an undifferentiated good. However, it should be emphasized that this is a description of one example, and does not necessarily have general relevance. The indistinguishability of error and innovation is acceptable in some postcolonial contexts, but not in others, and postcolonial prescription is not going to persuade those who resist the philosophy of difference that they should start using English in any way they see fit. Composition can become creative in specific political and cultural institutions, and some places see no need for this blurring, and no need to embrace a postcolonial English, or the multiplicity of World Englishes – at least, not yet.

Of course, this raises the question of what exactly constitutes a postcolonial context, either in terms of philosophy or history. It further raises the question of whether composition is actually practised in historically postcolonial contexts. As already mentioned, the Chinese University of Hong Kong was founded (during British rule) as a bilingual institution, as an alternative to the Anglophone University of Hong Kong. The different possibilities for curriculum delivery (Cantonese, English, and Putonghua) are kept separate, so on one level multilingualism is being held at bay. However, within the Department of English matters are less controversial and apparently much more straightforward. There is a composition stream, which is distinct from the university’s general English programme that all other students go through, and there are also creative writing courses. As Shirley Lim (2001) has argued, such courses provide evidence that Hong Kong students do not fit stereotypes about materialism and pragmatism. However, it is possible that such courses could provide a designated space for certain forms of creativity deemed unacceptable elsewhere. Indeed, these courses are options, distinct from the composition classes. This separation is something that fits students’ general theorization of their relationship with English, which is something I engage with in a mandatory course, ‘World Englishes and their Cultures’. Students are capable of recognizing the innovative vitality of, as examples, South Asian Englishes and Singlish. However, it appears that they distinguish themselves as Hong Kongers from this stream of creativity in World Englishes, and do not identify themselves as practitioners of bilingual creativity. Instead, they seem to agree with David Bunton, author of Common English Errors in Hong Kong (1989), who wants to distinguish error and innovation as clearly as possible, and assumes that native speakers have the authority to make this distinction. His book is still in print after two decades, offering superficial confirmation that many Hong Kongers agree with its perspective.

The responses encountered in the classroom are perhaps unsurprising, and Horner reminds us that we should not equate official pronouncements...
about language with students’ actual attitudes. He further reminds us of the consequent dangers of essentializing the student writer: ‘Such an approach assumes a false uniformity to student consciousness: it overwrites the articulation of any emergent oppositional consciousness by tuning in only the voicing of official consciousness’ (2000, 38). This warning is particularly useful for a context often compared with Hong Kong: Singapore. But I am attesting that my students recognize the partiality of institutional pronouncements about English, without making the next step that postcolonial theory seems to demand, to embrace marginal expressiveness. There is a distancing of English in Hong Kong, qualifying its status alongside the other World Englishes. This means that although Hong Kong English is itself highly innovative in its blending of different forms of Chinese and English (as evident from a cursory investigation of students’ online presence), the students themselves would want to reject its validity beyond the most superficial or ‘non-serious’ uses; they would never want their study in composition to blur into creative writing. It is important to consider why this resistance exists, even if some of the reasons might seem obvious (emotional distance, motivations in learning, etc.). In general terms, Ackbar Abbas’s comments prior to 1997’s ‘Handover’ to China remain important: ‘Of all the binarisms that keep things in place, perhaps the most pernicious in the Hong Kong context is that of East and West. This is not to say that there are no differences, but that the differences are not stable; they migrate, metastasize’ (1997, 117). This binarism is not only institutional, but is also often maintained at the level of everyday practice. Abbas’s general point informs the more specifically linguistic issues, although it cannot account for all cultural practices; indeed, outside the university classroom, English is everywhere used creatively, clashing with, transforming, and being transformed by Cantonese. However, it might be a useful point for the specific case of the university classroom, given the relatively restricted context that the university is in Hong Kong (approximately 18 per cent of high school leavers study at university). However, it does not explain everything about resistance to ownership of English.

One complementary explanation would be psychoeconomic; students are conditioned to value investments (of time and money) that are less risky than creativity, especially creativity in English. Discussing creativity more generally, Mark Runco makes the point that ‘Different cultures value different things and some of these values directly influence the development and expression of creativity’ (2004, 12). Different cultures frame our sense of the appropriateness of deviation and creativity; accordingly, such creativity in English might appear inappropriate. Perhaps creativity is kept quite distinct from the mainstream ‘seriousness’ of our language-learning. In any case, Runco’s point is made in the context of the study of creativity in the Asian classroom, and he wishes to tweak certain stereotypes; for example, he argues that ‘Western individualism’, although quite possibly real, is not necessarily more conducive to creativity than ‘Asian emotional control’. More generally, his argument is important, and complements critiques of attempts to foster
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creativity in the Asian classroom. Aik Kwang Ng and Ian Smith describe the paradox of promoting creativity in the Asian classroom: ‘the more creative a class of students becomes, the more undesirable their behavior appears to the teacher’ (2004, 87). If that is the case, attitudes are not changing fast enough to foster the desired creativity. Indeed, creativity may be desired for reductively instrumental reasons, and this again may result in inadequate economic and attitudinal resourcing for the creativity desired. This factor might be persuasive, although of course some of its assumptions would not hold true for all teachers; for example, local, native, and non-native teachers of English composition might hold different attitudes, and be perceived differently by students, parents, and so on. Indeed, the university teacher cannot be essentialized any more than can the students (see Braine 2010).

In any case, the above explanation is of course not only a psychoeconomic explanation. It is a realist explanation, one that recognizes the global linguistic situation, not to mention Hong Kong’s place as an international financial centre (like Singapore). Kingsley Bolton, considering English in the light of the 1997 handover of Hong Kong, suggests the following: ‘Offered a choice between affirming Hong Kong’s identity as a southern Chinese city or as a “global” city, Hong Kong’s Beijing-vetted government has opted for the latter. Such an identity choice inevitably involves the retention of English, if only for “pragmatic” and “business” considerations’ (2003, 200). English might be a colonial legacy, but that is hardly the whole story. With some freedom, but also hard-headed practicality, English has been fostered for access to the global economy, something clearly essential for a financial hub. As in other contexts, an international English has been imagined in terms of a standard form, and accordingly English in Hong Kong is exonormative. Innovation will not be valued when it can be written off as error, and so students have a practical reason for resisting the death of the native speaker. However, as Bolton’s final clause invites us to recall, this is not the end of the explanation.

That is because, as I have already suggested, a Hong Kong English really does exist, one that extends beyond accent to the grammatical and lexical specificity that defines a variety. However, this variety is not accepted by the general population, and is not a viable expressive medium in the university classroom. As has been suggested by Terence T.T. Pang, Hong Kong English is localized but not indigenized: through relexification, regrammatization, and rediscoursalization, Hong Kong users of English incorporate the language into their own. As Pang suggests, ‘Such language use is not only indicative of an inventive and dynamic culture, but also various pragmatic norms and conventions’ (2003, 17). The innovative dynamism and perhaps inchoate codification are linguistic facts, but they are not necessarily accepted or desired, and the values and attitudes leading to the failure of indigenization cannot be ignored or belittled. As Pang indicates, there is a dynamic, hybridizing, postcolonial vitality at work, which evinces cultural translation. In fact, this translation is one that might be harnessed even at an official level in future. However, currently there is not even any official recognition, and
although there have been shifts in education policy governmental recognition remains lacking. Despite its existence, the local population does not accept Hong Kong English; indeed, it appears to be largely non-local linguists who celebrate its dynamism. Pang himself records the non-acceptance of the local population with a certain neutrality, but it seems that cold-eyed objectivity is the best that Hong Kong English can hope for at present, even a decade later. The cultural awareness that must follow codification is not in place (see Poon 2006). In the context of a general societal disinclination to accept Hong Kong English it is difficult to imagine promoting the sense that the local variety is valid for university composition.

World Englishes: The Promise of a Term

Ultimately, various explanations of resistance to creativity in World Englishes offer useful ways of accounting for the resistance of actual creators to a postcolonial injunction to embrace difference in English. Each explanation is valid and persuasive for specific contexts. None can be dismissed from the vantage point of a theoretical perspective that accounts for their mistaken assumptions. Nonetheless, postcolonial theory, with its paradigm of difference, appears impatient with the realities of postcolonial situations. Real postcolonial situations, as critiques of postcolonialism have long pointed out, are various, and cannot be accounted for by a theory, however useful that theory may be in certain contexts. There are distinctions to be made between a fundamental level of cultural translation that is always present, and actual instances of that translation, and resistance to it, that we find in everyday life in different contexts. Postcolonial theory cannot afford to tilt toward ‘creating’ at the expense of ‘creators’, and sometimes, when it appears most alive to the creators (e.g., students) it is in fact seduced by creating – in short, difference.

The danger of a quasi-philosophical explanation of the kind put forward here is clearly the possibility of careless generalization or essentialization. If ‘the student writer’ has sometimes been essentialized, it is also possible to find an essentialization of ‘the native speaker’. I do not want to essentialize either again, but there are clear dangers that this might occur. Comparing student writers in Hong Kong to, for example, student writers in the US, is problematic. On one level it can be argued that the postcolonial rethinking of composition in the US identifies a more thoroughgoing philosophical postcolonialism than can be found in the historically postcolonial Hong Kong classroom. In fact, de-essentializing the native speaker for the Hong Kong classroom, while something that students can understand, is not quite something they can accept, at least not for themselves. The idea of the native speaker, with all its privileges, may be something they question, but what replaces it cannot be a wholehearted embrace of difference. It is, instead, a restrictive and simultaneously broadened sense of sameness; this could be understood as English
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In Hong Kong as an international language. Indeed, although some studies (Lai 2005) have found that postcolonial Hong Kong students value English more highly than Putonghua in terms of its integrative function, it remains the case that for obvious reasons they value Cantonese more highly than English. Indeed, in terms of English, students appear relatively uninterested in symbolic allegiance, and almost entirely focused on expertise or instrumental function. In understanding their own pragmatic motivations, I would imagine that they retain an assumption that cultural identities are things that exist first, and are then translated; that would be a plausible and seductive interpretation of the cultural translation that evidently does exist in Hong Kong identity, partly expressed in its specific usage of English.

Despite the evident drift of my argument, the idea that globalization poses a risk to the localized production of knowledge is understandable. Globalization is assessed as generally standardizing, and in the specific case of language use (particularly for the non-native speaker) implies restriction, the exonormative, the instrumental, and the emotionally distant. That we might want to liberate difference, against this globalizing linguistic force, is also understandable. This desire assumes the prior dissolution of the native speaker, and the elevation of non-native creativity, understood as a form of cultural translation. These two things are key factors in some contexts, but not in others. Kachru, like many who write on both World Englishes and postcolonial studies, elevates difference in practice; the postcolonial paradigm does so as philosophical precondition, of course. Arguably, ‘we’ are disinclined to revisit the paradigm of difference itself, even when to follow it to logical conclusions would be to override the desire for sameness found in students (from any context) we feel we are liberating. In other words, the emphasis on difference in theory, when met by sameness in practice, leads to a pedagogical disappointment; this is not an autobiographical assessment only, I would suggest, but a general comment on the postcolonial paradigm. It may be the case that in (to return to the comparison) Singapore there is a threat to localized knowledge production, and that this threat is embodied by the Singaporean government’s ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ attempts to rid itself of Singlish. In the case in Hong Kong, for the moment at least the assumption of ‘native speaker–non-native speaker’ communication retains pragmatic validity.

Conclusion

While this chapter may seem pessimistic about the space for creativity in English in the university classroom, perhaps that pessimism will be overridden by developments in the medium term. On that question of space, and writing about Hong Kong generally, Bolton has suggested that ‘Until recently, at least, the space available for English – for business, government, international communication, law – has been usually defined in pragmatic terms alone, but attitudes here also seem to be changing’ (2010, 465). It is certainly the case
that the Hong Kong government has begun to place emphasis on creativity and language arts, including in English, and so perhaps a shift from pragmatic assumptions is under way (see Burton 2010). In any case, my argument is obviously not that idiom needs to be barred from English language expression in university contexts, not even (in the postcolonial context, least of all) in a place such as Hong Kong. As Elaine Ho has recently argued, ‘For a long time, anglophone Hong Kong writing has been triply marginalized, labelled as elite discourse, as the specialized language of literature divorced from the pragmatic adoption of English by the majority of locals, and as written rather than spontaneous oral performance’ (2010, 435). I do not intend to contribute to further marginalization of English, particularly the Asian Englishes to which Ho convincingly argues recent Hong Kong creative writing is increasingly oriented. However, as Brian Chan (2007) suggests, and despite ongoing cultural and linguistic unrest, increased integration with China may well lead to closer identity and linguistic ties, in which case Hong Kong English may remain forever larval.

In any case, focusing on composition rather than creative writing suggests that we would do well to defer the former becoming the latter. The hard lessons of language-learning and use are not amenable to political and philosophical impositions. That warning applies equally to postcolonial theory and World Englishes, if they unquestioningly assume the desirability of cultural translation. In each case, one set of assumptions has replaced another. For postcolonial theory, the displaced assumptions concern the politics of English-language use, and appear to reserve creativity for the native speaker as such. For World Englishes, meanwhile, insofar as linguistics studies them to celebrate them, the displaced assumptions concern the pragmatics of interlocution. In neither case are we allowed to entertain a realistic acceptance of continuation of the displaced situation. That, I believe, can lead to a pedagogical pessimism. It is necessary to understand any resistance to the ‘death of the native speaker’ in the specific context it arises. Of course, in many postcolonial contexts there is such resistance, and any resistance to the full embrace of World Englishes is a residual reaction of a quasi-colonialist prejudice. However, each context demands its own response and its own neutral description, something that postcolonial theory is often unable to give. Ideally, in engaging with the study of World Englishes, postcolonial theory will become more attuned to the everyday politics and philosophies informing individual postcolonial contexts. It needs to develop its traditions of slow reading for broader and institutionally attentive purposes, as the next chapter will explore.