

# *A transdisciplinary approach to ELT: Teaching values and ideology in real-world context*

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**Abstract:** This paper examines how language teaching and learning can be informed by a transdisciplinary perspective. Transdisciplinary teaching and learning promotes real-world problem-oriented education rather than discipline-centered education. English language teaching (ELT) in a transdisciplinary perspective aims at reconstructing English and other disciplines, integrating knowledge from literature, psychology, philosophy, sociology, science and technology, politics, new information technology and other fields, and ultimately forming transdisciplinary knowledge that can be utilized to discover and solve real-world problems more effectively. In addition, transdisciplinary teaching is interlingual, intercultural oriented by integrating a diversity of epistemologies from different disciplines. Transdisciplinary perspective can contribute to teaching English more effectively and ethically. This approach also helps to reshape power dynamics and teacher ideology in the English language teaching and learning process.

## **1. Introduction**

Students are studying far more than simply basic language skills in foreign language classrooms nowadays. They are now studying some of the most complicated societal or environmental subjects of the day, such as cyber-security, tech-innovation and entrepreneurship, climate change, biodiversity loss, infectious diseases, energy crisis, and political hegemony, etc., through problem- and phenomenon-based learning. Language teaching and learning, is more of an area of study that is comprehended and investigated from cross-disciplinary and transdisciplinary viewpoints than it is a discipline or sub-discipline.

This diversity of disciplines has long been acknowledged. For instance, both Savignon[1] and Corbett[2] argued that Communicative Language Teaching needs to embrace a multidisciplinary perspective that includes, for example, linguistics, psychology, philosophy, sociology, and educational research. However, language teaching and learning requires not only collective multidisciplinary—multiple disciplines looking into different aspects of the same phenomenon—but also a synthesis of viewpoints, an epistemological homogeneity as opposed to an epistemological plurality, and a transcendence of disciplinary boundaries[3]. This is called transdisciplinarity. Transdisciplinarity is commonly conceptualized as the result of interdisciplinary discourse amongst experts in different paradigms to produce multifaceted answers to comprehending the complexity of the phenomena under study [4]. Transdisciplinarity is motivated

by the desire for new knowledge and the need to solve practical problems. Transdisciplinary teaching is being used by teachers to assist students in addressing important scientific issues and wide societal concerns.

## **2. Challenges that ELT teachers face**

ELT teachers in China are not strange to “New Liberal Arts Initiative” that highlights the integration of liberal arts, i.e. breaking down disciplinary barriers, integrating the humanities and social sciences with science and technology, and addressing problems with the collaborative power[5]. This concept indicates a strong sense of transdisciplinarity. Both are oriented to tying scientifically grounded answers to real-world issues that are extremely complicated in terms of uncertainty surrounding facts, weighted values, and social implications[6]. In the new era ELT teachers have to face a multitude of changes and challenges in the context of complicated world and teaching reforms.

### **2.1 Transdisciplinarity**

The increasing multidisciplinary is the primary challenge in ELT teaching and learning. Traditionally ELT is understood within the field applied linguistics, and there has been a lack of connection between second language learning and general learning. Researchers and educators in this field are narrowly concerned about the object of learning (language), the process of learning, and learners as individuals. However, it's gradually recognized that teaching, learning, and utilizing an additional language is a complex and multifaceted process that encompasses languages, cultures, communication, identities, and ELT is also at an intersection between multiple disciplines with different disciplinary traditions[7]. The notion that language and its usage are equivalent to the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, along with a few pragmatic rules of use, has been increasingly challenged. Language proficiency and usage are now recognized as complex and multi-layered, encompassing sociolinguistic variability, translanguaging, translating, multimodality, culturally contextualized meaning-making practices, etc. In the end, language proficiency involves not only the capacity to make meaning but also to comprehend the meaning-making process itself[7,8]. Language education is not just about teaching language; it is about converging language, culture, intercultural competencies, learners, learning, teachers, pedagogy, curriculum, policy, etc. Transdisciplinary teaching and learning languages represents a complex way of thinking and engaging with complexities, which poses challenges to today's ELT teachers, as well as to students.

### **2.2 Teaching ideology and values**

In some countries, particularly in the West, there has been some discussion about whether or not to engage in values transmission and whether teachers should act as values transmitters and pass on values to their students. This is a very sensitive and complex issue. The term ‘ideology’ tends to be understood by western academia as ‘bad belief’ or infringement of neutrality of culture[9]. There is no place for teaching values in western classroom due to the concern that value is personal preference or choice. Despite this prevailing view, however, this label on ideology and values is considered too naive to dismiss ideology which is “shared fundamental belief systems of a social collectivity” by which the whole society is organized and instituted[10]. Although explicit discussion of ideology in ELT has been marginalized, embracement of value and ideologically-sensitive approach has always been in practice. Ideology- and value-informed ELT teaching has been encouraged and practiced in many countries, like China, for instance. Moral development and ideology transmission has been valued and packaged into the ELT curriculum.

Indeed, teacher ideology must be at the center of ELT. Expressing opinions and attitudes is insufficient; it is also essential to consider how they relate to more general and broader societal ideologies. Thus teachers' political and moral beliefs, practices, and commitments is as important as pedagogy adopted in language teaching. In addition to helping themselves and their students act upon (even reform) the sociopolitical processes and practices that determine who they are as teachers and learners, teachers who hold political and ideological beliefs in their work have the capacity to completely rebuild the norms and content of teaching and learning inside or outside the classroom. A teacher has to learn to conduct himself/herself that has a moral value, that is, to teach in a morally upright manner. A diversity of factors may make teaching ideology and values a complicated matter, such as teachers belief, the curriculum, teaching materials, teaching approach and the target students, etc.

### **3. Implementing 'transdisciplinarity' in value-informed ELT**

Although there has been a heated debate between 'interdisciplinary and 'transdisciplinarity', it is suggested that the distinction may be more a difference of degree than a fundamental difference in kind. Both approaches involve the integration of multiple disciplinary perspectives to address complex issues. However, transdisciplinarity tends to place a greater emphasis on the practical application of knowledge and the development of new conceptual frameworks that go beyond disciplinary boundaries. In this sense, transdisciplinarity can be seen as an outcome that emerges from the integration of different disciplinary perspectives, rather than a predetermined goal. Transdisciplinarity is often an implicit outcome of scholarly work that seeks to address complex real-world phenomena. In contrast, a multidisciplinary approach combines disciplinary perspectives to gain new insights within each discipline. Transdisciplinary approach is problem-oriented, unifying layers of knowledge from multiple disciplines and drawing coherent patterns and configurations of findings across domains, across time periods, and across different levels of detail pertinent to the problem's solution[11].

ELT involves many different kinds of meaning making, for example, construction of meaning, identification of themes, selection of problems, selection of types of disciplinary knowledge, contextualization of transdisciplinary knowledge, and research on real problems. This integrated teaching aims to relate textual meaning to realities by incorporating constructive knowledge from diverse sources. Transdisciplinary approach attempts to enhance learning in a problem-solving process by encouraging learners' participation in a wider range of activities. Furthermore, it aims to promote learners confidence and competence in interaction with the real world.

#### **3.1 Teaching values with transdisciplinary knowledge**

ELT is not simply a matter of teaching language and cultural facts, but rather about grappling with moral quandaries and making tough choices in settings that are frequently fraught with conflict. In language classroom, both teachers and learners have to examine the underlying values that they hold as individuals and as members of their profession, and to show how those values are played out in the real world of language classrooms. The complexity of real-life teaching situation and world events pushes teachers and learners to take a broader view on their work. Beliefs, values and ideology that have long been ignored in ELT reclaim their status in language classroom. The tasks of Chinese ELT involves both building a distinctive discourse system and cultivating talents with national consciousness and international vision. Based on the nature and goal of today's ELT in China, it is natural to recognize that transdisciplinary perspective can provide new insights into ELT.

Knowledge isn't limited by disciplinary boundaries. It goes beyond the epistemological limitations of specific fields of study instead. The transdisciplinary approach sees the learner as an engaged contributor in the formation of knowledge. It encourages examining an issue from several

perspectives. It motivates students to generate a variety of structures. It allows for inquiry without restriction by any disciplinary rules or precepts. Value and ideological teaching is usually embedded in the production of transdisciplinary knowledge. For example, moral issues contained in transdisciplinary knowledge transcending disciplines, like war policy, literary characters, species extinction, welfare, help to build capacities necessary for morally good conduct (e.g., empathy, moral reasoning, and perspective taking). Transdisciplinarity encourages students to focus on different ways of meaning-making instead of relying solely on rules of grammar, vocabulary, etc. In the process of organizing and generating knowledge, transdisciplinary teaching aids students in preserving a balance between their emotional and analytical intelligence.

### **3.2 Addressing real-world problems**

The rapid and extensive transformations occurring in global human societies and the environment have led to a multitude of interconnected societal and environmental challenges. Integration plays a critical role in advancing transdisciplinary research and promoting sustainable and equitable solutions to those complex challenges. To effectively implement transdisciplinary ELT that addresses life's problems, issues, and concerns, it is crucial to engage more profoundly and genuinely in the relevant academic fields. This approach emphasizes a comprehensive understanding of complex challenges and necessitates the integration of knowledge from various disciplines. Transdisciplinary problem solving is an approach that specifically targets inherently complex challenges and aims to generate innovations that enhance well-being, prosperity, and sustainability. By integrating knowledge and expertise from multiple disciplines, this approach seeks to tackle intricate problems that cannot be effectively addressed through a single disciplinary lens. The ultimate goal is to develop novel solutions that have a positive impact on various aspects of society, including quality of life, economic development, and environmental preservation.

In order to address real-world problems in real-world situations, transdisciplinarity entails "bridge-building" or the bringing together of several disciplinary views through cooperation with scholars and language educators from other fields[12]. Transdisciplinary teaching is postmodern in nature. The postmodern approach to language learning and teaching is characterized by a critical and skeptical stance towards ideologies and grand narratives that claim to represent objective reality or absolute truth. This approach acknowledges the subjective nature of knowledge and challenges the notion of a single, universal truth in language education. In a postmodern perspective, language learning and teaching are seen as socially constructed processes influenced by various power dynamics, cultural contexts, and individual experiences. This approach emphasizes the importance of recognizing and valuing diverse perspectives, voices, and identities within the language learning environment.

Reality is indeed complex, and this complexity extends to language learning and teaching. One problem of ELT is that it emphasizes the implicit reproduction of natural speech, but often overlooks the variations in contexts, language use, and language users. ELT should go beyond a narrow focus on reproducing a standard or 'correct' form of language. Moreover, language learning should not solely prioritize output, but also emphasize comprehension, communication, and meaningful interaction. Learners should have opportunities to engage in authentic language use, where they can apply their knowledge in real-life situations and negotiate meaning with others.

### **3.3 Interlingual, intercultural mediation in learning**

The content of language education is indeed multilingual, as the primary goal is to develop learners' abilities in multiple languages, not only in English. Each language has its own academic traditions and historically rooted perspectives, which contribute to the richness and complexity of the field. This multilingual perspective in language education recognizes the value of linguistic diversity and promotes inclusive approaches that respect and leverage the linguistic resources and

identities of learners. It encourages the integration of multiple languages and cultures into educational settings, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of language and promoting intercultural competence.

According to Vygotsky, social contacts with more experienced people helped to develop higher mental processes and that learning is influenced by culture and interpersonal communication[13]. A person picks up cultural habits of mind via encounters, such as spoken and written language and other symbolic information that individuals use to create meaning and construct knowledge. Learning is basically language and culture-mediated. Interlingual and intercultural mediation is the key to transdisciplinary teaching. This perspective needs a revisiting of previous experiences or life histories to develop a multiple perspective and interpretation, and working between the tensions of different cultures and epistemologies. Exploring mediation across epistemological traditions promotes interdisciplinary dialogue and enriches our understanding of the complex nature of language teaching and learning.

### **3.4 Teacher ideology: Reconceptualizing ELT**

Despite the reality that a majority of people in the world are bilingual or multilingual, the ideology of monolingualism often portrays monolingualism as the norm or natural human condition. Together with this biased belief is monolingual ‘native speaker fallacy’, which holds that the ideal L2 teacher is a native speaker of the target language, especially of English[14]. Such monolingualism has been widely challenged around the world. For example, English-only policy and ideology in some precolonial countries has been criticized as hegemony of English and linguistic imperialism. And scholars and educators gradually come to realize the inequalities in language ideology[15]. There is a strong need for teachers to reconceptualize ELT ideology. This reconceptualization involves three issues: What English to teach, how to teach English, how to think about English.

There has been a debate about whether English is a global language for international communications between non-English speakers, like English as a Lingua Franca, or English has become localized and taken different varieties, like World Englishes. Whatever the differences, these two views share a more inclusive, pluralistic, and embracing outlook, in contrast to the traditional, uniform perception of English, which dictates a single correct and standard manner of usage that all speakers should aim to achieve. It is politically crucial to advocate for the recognition and validation of the various Englishes spoken globally within ELT. Teachers face the significant question of determining which pedagogical standards to employ when teaching and learning English in this context.

The ELT approaches in the worldwide have typically been derived from "Western" settings and circumstances. However, it has been observed that these methods are culturally unsuitable when applied in classrooms that do not align with "Western" styles of teaching, learning, and cognition. Although English pedagogy is ingrained in highly multilingual ecologies, popular ideas and techniques to teaching the language remain rooted in the cultural reality of inner circle nations, such as the UK and the USA[16]. Recent research has strongly contested the monolingual approach to English language education, highlighting the crucial role of mother tongues in English teaching and learning [17, 18]. Multilingual resources, such as mother tongues, have proven to be highly effective and constructive aids in the instruction of English, as well as other content subjects. It's necessary to explore local pedagogical approaches that embrace multilingualism in ELT.

The third reconceptualization is to change how to think about English. Although multilingual approach recognizes the diversity and complexity of language, English is still imbued with power and status. It is also crucial from a political standpoint to consider whether alternative perspectives on ELT can bring about a shift in ideologies concerning English and local languages, as well as the associated policies and practices. For example, teachers need to ask whether to teach English with local culture influence and ideological clarity.

## 4. Conclusion

A transdisciplinary approach to ELT is considered more suitable for language learning and teaching in the present era. The integrative conceptualization of transdisciplinarity aims not only to promote critical self-awareness of the conflicts inherent in our real-life learning and teaching experiences but also to reveal the unforeseeable, multifaceted, and diverse ways in which we create meaning. By meshing a diversity of disciplines and resources, ELT researchers and teachers are enlightened the potentials and challenges of transdisciplinarity and what they are able to do in real-world context. Language teachers face the challenge of adapting to our increasingly transnational era and staying abreast of diverse linguistic practices, multimodal communication, and sociolinguistic variation within and without the classroom. And in the meanwhile, a transdisciplinary perspective help to reconceptualize ELT ideology against monolingualism and inequalities by incorporating locally and culturally sensitive English pedagogical norms, as well as utilizing multilingual and transdisciplinary resources in the classroom.

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