

MOVING BETWEEN LANGUAGES &  
CULTURAL FRAMEWORKS

# BORDER CROSSINGS

EDITORS

Lee Su Kim

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PELANDUK

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## Preface

Crossings are not just physical in nature but occur in our minds as well. These types of crossings occur across perceived boundaries in our minds and our cultural frameworks of reference. Differences exist not just between our Self and others, but also within ourselves. There are differences in our public and private persona, in our behaviour depending on the social circle we are in, who we are interacting with and in the various contexts we operate in. Even between members of a same ethnic group or a same social class, there are differences in thinking, perceptions and behaviour. Kramsch (1993) states that we have to view the boundary not as an actual event but rather, as a state of mind, as a positioning of the learner at the intersection of multiple social roles and individual choices. Crossing the boundaries in our mind or 'border crossings', as Kramsch calls them, is a common occurrence in our everyday lives. Crossings take place frequently not just across cultures but also across social groups, social class, generation, discourses, etc. In a fast-paced, globalised world, these crossings have become even more prevalent. We are more "connected" than before and encounter borders which are not just geographical but political, social and cultural, and which increasingly challenge us to make more border crossings. This book is a collection of eight articles which document different types of border crossings. Seven are research-based chapters on border crossings in various situations and contexts in South-east Asia, (specifically, Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei) Japan and the United

Kingdom, while one is a Malaysian author's self-reflective personal narrative of the border crossings he made in his life's journey.

The first article in this book, *Silent Border Crossings: The Unspoken ESL Dilemma* by Lee Su Kim describes identity crossings by non-native speakers of English in a complex postcolonial, multicultural world. Her study revealed that the participants, who are adept bilingual/multilingual speakers, constantly made "border crossings" through language choices whenever they found themselves in localised contexts which required a switch from one identity to another. Three types of border crossings emerged: crossings across cultural boundaries, crossings in non-interactive, non-verbal ways and crossings in unfriendly to hostile contexts. The participants possessed a range of diverse identities, which they skillfully managed in order to fit into the changing contexts for the sake of group harmony and unity, or to display resistance and non-conformity.

*The Cultural Politics of English and Singlish in Singapore* by Terence Chong traces the crossings made by Singaporeans in terms of language choice, in this case in the choice of Standard English or Singlish, a variety of English. The article surveys the linguistic socio-cultural borders in Singapore from independence to the present. It looks at the Singapore government's installation of integrative mechanisms like bilingualism and 'mother-tongues' to show that such integrative mechanisms have been responsible for both the raising and lowering of cultural borders. It then shows how Singlish is used by middle class English-educated Singaporeans as a means to cross cultural and social borders, and to demonstrate class distinction. However, more than a pathway across borders, the championing of Singlish by certain sections of the English-

educated middle class is also shown to be a way for this group to distinguish themselves from the state.

*English-Malay Border Crossings: A Study of Code-Switching in Brunei Darussalam* by Nesamalar Chitravelu and Datin Hajjah Rosnah Ramly looks at another kind of crossings, a well-documented phenomenon known as code-switching. Using data collected from the chat site in the website *Brudirect*, the writers investigate the multiple socio-psychological, historical, anthropological and cultural motivations that sustain code-switching in the informal writing of Bruneians, particularly young English-educated Bruneians. The writers discuss, with specific examples, the fascinating functions that code-switching plays in the evolving cultural milieu that is modern Brunei.

Alan Maley and Qing Gu in *Changing Places: A Study of Chinese Students in UK and Their Teachers* explore the crossings made by Chinese students in the United Kingdom (UK) when they encounter a different culture of learning. It is an interim report of a study being conducted into the way tertiary level Chinese students in the UK adapt, in varying degrees, to their new learning and living environment. The writers find that, apart from the strains imposed by a different learning culture and an unfamiliar culture of living, there are factors to do with personality and attitude which impact strongly on the likely success of such students in the UK.

*The Generational Border: "Gairaigo" and the Lexical Barrier Between the Young and Old in Japan* by Thomas Richard Schalow explores crossing across generations specifically in the use of *Gairaigo*. *Gairaigo* is the Japanese term for the lexicon that is adapted from a foreign source for use in the Japanese language and is perceived as the language of modernity. Its vocabulary is largely derived from technological innovations, business practices and the vocabulary of business.

The majority of *Gairaigo* are not surprisingly, derivatives from English. This article will show how many elderly speakers of Japanese have become disenfranchised from their own language as the result of the enthusiastic adoption of *Gairaigo* by the Japanese media, and by younger Japanese.

*Developing Intercultural Sensitivity: Border Crossing Experiences for Japanese Learners of English* by Hiromi Hadley explores crossings over cultural frameworks of reference in an ELT classroom in Japan. With English becoming increasingly important as the international lingua franca, the development of the learner's intercultural competence, besides linguistic proficiency, was emphasized. This article describes a content-based English language syllabus designed to facilitate intercultural sensitivity at Niigata University, and examines its impact on the learners in this mainly monolingual, monocultural society. Of particular interest was the way learners crossed over various cultural frameworks of reference, and learnt to imagine what life experiences were like from the viewpoints of non-Japanese.

Shantini Pillai, in her article, *Integrating Patterns of a Coolie Past: Literature and the Figuring of Contemporary Malaysian Indian Identity* argues that, rather than negating early Indian diasporic experience in colonial Malaya, we should acknowledge that the contemporary Malaysian Indian identity is shaped by the Indian coolie experience during colonial times. She claims that the perceptions of the coolie experience – as a reminder of a subordinate and subjugated past – are the result of distorted envisionings in textual history. Using characters from K.S. Maniam's short stories, novels and plays, she shows that when figures of the coolie past are illuminated within the discourse of diasporic sensibility, they can be reviewed as synthesisers of the diasporic identity. Only when the coolie past

is deeply integrated into the globalised present, can the Malaysian Indian identity be seen to have crossed the borders of a solely Indian worldview “to engage with the elements of the Malay(si)an soil that supports them”.

The last article, *Necessary Exile: When Sojourns and Journeys Become One* by Ooi Kee Beng is both analytical and autobiographical. Ooi argues that though language may be the greatest prison of all, it can be a wonderful tool once we break its mastery over us. Through the endless crossings of physical, communicative, epistemic and cultural borders, language and the world it conjures are pushed to the limits, and it is in the grey zone between cultures and characters that the ability of language to maintain a semblance of solidity is tested. When it fails, for fail it must, we fall into crisis. Crises then become opportunities to realise the distance between physically experienced existence and language-configured existence, and provide us with what may be considered religious space as it distances us from our cultures and social identities. The solidity of language-configured existence is illusory. There are no sojourns, only journeys.

The eight articles in this collection provide us with a range of border crossings that were encountered and the cultural bridges that were made to overcome these barriers. It is hoped that this collection of articles has provided some insights and a deeper understanding of the cultural and linguistic complexities of human interactions, and will be of interest to academics, researchers, students, and those interested in issues of intercultural communication, cultural studies and education.

*Lee Su Kim* (Chief Editor)  
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# Contents

*Preface*

*The Editors*

*The Contributors*

- 1 Silent Border Crossings: The Unspoken ESL Dilemma • *Lee Su Kim* 1**
- 2 English-Malay Border Crossings: A Study of Code-Switching in Brunei Darussalam • *Nesamalar Chitravelu • Rosnah Ramly* 23**
- 3 The Cultural Politics of English and Singlish in Singapore • *Terence Chong* 56**
- 4 Developing Intercultural Sensitivity: Border Crossing Experiences for Japanese Learners of English • *Hiromi Hadley* 78**
- 5 Changing Places: A Study of Chinese Students in UK and their Teachers • *Alan Maley • Qing Gu* 121**
- 6 Integrating Patterns of a Coolie Past: Literature and the Figuring of Contemporary Malaysian Indian Identity • *Shanthini Pillai* 166**

- 7    **The Generational Border: Airaigo and the  
Lexical Barrier between the Young and Old  
in Japan • *Thomas Richard Schalow*    183**
- 8    **Necessary Exile: When Sojourns and Journeys  
Become One • *Ooi Kee Beng*    209**

# Silent Border Crossings: The Unspoken ESL Dilemma

*Lee Su Kim*

## **Introduction**

The world today comprises more and more speakers who can speak not just their native language but a repertoire of languages of which a dominant one is usually English. Graddol (1997) states that the number of non-native speakers of English today far outnumber the total population of native speakers of English throughout the world. The strategies employed by non-native speakers remain an under-researched area of English usage. In terms of identity construction and identity negotiation in relation to the acquisition of English, this too is a relatively uncharted area of study. When one crosses over from one's own language to another language, does this crossing affect a person's identity in some way or other? Language affects one's identity to an extent. Language is a code of expressions, systems and signs which we use to articulate our ideas and to communicate with each other. It is also an expression of our cultural identity, and in the process, it plays a role in influencing and shaping our identity. Not much has been researched on this intriguing question although there is a plethora of books on culture shock and cross-cultural education, and manuals offering cross-cultural communication techniques and strategies. This paper will discuss



the findings of a research study which set out to investigate this link – how the acquisition of the English language affects the identities of non-native speakers of English in a multicultural setting.

## **Border Crossings**

The expression ‘border crossing’ was originally used by Kramsch (1993) to describe crossovers from one culture to another. Lee’s research study (Lee Su Kim, 2001) revealed that her participants who are adept bilingual/multilingual speakers, constantly made “border crossings” across cultures. These crossings were made when they found themselves in different contexts which required a switch from one identity to another through language choice (Lee Su Kim, 2003a, 2003b). From the data of her study, three types of border crossings emerged.

### **1. Border Crossings Across One’s Cultural Boundaries**

Human beings are cultural beings and language is to an extent culture-bound. When the participants of the study found themselves in situations where they felt that it was inappropriate in their culture to express their emotions or feelings in their native language, they did not hesitate to make “border crossings” and switched to using English instead in the act of expressing their feelings. This language and identity switch frees the subject from the angst of clashing against the conventions of her culture and gives her the protection of freedom of expression in what she considers to be a neutral and non-ethnic language. It can be argued that no language is completely culture-