

Translanguaging in the Multilingual Classroom: From Theory to Practice



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Translanguaging has become a “hot topic” in the field of teaching and learning English as a new language; however, experienced ESL teachers have long recognized that culturally and linguistically diverse students bring unique strengths to language learning classrooms. One of those strengths is their ability to use what they already know about language to help them navigate a new linguistic system. This article shares a practical perspective on the theory of translanguaging and demonstrates how translanguaging practices may be used in classrooms to foster English language development across the language domains.

Translanguage

All authors have had experience in schools that have not fully-appreciated the linguistic resources of emergent bilingual students. For Josh (the first author), this experience came early in his teaching career at an international school in Poland, which embraced an outright ban on the speaking of Polish in classrooms among the majority Polish-speaking student population. For Anne (the second author), teaching Somali refugee students in Minnesota, the challenge existed in the limited resources available to support the linguistic development of the home language of her Somali students. For Emma (the third author), it was witnessing the effects of subtractive bilingualism on family members as they enrolled in schools without bilingual or dual language programs. While the intent of these misguided policies and practices was to improve students’ English, they ultimately complicated students’ language learning by limiting the pathways students and teachers could use to support linguistic development

These extreme approaches to maintaining language separation in schools reflect a view of bilingualism as a kind of “parallel monolingualism” (Creese & Blackledge, 2010, p.105) in which languages develop separately and learning is compartmentalized without any overlap between the new language and the established language.

Ofelia García, a researcher and language teacher educator has dedicated her research efforts to dispelling this notion of linguistic separation. García and



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her colleagues offer an alternative view of bilingualism that promotes translanguaging as, "... the deployment of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages" (Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2015, p. 281). For students, that means that as they engage in learning within a multilingual learning environment they tap into what they already know about language to take up, refashion, and personalize their new language. In a classroom that promotes the practice of translanguaging, emergent bilingual students are not viewed from a deficit perspective, but rather as language pioneers, bringing their linguistic repertoire into new spaces and learning contexts.

Similar to translanguaging is the notion of code-switching, another term referring to the use of two or more languages. Yet, translanguaging offers a more holistic view of one's unique linguistic system. Garcia and Kleifgen (2018) explain, "Code-switching implies a 'switch' from one language code to another and rests on the assumptions that bilinguals have two, separate, bounded language systems" (p. 62). Translanguaging practices can be seen as supporting the complete, unitary linguistic systems that students bring to classrooms. Teachers who create opportunities in their classrooms for translanguaging communicate to students that their full linguistic repertoire can be used for learning and communicating. Perez (2004) asserts that when a student learns to read, write, and think in their home language those skills not only transfer to the new language but also reinforce a better understanding of the purpose, function and process involved in reading, writing and thinking.

Putting the principles of translanguaging into practice can be a challenge for teachers. Given that many teachers work in schools that covertly discourage multilingualism through "English only" language policies. Many teachers themselves may adhere to adages that "allowing" students to use their home language is detrimental to their English language acquisition. However, teachers can create a space for translanguaging by purposefully designing and implementing opportunities for using the languages of choice (Wei, 2018). In the next sections, we illustrate several ways to open up the translanguaging space across the four language domains.

Translanguaging in To Support English Learners in The Four Language Domains

Reading

Students of all English language development (ELD) levels are expected to make gains in reading skills as

they progress through school. While not all students enter our classrooms literate in their home language, there are ways teachers can promote translanguaging practice to support the reading development of emergent bilinguals. For instance, before reading a narrative with emergent bilinguals, teachers may read a synopsis of the story aloud in the students' home language. The synopsis typically highlights the key events in the story with a few significant details omitted so there is an information gap for students that allows students to read purposefully. Reading a synopsis of the story aloud in the students' home language lowers the cognitive demand placed on learners by providing a semantic road map that facilitates their meaning making without getting overwhelmed by an influx of new words. When teachers don't share the home language of their students, they could call on other students who they know are literate in the language (either in the class or in a higher grade in the school), who could volunteer to read. Not only does this help students to make meaning, but also positions the volunteer students as language experts who employ a skill, their knowledge of their home language, to help their classmates. If literate students are not available, teachers may call on parents or community members to assist, by either reading aloud or recording themselves reading the synopsis. Recruiting family and community members to utilize their linguistic skills often helps to "flip the script" and show language skills in a positive light.

Writing

Students can also translanguage to support their academic writing development. Teachers may begin units of writing instruction by having students build their background knowledge of the topic by brainstorming using all the language resources available to them. Teachers can supply graphic organizers like KWL charts, so students may highlight phrases, words and questions in multiple languages to share what they knew about a particular topic even if they have not yet developed the skills to express what they knew about a topic in their new language independently. Students also can work with students who share a common home language to construct first drafts of persuasive or informational writing pieces. Students discuss the topic in groups and take notes in their shared language. They could discuss the topic, make a list of words they know in their shared language and determine a number of words or phrases they want to learn and use in their English writing. When it is time to compose, students may either work individually or in groups and freely use their linguistic resources to aid the composition process. This process may look different for students of varying ELD levels. Entering and beginning students may compose an entire first draft in their home language. Others may

write a draft primarily in English, but translanguage when they encounter words or phrases they did not know. Promoting translanguage practices, avoids the breakdown in communication flow and potentially decreases frustration at not knowing the “right word in English” or disruption of writing as students search for a translation in a bilingual dictionary.

Translanguage practice also allows students to draw on topics that are familiar to them. For instance, for a persuasive writing unit in middle school ESL classroom comprised of Spanish speaking students from the Dominican Republic, Josh (first author) noted his students’ enthusiasm for reggaeton music. To build on the cultural and linguistic knowledge the students brought to the classroom, Josh had students explore the history and iconic artists of the genre and write persuasive musical reviews in which they attempted to persuade fellow students to download the latest songs of their favorite Reggaeton artists (see Schulze, 2016 for a description of this project). These examples show how teachers can employ translanguage to encourage the academic writing practices of their emergent bilingual students.

Speaking

Teachers of emergent bilinguals can foster a progressive learning environment by encouraging students to utilize their language repertoire during student discussions. When students are encouraged to use their home language, they can clarify and discuss topics with greater depth because they are not limiting themselves to just one language repertoire. Teachers can enhance the quality of oral interactions by grouping less proficient students with a more proficient students in order to create a supportive environment.

During student discussions, it is very common to hear bilingual students insert words from their home language when communicating in their new language. While to many this might just sound like codeswitching, what is essentially occurring can be described as a strategy of postponing. The “postponing” strategy occurs when students hold on to a complex idea that they are trying to convey and communicate because they may not have the adequate words in English to convey the meaning quite yet. Therefore, students will use a word from their home language as a placeholder in their conversations until they can obtain the English term from a peer, teacher or dictionary. However, they may also choose to use a word or phrase that they feel more adequately expresses their communicative intentions, thereby using their full linguistic repertoire to express their ideas in a unique and potentially more powerful way.

Listening

To support listening development, teachers open up spaces for translanguage in the classroom through reading multilingual or bilingual texts to their students. For example, parallel texts, with side by side translations, offer students the opportunity to hear ways that authors use both languages to tell a story. Bilingual texts can also include two or more languages in one complete text. For example, Alma Flor Ada’s book, “I love Saturdays y domingos” is a child’s account of spending time with her “abuelitos”. The use of both Spanish and English language in the text models translanguage to students, allowing students to hear their own linguistic systems at work in a published text.

Given that there are an abundance of languages that are not represented in current children’s books, students can write their own books and read them to each other, providing multilingual listening opportunities. In one recent example of translanguage practice to support listening, students used digital tools to record stories using translanguage and shared them with their classmates (Rowe, 2018) .

In summary, translanguage allows students to use their full linguistic repertoire to communicate. Recognizing that students enter the classroom with linguistic skills that they can tap into to make meaning constructs a powerful counter-narrative to deficit discourses concerning English language learners.

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