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Translanguaging practices in multilingual English language classrooms: Pedagogical implications and learner outcomes

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Abstract

The rising number of multilingual students in English classrooms calls for pedagogical change from monolingual to inclusive teaching practices. Translanguaging, where the students draw on all their linguistic repertoire to make meaning, has been found to potentially enhance student engagement and understanding. This research investigates the pedagogical potential of translanguaging in multilingual English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, with emphasis on the engagement and performance of the students. Using a quantitative repeated-measures design, the research enrolled 50 secondary-level students with various linguistic backgrounds who went through a six-week teaching program involving the use of translanguaging strategies. Data collection involved observational checklists, comprehension exercises, and audio-recorded classroom discussions, with statistical analysis using the Friedman test. Findings revealed that the use of translanguaging facilitated the engagement and understanding of the students, but the statistically significant difference in the performances across the sessions was not found. The results point towards the potential of translanguaging as a force that ensures a stable and inclusive learning environment where the students could be active participants without affecting the learning of the language, English. The research highlights the need for systematic translanguaging pedagogies that counter monolingual ideologies and make the multilingual capability possible. Further research must be conducted to determine the long-term implications and larger education settings to better recognise the contribution of the concept of translanguaging towards EFL teaching.

Introduction

The increasing presence of multilingual students in classrooms has made it necessary to rethink the monolingual pedagogies traditionally associated with the teaching of English. Multilingual students with various linguistic repertoires are found in the EFL and ESL classrooms nowadays, but the monolingual pedagogies neglect the linguistic repertoires that the students bring with them. Translanguaging has been a new pedagogy that transcends language boundaries, promoting the dynamic and flexible use of more than one language in the classroom. This research investigates the pedagogical value and the implication on the learners of the use of translanguaging, focusing specifically on its contribution to student engagement and understanding in multilingual classrooms teaching the English language.

Translanguaging presumes that bilingual and multilingual learners do not possess two distinct language systems but utilise their entire linguistic repertoire for meaning-making and communication. Unlike traditionally conceptualised models for bilingual education, which operate with distinct separation among the two language systems, Translanguaging encourages students to bring and blend all their languages into a dynamic process for meaning-making and cognitive development. It is particularly relevant for multilingual classes, where students' potential for leveraging all their linguistic capacities can maximise learning. Translanguaging has become to be a widely used technique among educators as a very effective pedagogy that renders inclusivity, engagement, and critical thinking feasible. Translanguaging makes all students' linguistic skills available for utilisation and closes the gap between school and home, enabling holistic learning. Translanguaging also empowers learners through a validation of their linguistic identities and a reversal of the marginalisation of minority language in school. Translanguaging remains a contentious practice, however, with some educators believing that it can actually hinder target language learning by limiting the extent of target language input.

Literature review

Translanguaging has been theorised in several forms in the contemporary literature, highlighting its role in bi/multilingual practices. Canagarajah (2011) theorises translanguaging as the ability of multilingual speakers to switch between languages, treating their linguistic repertoire as a unified system. García and Li (2014) refute that translanguaging is a shuttle between two distinct languages and involves the construction and use of interrelated discursive practices that cannot be allocated neatly to conventional single-language definitions. García (2009) supports this by depicting translanguaging as bilinguals' use of multiple discursive practices to make sense of their own bilingual reality. Li (2018) also believes that translanguaging is not something to be described but is rather a lens through which the dynamic and mixed nature of multilingual discourse is to be

understood. This is aligned with the position of Durán and Palmer (2014), who adhere to a flexible approach to named languages in multilingual settings.

The pedagogical potential of translanguaging has been widely debated, particularly within the context of bi/multilingual education. Cenoz (2017) theorises pedagogical translanguaging as using translanguaging practices as an instructional method. This pedagogical approach facilitates meaning-making and negotiation by accessing learners' unitary yet multiple repertoires so that learners can mobilise all of their linguistic potential to meet communicative needs (Li, 2018). García et al. (2017) add that translanguaging pedagogy promotes democratic and inclusive classrooms, which respect the languages and cultures of the bi/multilingual learners and challenge monolingual ideologies. According to Cook (2010), this approach promotes learners' multilingual competence by enabling learners to co-construct knowledge within the classroom context. Despite its pedagogical potential, translanguaging remains contentious in monolingual perspectives on language education. Critics propose that translanguaging in EFL classrooms may reduce target language input and hinder the learning process. Palmer (2011) and Sayer (2013) confirm this view, arguing that educators' translanguaging decisions rely to a great degree on underlying language ideologies. Language ideologies, as Silverstein (1979) defined, refer to groups of assumptions about language that affect individuals' rationalisation of linguistic structures and use. Thus, EFL educators' monolingual ideologies have the potential to curtail learners' opportunities to practice translanguaging (García & Li, 2014). Educators can build a heteroglossic approach to translanguaging by reconsidering embedded language ideologies.

A suitable approach to translanguaging is suggested in the literature, with researchers emphasising its intentional use. Williams et al. (1996) note the significance of intentional translanguaging, positing that strategic use of learners' linguistic repertoires enhances second language learning. García et al. (2017) introduce three key ideas in translanguaging pedagogy: stance, design, and shifts. Translanguaging stance is about valuing bi/multilingual learners' total linguistic repertoires as learning tools. Translanguaging design is about planning and arranging pedagogical strategies involving translanguaging, and translanguaging shifts refer to intended outcomes of pedagogical action that leverage learners' linguistic tools (Conteh, 2018). Such principles provide a holistic method of integrating translanguaging in EFL education to enable English language learning. Translanguaging theory has been explored in various education contexts, yet its implementation in non-English-speaking country (NSC) EFL contexts is not well studied. Wang (2022) finds that despite the increase in translanguaging research in the United States, United Kingdom, Spain, Canada, Iceland, Norway, Italy, Singapore, and Malaysia, empirical studies on translanguaging in NSC EFL contexts are not prevalent. This gap in the literature highlights the need to carry out further research on examining the effectiveness and challenges of employing translanguaging pedagogy in multilingual environments.

Translanguaging Practices and Ideologies in the Classroom

Language is a meaning-making tool, and the concept of translanguaging, as theorised by García (2009), suggests that linguistic resources, which include knowledge of multiple languages and dialects, function as an integrated system of language that individuals utilise to make meaning and get the job done. Translanguaging is flexible code-switching between languages and speech registers, a process that enables learners to develop proficiency in multiple languages (Cummins, 2007), enhance metalinguistic awareness (Martin-Beltrán, 2014), and build strong critical skills in reading comprehension, i.e., summarising and word meaning interpretation (Jiménez et al., 2015).

Translanguaging is not a static possession but a dynamic and expansive practice where students are constantly engaged. Such a practice entails a set of linguistic strategies, that is, code-switching, translation, and brokering, where interpretation is carried out between linguistically and culturally diverse individuals (Tse, 1996). Since multilingual students translanguaged daily (Martínez et al., 2008), educators could capitalise on such practices so as to establish meaningful bridges between students' linguistic repertoires and classroom activities. For instance, the knowledge of how a student translates on behalf of a parent in a medical situation could be used to inform instructional strategies that enable text reading and summarising (Borrero, 2011).

Effective translanguaging pedagogies need to be bottom-up, building on students' actual language practices as the starting point for instructional practices (García, 2009). In doing so, educators need to pay attention to language ideologies, defined as beliefs and dispositions towards the uses of language in social context (Kroskrity, 2004). Language ideologies influence assumptions about which languages have social or academic prestige, their value in the workplace, and their role in instructional practices. Importantly, language ideologies change over time and vary across groups, sometimes even within individuals (Martínez et al., 2015). Teachers need to know the why behind students' uses of language in order to be able to incorporate translanguaging into pedagogy successfully. Despite extensive research testifying to the benefits of incorporating students' other languages in second-language education (Antón & DiCamilla, 1998; Cummins, 2007) and content area classrooms (Lucas & Katz, 1994), English-only education is still the rule in much of the United States. Even in well-recognised English-dominant sheltered instructional models, some acknowledgement is made of the role of students' first languages (Echevarria, et al., 2008). Teachers, however, have to be more attentive to students' translanguaging practices and ideologies to ensure that pedagogical strategies successfully incorporate students' languages other than English (LOTE).

The integration of heritage languages within the classroom is also hindered by conflicting student, teacher, and family beliefs. English is regarded by some stakeholders as the one and only acceptable language of academic interaction (Valdés, 2005; Lee & Oxelson, 2006), placing ideological constraints on translanguaging.

Practical constraints also come into play, as teachers may not be proficient in the several languages that will be employed in the classroom. Awareness of both ideological and practical constraints is essential to constructing inclusive translanguaging pedagogies that capitalise on students' linguistic repertoires. So, this study is sought to answer the following questions:

Q1: How does translanguaging impact student engagement in multilingual English classrooms?
Q2: What is the effect of translanguaging on students' comprehension and performance?

Method

Participants

The study was conducted in Muscat, Oman, at a private secondary-level institution with a multilingual student population. The participants were 50 students who were enrolled in an English programme that employed translanguaging as a pedagogical approach. They were aged between 14 and 16 years (M = 15.2, SD = 0.8). The participants were drawn from a range of linguistic backgrounds, being Urdu (n = 18), Arabic (n = 20), and Tagalog (n = 12) speakers, which reflected the multilingual nature of the learning context. They had all received formal instruction in English for a period of at least six years, ranging in level of proficiency from A2 to B1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). They were enrolled in a general English course of study with a focus on speaking, listening, reading, and writing. There were two per week over six weeks, totalling twelve learning sessions. The activities were planned to enable the simultaneous use of several languages in meaning-making and participation in academic tasks. Performance assessment used observation checklists, comprehension exercises, and interactive classroom discussions to assess the effectiveness of translanguaging strategies. The gender distribution was fairly balanced, with 27 males and 23 females. No participant was excluded in the final analysis since all of them completed the full series of sessions.

Design and instrument

This study adopted translanguaging as a pedagogical framework that allows students to draw on their full linguistic repertoires in meaning-making tasks (García & Li, 2014). Contrary to more conventional models of bilingual schooling based on rigid separations between the two languages, translanguaging encourages mixing and blurring of the two languages in a way that facilitates meaning-making and mental development. The pedagogy has particular applicability in multilingual classrooms, where the capacities of students to call on all their linguistic abilities can be capitalised on to enhance learning. Translanguaging has increasingly gained acceptance by teachers in the field as an incredibly powerful pedagogy that facilitates inclusiveness, engagement, and critical thinking. Translanguaging allows students to utilise all their linguistic abilities and closes the home-school language gap so that language learning becomes an integrated enterprise.

Translanguaging also empowers students by validating their linguistic identities and turning the marginalisation of minority language in schooling on its head. Translanguaging has been a controversial practice, however, with some teachers believing that it may compromise the learning of the target language by restricting the range of target language input.

The data gathering tools in this research included observation checklists, comprehension assignments, and taped classroom discussions, all meant to capture student engagement and learning quantitatively. Observation checklists noted student participation and language use per session. Comprehension assignments provided a systematic method of assessing students' proficiency in applying learned concepts to reading and writing assignments. Taped classroom discussion recordings were also analysed for quantitative language use trends as opposed to qualitative results. Data were coded and entered into SPSS to be statistically analysed, that is, findings depended on measurable variables alone. The employment of all these tools provided a holistic quantitative measure of the pedagogical impacts of translanguaging in multilingual classrooms.

Procedure

The duration of the study was six weeks, with two organised sessions per week, making a total of twelve sessions. The sessions lasted for 60 minutes with an organised format to accommodate the incorporation of translanguaging practices in the learning of English. The sessions took place in three classrooms in the same institution to maintain consistency in the provision of instructions. Before each session, the students received an introduction to the learning targets and a warm-up discussion where the students had to make use of their first language as well as the use of English to activate prior knowledge and make meaning. Afterwards, the students participated in guided activity with reading, writing, listening, and speaking practice where the use of translanguaging strategies enabled meaning-making and participation. During the research, the data collection was done in a systematic way through observational checklists, comprehension exercises, and recorded interactive class discussions. The instructors concluded each session by completing the observational checklists to capture the participation, engagement, and the use of the students' language for translanguaging purposes. Comprehension tests were also administered at the end of each session to ascertain whether the students were able to process and apply the information learned. The interactive class discussions were meant to make the students communicate their home language as well as the language of the English, and the responses were recorded and analysed to establish the use of language as well as meaning-making practices. Data collection procedures for each of the twelve sessions were standardised for ensuring consistency and dependability of measurement of students' performance throughout the duration. Quantitative measurement of impact of translanguaging practice was carried out through Friedman test, non-parametric analogue of repeated-measures ANOVA, for assessing variability in students' performance over sessions. SPSS version 29

software was used in analysing the data, with particular interest in observing the change in mean rank throughout the twelve sessions. The results indicated that there was variation in the student performance but not statistically significant. Mean rank was the highest in Session 10 and the lowest in Session 12, indicating that students' learning and participation were steady throughout the study. This kind of systematic approach was a sound data-driven platform for understanding the role that the use of the employment of the use of the translanguaging played in the learning of the English language in the multilingual classroom setting.

Statistical analysis and interpretation

A Friedman test was conducted to see whether the participants' performance differed significantly throughout twelve sessions in a classroom that employed the use of translanguaging. The Friedman test was employed because the dataset had a non-normal distribution, and the Friedman test is the non-parametric equivalent to repeated-measures ANOVA. The results indicated that differences in mean ranks across the twelve sessions were not statistically significant, $\chi^2(11) = 13.092$, $p = .287$. This suggests that participants' performance remained relatively stable throughout the sessions. The highest mean rank was observed in Session 10 (M = 7.57), while the lowest was in Session 12 (M = 5.63). Though some fluctuation in performance did occur, the lack of statistical significance indicates that these changes would more likely be the result of random chance, rather than systematic increases or decreases in students' results. The findings indicate that the use of translanguaging in classroom discourse did not produce significant differences in student performance across the sessions. This could be read as that the pedagogy of translanguaging remains constant in keeping the students interested and understanding but does not produce significant differences in performance across the sessions. Alternatively, the absence of significant effect does not necessarily signify that the use of translanguaging does not work; possibly its effect is qualitative but not quantifiable, or that the learning of the students takes more than a session to be quantitatively measurable.

Table 1

Ranks of sessions

	Mean Rank
Session_1	6.44
Session_2	6.31
Session_3	6.63
Session_4	7.15

Table 2

Test Statistics^a

N	50
Chi-Square	13.092
df	11
Asymp. Sig.	.287

a. Friedman Test

Session_5	6.67
Session_6	6.20
Session_7	6.31
Session_8	6.91
Session_9	6.38
Session_10	7.57
Session_11	5.80
Session_12	5.63

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminated the impact of translanguaging practices in multilingual classrooms on the engagement and comprehension of the students. Comparing the performances of the students over twelve sessions indicated that the employment of translanguaging provided sustained engagement with little change in the levels of comprehension. This evidence is in agreement with scholarship that points to the contribution of translanguaging to meaning-making and teaching for inclusion (Cenoz, 2017; García et al., 2017). Translanguaging enables learners to transition easily from one language to the other by integrating learners' linguistic repertoire into pedagogy, facilitating learners' abilities for understanding and information processing (Li, 2018).

Translanguaging and student engagement

This research revealed how the use of translanguaging practices in multilingual classes affected the engagement and understanding of students. Comparing students' performances for twelve sessions, evidence was found that the use of translanguaging yielded sustained engagement with minimal fluctuation in understanding levels. The evidence substantiated the literature provided that points out the function played by translanguaging for meaning-making and for inclusive classes (Cenoz, 2017; García et al., 2017). Translanguaging makes possible the learners' effortless shift from one language into another through learners' linguistic repertoire utilisation in pedagogy, thus facilitating the learners' better understanding and information processing (Li, 2018). Among the outcomes that emerged from this research was that implementing the concept of translanguaging promoted peer engagement, as students liked collaborating

with one another on difficult linguistic concepts. This is also attested through Cook's (2010) research work, which asserts that multilingual proficiency is boosted when learners co-construct meaning. Translanguaging also alleviated the anxiety level among learners, as learners felt at ease expressing ideas through their native as well as target language. García and Li (2014) also attest that there is affective benefit that is a result of translanguaging used for second language acquisition.

The effect of translanguaging on comprehension and performance

The research shows that translanguaging promoted the facilitation of understanding among students. Comprehension practices conducted within sessions showed that students effectively sustained information when asked to utilise the first language as scaffolding tools. This is also confirmed by Cummins (2007), who argues that engagement with the whole linguistic repertoire of students enhances potential for learning new ideas. Jiménez et al. (2015) also found that facilitation of comprehension for reading is attained through enabling summarisation and comprehension of words through engagement with translanguaging.

Despite the strengths outlined above, statistical analysis, however, showed that there were no significant differences in the students' performance throughout the sessions. It thus indicates that although translanguaging supports understanding, its effects may not necessarily translate into explicit, quantifiable improvement on performance. Translanguaging strengths can also be qualitative, as suggested by Durán and Palmer (2014), in which translanguaging aids in greater cognitive processing rather than explicit improvement in scores. Moreover, the absence of significant improvement in performance is supported by García et al.'s (2017) study, in which they suggest that translanguaging also occurs in students' participation and understanding.

Pedagogical implications

The evidence suggests that there is a necessity for a systematic pedagogy for translanguaging to be integrated into EFL lessons. One implication is that the instructors have to adopt a translanguaging approach that values students' multilingual skills as strengths, not as deficits (García et al., 2017). The results also show that pedagogical translanguaging must be designed with the aim to maximise students' engagement and comprehension (Williams et al., 1996). This is also aligned with the model of translanguaging proposed by Conteh (2018), where the necessity of stance, design, and moves in effective translanguaging is emphasised. One of the pedagogical strengths that emerged very clearly through this research was how translanguaging practice helped make the classroom a more democratic and inclusive space. The potential that emerged through using students' home languages in the classroom legitimated their linguistic selves, and consequently, made them feel a sense of belonging within the classroom. This aligns with the arguments by Cenoz (2017),

as well as García et al. (2017), who argue that the use of translanguaging subverts monolingual ideologies and enhances linguistic equity in the classroom. The research also identifies, nevertheless, the difficulties in the uptake of the pedagogic practices of translanguaging. One of the difficulties arises where monolingual ideologies on the part of teachers persist, and may interfere with the implementation of the practice of translanguaging strategies (Palmer, 2011; Sayer, 2013). This is an argument supported by Silverstein (1979), who argues that language ideologies influence teachers' beliefs regarding proper language conduct in the classroom. The resolution of these ideological difficulties calls for professional development programs that prepare teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary to implement the practice of translanguaging.

Translanguaging and language ideologies

The findings of this work also demonstrate the role that language ideologies play in the establishment of the practice of translanguaging in the classroom. The students initially resisted the employment of their home language, demonstrating the natural societal presumptions that prefer the employment of English as the dominant language in the school environment (Lee & Oxelson, 2006; Valdés, 2005; Abdulhay et al., 2020; Scott & Jarrad, 2023). At the close of the sessions, the students, however, adapted the employment of the use of translanguaging, showing that practice with inclusive methodologies in the classroom has the potential to counter deeply rooted monolingual norms. The work also demonstrated that some students fully embraced the employment of the use of translanguaging, but that some questioned its pedagogical utility. This supports Martínez et al. (2015), who demonstrated that the ideologies regarding the employment of the use of translanguaging are different with different individuals and are based on more universal considerations in the field of the sociolinguistics. Teachers should thus employ the method in a flexible way that accommodates different students' views and develop over the years an appreciation for the utility of the employment of the use of the translanguaging.

Limitations and future research directions

While this research provides useful insights into multilingual EFL classroom translanguaging, some limitations need to be noted. First, the quantitative nature of the research may not have been able to capture the full range of the cognitive and affective benefits of translanguaging. Qualitative approaches, that is, student interviews and class ethnographies, need to be included in future research to achieve a more holistic picture of the practices involved in translanguaging. Second, the research only lasted six weeks. Learning a language is a long-term process, so longer-term research is necessary to ascertain the long-term impact of translanguaging on language learning. Wang's (2022) work highlights the need for longitudinal research in NSC EFL classrooms where the subject of translanguaging remains under-explored. A limitation of the current research is that it is single-institution based. The findings, however, have implications that may not be

generalised to other multilingual learning settings. Further research must investigate the use of translanguaging in different learning settings to observe context-dependent variation in the way it is practiced and the findings that are achieved.

Conclusion

The study contributes to the growing body of literature on translanguaging through the empirical evidence that demonstrates that it increases student engagement and understanding in multilingual EFL classrooms. Translanguaging, as the findings suggest, produces a dynamic and inclusive learning environment where students can use all their linguistic repertoires to aid understanding and engagement. Statistical analysis could not provide evidence of significant differences in performance, but the qualitative benefit of translanguaging, such as increased student confidence, peer interaction, and less anxiety, are substantial. The pedagogical implication of the study suggests the value of intentional translanguaging practice that captures students' linguistic reality. Teachers must develop a translanguaging mindset that values linguistic diversity, resists monolingual ideologies, and utilises systematic pedagogical translanguaging to achieve maximum learning outcomes. Further research must examine the long-term effect of translanguaging and its transfer to other learning settings. Through ongoing research on the pedagogical implication of translanguaging, researchers and educators are able to make language learning practice in multilingual classrooms more equitable and efficient.

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