

Translanguaging in Language Education: Pedagogical Practices for Multilingual Classrooms

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Abstract

Translanguaging, the dynamic use of multiple languages for meaning-making, has emerged as a powerful pedagogical approach in language education, particularly in multilingual and foreign language classrooms (García & Li Wei, 2014). Unlike traditional monolingual models that separate languages, translanguaging recognizes the learner's full linguistic repertoire, facilitating cross-linguistic transfer, metalinguistic awareness, and cognitive flexibility (MacSwan, 2017). Research has shown that integrating translanguaging into language instruction enhances student engagement, vocabulary retention, and comprehension (Hornberger & Link, 2018; Turnbull, 2019). This paper explores the theoretical foundations of translanguaging, drawing from sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and dynamic bilingualism. It reviews empirical studies demonstrating the effectiveness of translanguaging in scaffolding learning, fostering linguistic inclusivity, and improving foreign language acquisition (García & Seltzer, 2021; Meyer & Schmid, 2022). Additionally, it presents practical strategies for implementing translanguaging in language classrooms, including multilingual writing tasks, collaborative translation activities, and AI-assisted translanguaging tools. Despite its pedagogical benefits, institutional barriers and monolingual assessment frameworks often limit the adoption of translanguaging (García, 2009). This study discusses the challenges of implementing translanguaging pedagogy and offers solutions for integrating multilingual practices in education, advocating for a shift toward more inclusive and student-centered approaches to language learning.

Keywords: *Translanguaging; Multilingualism; Language Education; Second Language Acquisition; Inclusive Education*

1. Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected and linguistically diverse world, language education faces the urgent challenge of addressing the complex realities of multilingual classrooms. Traditional pedagogical approaches have often relied on monolingual norms that compartmentalize languages, overlooking the dynamic and interconnected ways in which multilingual learners use their full linguistic repertoires. In contrast, translanguaging has emerged as a powerful educational framework that recognizes and leverages the fluid language practices of bilingual and multilingual individuals [1].

Originating in bilingual education contexts in Wales and further developed in North American sociolinguistics, translanguaging refers to the process by which multilingual speakers draw on all their linguistic resources to make meaning, communicate, and learn [2]. Far from simply alternating between separate languages, translanguaging involves a flexible, integrated use of language that challenges rigid language boundaries and validates the everyday communicative practices of multilingual learners.

Recent research suggests that translanguaging can foster deeper student engagement, support cognitive and metalinguistic development, and enhance learning outcomes in second and foreign language acquisition [3], [4]. In this regard, translanguaging aligns closely with sociocultural theories of learning [5], which emphasize the importance of mediation, scaffolding, and cultural tools in the development of higher psychological processes.

This paper explores the theoretical foundations and practical implications of translanguaging in the context of language education. It examines how translanguaging can be employed as a pedagogical strategy to scaffold learning, promote inclusive practices, and empower students in multilingual classrooms. Furthermore, it discusses challenges to implementation – such as institutional resistance and monolingual assessment norms – and offers suggestions for overcoming these obstacles through innovative and inclusive teaching practices.

2. Theoretical Framework



Translanguaging has emerged as a transformative lens in applied linguistics and language education, transcending traditional dichotomies between named languages and embracing the full linguistic repertoire of bilingual and multilingual individuals. As originally conceptualized by Cen Williams and later reconceptualized by García [2] and García and Li Wei [1], translanguaging is not merely a pedagogical technique but a broader theoretical orientation that centers on *how multilingual speakers make meaning* across flexible and integrated language practices.

Drawing on sociocultural theory [5], translanguaging is understood as a mediated process, where language serves both as a tool for learning and a space for identity negotiation. In this framework, learning is not the passive accumulation of knowledge but an active, socially situated, and language-mediated process. As such, translanguaging fosters *scaffolding*, *metalinguistic awareness*, and *cognitive development* through interaction in multiple languages.

Translanguaging challenges hierarchical conceptions of language by embracing dynamic bilingualism [6]. Rather than viewing languages as separate or competing systems, it highlights their interconnectedness and mutual reinforcement – particularly within educational settings – thus questioning the subtractive ideologies that continue to shape language education policies.

This view is supported by MacSwan [3], who argues against “code-switching” as a deficit or interference and promotes a multilingual grammar approach, where language mixing is seen as natural and rule-governed. Similarly, Li Wei [7] introduces translanguaging as a *practical theory of language*, emphasizing its potential to disrupt power asymmetries and offer agency to minoritized speakers.

From a critical sociolinguistic perspective, Gogonas & Maligkoudi [8] argue that translanguaging is not only a linguistic or cognitive phenomenon, but also deeply ideological and political. Their research on the Greek linguistic landscape during the economic crisis reveals how translanguaging practices in public spaces challenge dominant narratives and express social dissent, particularly among marginalized groups. Graffiti combining English and Greek, for instance, become translanguaging acts of resistance, signaling alternative identities and reclaiming linguistic space. As they note, “translanguaging spaces are created by and for translanguaging practices... disputing norms and characterized by creativity and criticality” (p. 68).

In educational contexts, Tsokalidou [9] expands this view by emphasizing translanguaging as both a *communicative practice* and a *pedagogical imperative*. Based on extensive research with bilingual educators and learners in Greece, she argues that translanguaging unlocks emotional and cognitive dimensions of learning, fosters *belonging*, and enables learners to navigate between linguistic and cultural identities. She frames translanguaging not just as a means of expression, but as an act of emancipation and *pedagogical justice* in classrooms serving refugee and migrant students.

Viewed collectively, these perspectives position translanguaging as a multidimensional construct that integrates the cognitive, the sociocultural, and the critical. It is both a *natural practice* of multilingual individuals and a *deliberate pedagogical strategy* that can transform language classrooms into inclusive and empowering spaces.

3. Empirical Insights: Evidence of Translanguaging in Practice

A growing body of empirical research supports the pedagogical potential of translanguaging across diverse educational contexts. Studies across levels of education – ranging from primary schools to universities – have documented how translanguaging fosters engagement, facilitates comprehension, and enhances academic achievement among multilingual learners.

One of the key findings in recent literature is that translanguaging contributes significantly to vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and classroom participation. For instance, Hornberger and Link [4] showed how students in multilingual classrooms used their full linguistic repertoires to construct meaning across texts, often engaging in translanguaging practices such as peer translation, paraphrasing in L1, and writing hybrid texts. These practices not only deepened comprehension but also encouraged critical thinking and identity affirmation.

Similarly, Turnbull [10] demonstrated that allowing students to use their first language while working on second language reading tasks improved their overall understanding and supported higher-order processing skills. This challenges the often-assumed “immersion-only” approach in foreign language instruction and supports a more inclusive, multilingual pedagogy.

At the university level, Meyer and Schmid [11] explored translanguaging strategies in German as a foreign language courses. Their study found that activities such as collaborative translation, multilingual glossaries, and code-meshing exercises led to higher retention of vocabulary and a



greater sense of autonomy among students. Notably, students reported feeling less anxious and more confident when their language background was treated as an asset rather than a barrier. In this light, translanguaging may also serve as a powerful tool for reducing language anxiety [12], it validates learners' linguistic resources and fosters a sense of security and belonging in the classroom.

Beyond individual cognition, translanguaging has been shown to contribute to classroom ecology and inclusive learning environments. García and Seltzer [6] highlight how translanguaging transforms the classroom into a *heteroglossic space* – a space in which students can bring their whole selves into learning. Teachers in their study deliberately designed activities that required students to use more than one language, such as multilingual journaling, concept mapping across languages, and digital storytelling using home languages. These practices not only supported learning outcomes but also validated the students' cultural and linguistic identities.

In the Greek context, empirical work by Tsokalidou [9] and Gogonas & Maligkoudi [8] complements these findings. In classrooms with refugee or immigrant learners, translanguaging practices have been shown to reduce feelings of alienation, build trust between teachers and learners, and enable co-construction of meaning. As Tsokalidou notes, translanguaging allows teachers to engage with the "invisible bilingualism" of their students – especially in environments where languages such as Albanian, Arabic, or Urdu are often overlooked or undervalued.

Moreover, Gogonas and Maligkoudi [8] argue that translanguaging should not be confined to the classroom. Their study of linguistic landscapes in Athens and Thessaloniki during the financial and refugee crisis shows how public displays of hybrid language – often in the form of graffiti – constitute acts of social commentary and cultural negotiation. These translanguaging instances become part of the *wider ecology* of multilingualism, blurring the boundaries between formal learning spaces and the everyday sociolinguistic reality of students.

Taken together, these empirical studies illustrate that translanguaging is more than a pedagogical tool; it is a *socially embedded practice* that empowers learners, disrupts monolingual norms, and enriches the process of language education.

4. Pedagogical Applications and Strategies

Having explored the empirical benefits of translanguaging, the next step is to consider how educators can meaningfully embed it into their teaching practices. Translanguaging is most impactful when it is intentionally integrated – not as an exception or accommodation, but as a central part of curriculum and classroom design.

4.1. Multilingual Writing Tasks

Encouraging students to write using more than one language allows them to access their full linguistic repertoires and scaffold their thoughts creatively. Activities might include:

- Dual-language journals, where learners switch languages mid-entry or reflect bilingually.
- Autobiographical texts incorporating home-language expressions.
- Poetic or creative writing that intentionally blends linguistic codes [9].

These tasks promote expressive freedom, support metalinguistic awareness, and validate students' identities.

4.2. Collaborative Translation and Revoicing

Translation becomes a dynamic learning tool when students engage in comparing meanings, idioms, and cultural nuance. Teachers can:

- Organize peer translation exercises between stronger and less proficient peers.
- Use revoicing activities, in which students retell or summarize texts first in their dominant language, and then in the target language.

This promotes confidence, conceptual clarity, and cross-linguistic strategy use.

4.3. Plurilingual Reading and Vocabulary Building

Leveraging connections across languages enhances retention and comprehension. Strategies include:

- Creating student-built multilingual glossaries.
- Mapping semantic fields across languages, especially using cognates or etymological connections.

- Annotating texts in L2 using L1 summaries or marginalia.

These practices encourage learners to develop critical vocabulary strategies rooted in their multilingual resources. In this context, the use of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries – including learner-built, corpus-based, or visual dictionaries – can serve as a powerful metacognitive strategy. Dictionary use supports lexical awareness, fosters autonomy, and enables learners to navigate meaning-making processes across languages [13]. When integrated into classroom activities, it can also prompt reflection on language form, register, and collocations, thus reinforcing translanguage as both a practice and a strategy [14].

4.4. Visual and Environmental Translanguaging

Classroom environments themselves can model and celebrate translanguaging. Examples include:

- Multilingual wall displays with labels, quotes, or thematic vocabulary.
- Student-led linguistic landscape projects that document and analyze public signage.
- Incorporating home language texts into classroom libraries.

Such strategies increase visibility of minority languages and foster linguistic pride.

4.5. Technology and AI-Assisted Translanguaging

Digital tools can scaffold translanguaging while expanding access to content. Suggested tools and uses:

- Collaborative multilingual writing via cloud platforms (e.g., Google Docs).
- AI translation tools (with critical reflection) as writing aids.
- Voice recording and subtitling apps for multilingual presentations or storytelling.

Technology, when used critically, enhances participation and supports differentiated learning paths.

4.6. Socioculturally Responsive Planning

At its core, translanguaging pedagogy begins with relationships. Teachers who understand their students' cultural and linguistic histories are better equipped to design relevant instruction. As Tsokalidou [9] reminds us, translanguaging is not merely a technique – it is a pedagogy of trust and solidarity.

Crucially, translanguaging should not be seen as an extra burden, but as a transformative shift in pedagogical orientation. When implemented with intention, it fosters inclusion, critical engagement, and learner autonomy.

5. Overcoming Barriers: Towards a Translanguaging Pedagogy

Despite the well-documented benefits of translanguaging, its implementation in educational systems often faces substantial resistance. This resistance is both institutional and ideological, stemming from long-standing attachments to monolingual norms, standardized assessment practices, and the legacy of nation-state language ideologies.

5.1. Institutional Barriers

Many education systems, including the Greek one, are governed by curricula and assessments that prioritize target-language purity and monolingual performance metrics. This has several consequences:

- Teachers are often reluctant to permit translanguaging, fearing it may interfere with language acquisition or be seen as unprofessional.
- Learners may internalize deficit views of their own language practices, perceiving them as signs of inadequacy rather than assets.
- There is little space for home languages in the classroom, despite evidence showing their importance for identity, cognition, and achievement.

5.2. Ideological Challenges



Translanguaging disrupts traditional language ideologies that view languages as separate, bounded systems. It also challenges the notion of the "ideal native speaker" as the educational target. As García and Li Wei [1] argue, translanguaging is not simply a technique, but a "decolonizing act" – and this makes it politically and socially uncomfortable in some contexts.

Furthermore, as Gogonas and Maligkoudi [8] show, translanguaging in public discourse is often associated with subversion, protest, or marginality. While this creativity is powerful, it also means that translanguaging is sometimes dismissed as disorderly or threatening to the status quo.

5.3. Recommendations for Moving Forward

To shift toward a translanguaging pedagogy, the following steps are proposed:

- **Teacher Training and Reflection:** Teachers need safe spaces to explore their own language ideologies and experiment with translanguaging in practice. Training programs should model translanguaging themselves and include multilingual resources and assessment strategies.
- **Policy-Level Change:** Curricula and assessment frameworks must evolve to recognize plurilingual competence as a legitimate learning goal [15]. Translanguaging should be acknowledged as a learning strategy, not an error.
- **Community Engagement:** Translanguaging pedagogy benefits from engaging families and communities. Home languages should be seen as bridges to learning, not barriers. Schools can host multilingual events, include parents in language activities, and promote cross-cultural dialogue.
- **Critical Literacy and Student Voice:** Students should be encouraged to reflect on their own language practices and critique dominant discourses about language, identity, and power. Translanguaging is a tool for fostering critical consciousness.

6. Conclusion

Translanguaging represents a paradigmatic shift in the way we understand and approach language education. Far from being a mere instructional technique, it reflects a broader commitment to linguistic justice, cognitive flexibility, and educational inclusion. As shown throughout this paper, translanguaging enables learners to draw on their full linguistic repertoires, thus fostering deeper engagement, enhanced comprehension, and stronger identity affirmation.

Theoretical frameworks rooted in sociocultural and critical perspectives highlight translanguaging as a means of challenging monolingual ideologies and empowering marginalized voices. Empirical studies, both international and Greek, have demonstrated its effectiveness in improving vocabulary retention, reducing anxiety, and supporting meaningful classroom participation.

Yet, the path to a translanguaging pedagogy is neither automatic nor uncontroversial. It requires intentional pedagogical design, reflective teacher training, and systemic change in assessment and curriculum frameworks. If linguistic hierarchies and standardization persist, translanguaging will remain a counter-hegemonic practice – and perhaps that is part of its power.

Moving forward, educators and institutions must embrace the complexity of multilingual classrooms not as a challenge to be managed but as a resource to be cultivated. In doing so, they can co-create classrooms that are not only sites of learning but also spaces of recognition, resistance, and belonging.

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