Translanguaging in the ELT classroom

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explains what, why and how.

Over the last decade or so, the term 'translanguaging' has become a new buzzword in education. There is much written about its transformative potential, its innovative practices and its social justice narrative. However, there is surprisingly little written about translanguaging specifically for those of us who teach English as a foreign and second language. So what exactly is translanguaging? What is its significance for us as English language teachers? And what implications does it have for our classroom practice?

In this brief introduction to translanguaging, I attempt to introduce the key ideas behind it, share my opinion about why I think it is important in our field, and also provide some practical suggestions for the classroom, as well as links to further resources, many of which are free. While reading the article, bear in mind that there are quite diverse opinions within the translanguaging community, and even some important critique of the ideas underpinning it (see Jaspers, 2018; Macswan, 2017).

What is translanguaging?

The word 'translanguaging' can be used as both a verb (to translanguage) and a noun (translanguaging); 'translingual' is the most commonly used adjective. Definitions of translanguaging vary, referring both to the acts of language use themselves and to the theoretical paradigm underpinning such acts.

When it comes to language use, translanguaging typically refers to our use of any or all of the resources (words, bits of grammar, paralinguistic features, etc.) in our full linguistic repertoire – including all the languages we speak – to maximise communicative potential (Canagarajah, 2011; García, 2009). When translanguaging, multilinguals may often cross or disregard boundaries between named languages to combine resources from them in varied ways. In this sense, translanguaging is sometimes seen as an 'umbrella term' (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; Heugh, 2021) to refer to a wide range of practices that have been referred to using different labels in the past, such as 'codeswitching' or 'codemixing' and – in language teaching – using the 'L1' or 'mother tongue' in the classroom. So, for example, when we and our learners engage in acts of translation, multilingual explanation or comparison between

what we often call the L1 and English, we are translanguaging (Celic & Seltzer, 2013; Macswan, 2017; Seals *et al.*, 2020).

Things get trickier when we move to theoretical matters, where we find conceptualisations of translanguaging varying from weaker to stronger versions (García & Lin, 2017). Writers who adopt weaker conceptualisations of translanguaging when discussing pedagogy, including the originator of the term (Williams, 1994), Cenoz and Gorter (2021) and myself (Anderson, 2018), recognise both the importance of the multilingual's full repertoire and the societal reality of named languages, particularly evident in formal educational systems (e.g., monolingual exams). They typically call for a softening of the borders between languages, both in bilingual education and in foreign and second language learning, emphasising the utility and pedagogic potential of the use of multiple languages to facilitate greater learning. Scholars who adopt stronger versions, such as Ofelia García and Li Wei (2022) argue that translanguaging is conceptually not the same as 'using the L1' or 'codeswitching', even if the acts of language use are no different. This is because they seek to emphasise that – at a psycholinguistic level – multilinguals possess a single, unified repertoire of resources that are deployed according to context, interlocutor and communicative purpose. In this sense, they argue, we don't 'use' different languages, 'switch' between them or 'combine' them, we simply 'language' (as a verb). Interpreting a multilingual's behaviour as 'using languages' (plural) misrepresents these complex, flexible, creative practices and, importantly, undervalues them. García and Li (2014) argue that, in educational contexts, recognising and valuing these practices can have a transformative impact on the education of language minority students in bilingual education in the US and the UK (García & Sylvan, 2011) – the primary contexts for their research.

Thus, to summarise, the term 'translanguaging' has two broad uses: it both describes the complex, fluid language-use practices, especially of multilinguals, and also offers a new theoretical perspective to value and validate these practices as fundamental to communication and learning.

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How relevant is translanguaging to English language teaching?

Hopefully, the above discussion makes clear some of the potential implications of translanguaging for ELT, even though this depends, to some extent, on what theoretical position we adopt. A strong translanguaging position would offer the argument that the classification and teaching of languages as separate systems (as happens in any foreign or second language curriculum) is an archaic and counterproductive practice, and that curricula and teachers should seek to focus on teaching content in ways that involve and activate our full language repertoires, thereby potentially rendering separate 'language lessons', such as English, redundant. This may make sense in some multilingual contexts where the key languages of importance are present both in the society and the classroom and, therefore, will inevitably be involved during learning. However, for the many students around the world for whom languages such as English may not occur in wider society, it begs the question: if other languages would better serve content learning, how can they ever learn English?

Writers discussing foreign and second language learning contexts often answer this question by recognising the curriculum itself, and the materials used to teach it (e.g., our coursebooks) as 'the content', and view translanguaging as the most appropriate means to justify and advocate the use of more familiar languages to mediate and interpret this curriculum (Mahapatra & Anderson, 2022; Rabbidge, 2019). Not only does this include the use of the L1 in the classroom, including translation, explanation and comparative analysis of languages, but it could also involve, for example, translingual explanation, questioning and groupwork discussions. However, such writers typically also recognise that, rightly or wrongly, teachers and students may need to 'monolanguage' at times (Anderson, 2018), what Rabbidge calls 'restrictive translanguaging' (2019), when they restrict their language use to resources from one named language (e.g., English). We may need to do this, for example, to provide sufficient opportunities for English practice, to prepare learners for monolingual examinations or when listening to a monolingual audio recording or film. While the argument that has often been used to exclude other languages from the classroom (the need to maximise target language use or exposure [Macaro, 2001]) is rarely invoked, there is recognition of a reality that many English teachers face – that there is precious little time on the curriculum for English, and many teachers feel the need, at least on some occasions, to encourage 'target language' practice among learners (Anderson, 2022; Rabbidge, 2019).

How can my learners and I translanguage?

The answer to this key question will depend, to some extent, on a number of factors:

1. The level and wider educational context you work in: primary, secondary, tertiary or extracurricular education (e.g., a private language school)
2. Which languages are present among your learners: is there mainly one language other than English, two, or many?
3. The extent to which you, the teacher, are able to use these languages
4. The wider social context, and the extent to which English is available to learners outside the classroom

5. The expectations and requirements of your institution and curriculum (Some of us are required to teach only in English.)

To deal with the last of these first, we all need to be aware of the extent to which translanguaging is permitted within our institutional or curricular context. If, either in your contract, institutional methodology or curriculum, you have been directed to teach only in English, breaking this rule could have serious consequences for your own employment, and you will need to think twice and consult peers before trying out any of the ideas recommended below. However, there are often opportunities, even within such highly restrictive contexts, for creating spaces for other languages to facilitate learning. For example, if you have only been told never to 'speak' other languages in the classroom, this does not necessarily restrict you from eliciting translations of words or sentences from learners in other languages, nor from allowing the learners to annotate texts and take notes in their stronger languages, or even stop you from writing on the board in another language.

The next factor to mention that is likely to have a strong influence on whether and how translanguaging happens in your classrooms is the extent to which you, the teacher, are able to understand and use your learners' other languages. Those of us who work in highly multilingual classes (e.g., in primary education in large cities or in private language schools in Anglophone countries) are unlikely to know many, if any, of our learners' languages, even if we ourselves are multilinguals. In contrast to this, it is important to note that probably a majority of English language teachers in the world do share at least one 'more enabled language' (Durairajan, 2017) with their learners, particularly in primary and secondary education around the world, where often one language dominates in the local community outside the classroom. In his practical guide *Translation and Own Language Activities*, Philip Kerr (2014) distinguishes between three types of context:

"However, there are often opportunities, even within such highly restrictive contexts, for creating spaces for other languages to facilitate learning."

- **Type A:** contexts in which the teacher can only use English in the classroom and learners do not share a community language, yet they can still be encouraged to use other languages in their learning
- **Type B:** contexts in which the learners do share a community language, but the teacher cannot use this language
- **Type C:** contexts in which the teacher and learners can use a more enabled language to facilitate English learning

As Kerr observes of his activities, almost all translanguaging activities can be used in Type C contexts, somewhat fewer in Type B contexts, and even fewer in Type A. However, some opportunities do exist in Type A contexts that may not exist in the others (e.g., students can choose a poem in their first language to present to their classmates, mediated through their use of English).

Below I have drawn eclectically upon categories used by different authors in both the translanguaging and L1-use literatures to present three areas in which you may be able to soften the borders between languages to facilitate learning in your classroom – there are many more! The further resources mentioned below provide examples of specific activity types.

Activities that draw and build upon the learners' prior knowledge

Because so much of what we know is encoded in the languages we know, these languages can be key to

'raising background schemata', i.e. when we draw upon what our learners already know to make lesson content or a complex text more accessible to our learners. Historically, many of us have learnt to do this without using other languages (e.g., showing pictures before a listening, predicting text content from a title), but we can also get learners to link what they see or read to what they already know through comparison of language, culture and even translation: '*Do we have an equivalent saying? What do we call this tradition?*' Importantly, as Cenoz and Gorter (2021) recommend, raising schemata translingually also builds learner metalinguistic awareness: their awareness of language itself, and the role it plays in knowledge and learning. Seals *et al.* (2020) note that we can encourage learners to use other languages when brainstorming ideas for a task, prior to the task itself.

Activities that involve crosslinguistic mediation

Crosslinguistic mediation involves using our stronger languages to help others to understand something encoded in a weaker language (English in our classrooms). On the most obvious level, this can involve translation of a whole text or part of it, but it can also involve more subtle acts, such as getting learners to summarise the content of a text written in a different language in English or taking notes on a lecture presented in English in one's L1, depending on the need. The strong focus on mediation in the recently updated Council of Europe *CEFR Framework* (2020) has led to this becoming a key concept in language teaching recently, and is the topic of Chiappini and Mansur's resource book, *Activities for Mediation* (2021), which offers a number of translanguaging activities for the ELT classroom.

Activities that support cognitive development through the inclusion of other languages

Many of us often have to teach challenging lesson content to our learners. For some of us, this includes complex grammar rules that learners may need for high stakes exams, or metaphors and allegories used in English literature poetry or stories. At other times, we may be expected to develop our learners' higher-order thinking skills, even though they may only have 'lower-order' language skills! At such times, it makes sense to use our learners' other languages. The most obvious example of this is to provide explanation in the other language, something that many teachers have always done. Translanguaging can help with this – we can combine both languages in our explanation, enabling us to draw learners' attention to specific terminology in English, which we can even contextualise alongside first language 'co-text' to make it more understandable (Anderson, 2022). One expert teacher I worked with in India was able to use the English language texts in her curriculum to develop learners' higher-order thinking skills (e.g., creativity, criticality). She asked them questions about the text in their first language and encouraged them to respond in this language, thereby enabling her to scaffold their creative ideas while also effectively checking and correcting any misunderstandings they had about the text. Unsurprisingly, this facilitated much richer reflection on the text when the learners came to write about it in English (Anderson, 2021).

Further resources

- The City University of New York guide on translanguaging was created specifically for US bilingual education contexts (primary and secondary), but it is packed full of ideas relevant to ELT practitioners. Free to download:

  Celic, C. & Seltzer, K. (2013). *Translanguaging: A CUNY-NYSIEB Guide for Educators*. CUNY NYSIEB. https://www.cuny-nysieb.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Translanguaging-Guide-March-2013.pdf

- Cenoz and Gorter's book covers practical and theoretical aspects of translanguaging, particularly for multilingual education, but it's also relevant to ELT too. It's also free to download:

  Cenoz, J. & Gorter, D. (2021). Pedagogical Translanguaging. Cambridge University Press. https://www.cambridge.org/core/elements/pedagogical-translanguaging/67802C1E5AE4A418AE3B8E2DEFBAD30A

- My brief compendium of ideas was written specifically with EFL and ESL teachers in mind, and is also free to download:

  Anderson, J. (2017). *Ideas for translanguaging in the EFL/ESL classroom*. http://www.jasonanderson.org.uk/downloads/Jasons_ideas_for_translanguaging_in_the_EFL_ESL_classroom.pdf

- The following books, while not specifically 'positioned' as translanguaging guides, involve a wealth of ideas that will inspire and facilitate translanguaging practices effectively:

  Butzkamm, W. & Caldwell, JAW. (2009). *The bilingual reform: A paradigm shift in foreign language teaching*. Narr Studienbucher.

  Chiappini, R. & Mansur, E. (2021). *Activities for Mediation*. Delta Publishing.

  Deller, S. & Rivolucri, M. (2002). *Using the Mother Tongue: Making the most of the learner's language*. Delta Publishing.

  Kerr, P. (2014). *Translation and Own Language Activities*. Cambridge University Press.

Conclusion

As Guy Cook (2010) observes, the 20th century in language teaching was largely a monolingual period in which our learners' prior languages were, at best, ignored, and at worst banished from the language classroom, at least in mainstream ELT discourse. With this, we lost so much of their creativity, identities and social rights as multilinguals, not to mention the many hours we spent trying to explain, mime or elicit the impossible! Since the turn of the 21st century, we have rejected these practices, and the concept of translanguaging has emerged as the means to offer both the theoretical justification and the inspiration for how we can do this in our classrooms. Translanguaging also empowers the majority of teachers in the world, who typically have a good knowledge of their learners' languages, culture and knowledge base. Such a translingual teacher:

> *is able to understand, interpret, scaffold and challenge their learners' choice of linguistic resources appropriately. Importantly, s/he is also able to model effective translingual and monolingual practices across the translingual continuum*
> – Anderson, 2018:34

They thereby facilitate learning, identity development and critical awareness as a result. I wonder, to what extent are you a translingual teacher?

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