

The Potential of Translanguaging among Newcomer Students and Adult ESL Learners

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Summary: This paper shares emerging translanguaging practice in Newcomer Center and adult ESL learners in Spokane County. The author shares experiences that demonstrate the benefits of incorporating home languages into educational settings, especially where there is a significant immigrant and refugee population. Unlike code-switching, translanguaging allows for a fluid use of linguistic resources, enhancing comprehension and engagement while promoting social justice by valuing marginalized languages. The paper advocates pedagogical strategies that harness translanguaging to improve educational outcomes and empower multilingual learners.

Keywords: translanguaging, multilingualism, ESL adult learners, Newcomer Center

Introduction

In recent years, the rise in global migration has resulted in increasingly multilingual classrooms. In Spokane, a significant refugee and migrant populations is contributing to the increasing diversity of languages spoken and the rise multilingual learner households with limited English proficiency. In spring 2024, Spokane Public Schools (SPS) had over 2,500 multilingual students speaking 70 languages other than English, with the largest language populations including Marshallese, Dari, Spanish, Russian, Kinyarwanda, Ukrainian, and others (Hagen, 2024). Furthermore, more adult learners from various countries have also been resettled in this city. This demographic shift has led to a burgeoning population of multilingual learners in different classrooms.

In the fall of 2023, during my visit to the Newcomer Center at a middle school in Spokane as part of an MATESOL graduate student opportunity, I worked with Kala (a pseudonym), a student from Eritrea. The Newcomer Center is a program for students new to Spokane, helping them learn English and understand the new school system for a smoother transition. This encounter prompted me to reflect on the potential of maximizing the use of minority languages to support learners' academic success and wellbeing. When the pre-service teacher asked where she was from, Kala hesitated and, with a sad expression, said she didn't know how to say it in English. However, I could see bright light shines in her eyes when she taught us her language (Tigrinya, a language commonly spoken in Eritrea and in northern Ethiopia's Tigray Region). During the same school year, the same thing happened when I worked as a coordinator in Gonzaga ESL Community Outreach (GECO) program. GECO is a community-based program offering free weekly ESL classes to immigrant and refugee adults in Spokane, organized and taught by Gonzaga

University MA TESOL students. There, I had the opportunity to support multilingual learners from various backgrounds. One experience that stood out involved a Ukrainian student, Karinen (a pseudonym), who was a very beginner student. She initially had difficulty keeping up with the whole class and was generally quiet during most lessons. A group activity that encouraged sharing cultural experiences in both English and their home languages turned out to be the time I saw her have the most linguistic output, with a smile on her face. This shared experience in class even led to further conversations.

These moments encourage me to consider how incorporating home languages can enhance learning, ultimately leading to the concept of translanguaging. This paper aims to delve into the term translanguaging and its implications for multilingual learners. While much of the existing research talks about translanguaging, there is still a need to investigate groups who have recently migrated to a new country.

Definition of Translanguaging

The term translanguaging has become a widely debated topic, particularly in the last decade. It is originally from the Welsh term 'trawsieithu' and is used as a pedagogical practice to alternate languages for receptive or productive use, which officially began with the teacher Cen Williams in local bilingual English and Welsh community (as cited in Garcia 2014). In 2009, Garcia extended and defined translanguaging as "multiple discursive practices in which bilinguals engage in order to make sense of their bilingual worlds" (p.45). She sees translanguaging as an effective pedagogy for multilingual classrooms.

Since then, more researchers have joined this conversation to explore multilingual classroom language dynamics. Teachers

and students construct and participate in a flexible bilingual pedagogy, which has been adopted from the translanguaging approach (Creese & Blackledge, 2010). Students and teachers can alternately use English or community languages to facilitate learning, understanding, and interaction in the class. Compared with language separation programs, this flexible bilingualism largely reduces the boundaries between languages. Translanguaging also carries a deeper meaning and mission, which is social justice. This is obviously shown from the recently published research papers about seeing translanguaging as a decolonizing tool for marginalized language and groups (García, 2019; Wei & García, 2022). García and Wei (2022) stated that translanguaging “is fundamentally reconstitutive and transformative of the power relations between the named languages in society” (p. 322). This also can be one of the main differences between translanguaging and code-switching, which I will explain more in the next section.

The difference between translanguaging and code-switching

There is argument and confusion about code-switching and translanguaging. Code-switching is the process whereby bilingual or bidialectal speakers switch back and forth between one language or dialect and another within the same conversation (Shin 2005). Code-switching focuses mainly on two languages’ changing reasons and outcomes, whereas translanguaging is taking multilingual practice as a dynamic and mobile process. Some researchers have argued that the difference between code-switching and translanguaging is rooted in ideology, where code-switching is linked to the separation of languages, while translanguaging supports the fluid use of multiple languages in the learning process (Lewis, Jones, & Baker, 2012; García & Wei, 2014; Wei, & García, 2022). Otheguy, García and Reid (2015) explicitly differentiate translanguaging from code-switching, defining 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” (p.283). Learners’ full language practice repertoire includes varieties and vernaculars that may not otherwise be recognized as language.

Moreover, a translanguaging paradigm is designed to be transformative, “removing hierarchy of languaging practices that deem some more valuable others” (Creese & Blackledge, 2015). The behavior of adopting translanguaging in the classroom pushes back against English language hegemonies. Doing so also promotes the maintenance and revival of minority languages. While code switching shares some similar characteristics with translanguaging from the perspective that two languages are used during the interacting process, it is, however, quite different in terms of broader perspectives towards language ideology, society, and identity.

Translanguaging for teachers

It is hard to make sure all ESL classroom teachers have multilingual fluency; however, there are still some ways to employ translanguaging in the classroom. For instance, in GECO, there were two language learners from Ukraine who had difficulties understanding the teachers’ instructions due to the varying language proficiency levels within the class. This in turn hindered their progression in the learning process. Later, some teachers provided Ukrainian translations for activity instructions. It turned out that when the students understood the process, they could participate in group activities, even providing some English output. This reinforces what Espinosa, Ascenzi-Moreno, and García (2021) stated,

Translanguaging is a potent tool for constructing meaning, for thinking, for authentic communication and expression; it is not simply a scaffold to support students who are not yet fluent in English. It allows students to capitalize on their linguistic repertoire without rigid language boundaries. (p.25)

A second example bears mentioning. In another GECO classroom while teaching the Christmas topic with spices vocabulary, the teacher displayed matching pictures to aid visualization and encourage students to share how to say the words in their own languages. It would be more efficient and comprehensible for them to enhance their understanding of the target language. This practice is needful for migrating adults’ class, especially for beginners.

Beyond adult education, practices and potential can also be observed in K-12 education. Similar to the GECO program, there is one class in one Elementary school for all new immigrants and refugees’ kids from Newcomer Center in Spokane. The classroom is linguistically diverse, including speakers of Swahili, Kinyarwanda, Marshallese, Russian, Arabic, and Spanish in a class of just 15 students. While the teacher cannot learn how to speak all those languages, she created a classroom environment that fostered multilingualism and translanguaging.

First, it is seen from the class decoration. They have word wall world languages posted with English and their home languages together hanging in the class. On top of the board area, English numbers match with Spanish numbers, “uno, dos, tres”, etc. also can be seen in the class. “By creating a purposeful, multilingual space, it not only shows the languages of students and families are valued, but also provides students diverse language practice” (Espinosa et al., 2021, p.36). Teachers can actively engage students’ languages and cultures, even without fluency in those languages.

By viewing students as valuable assets rather than barriers, educators can create inclusive environments that celebrate diversity. However, some teachers see emergent bilinguals’ language differences, cultural resources, and educational histories

are often seen as challenges, rather than as assets in their learning. (p.11).

Furthermore, in a mathematics class focused on calculations, teacher Eve (a pseudonym) organized students into groups based on their shared language backgrounds. Students could use their own language to discuss the pattern in numbers change. This resulted in increased engagement and understanding, as students felt more comfortable expressing their ideas and collaborating with peers. This is similar to translanguaging strategy that García observed in the International Network for Public High Schools in New York city for recently arrived immigrants. “Since it would be impossible to speak all the students’ languages, teachers group students in home language so that students could assist each other make meaning of the lesson” (García & Li Wei, 2014, p.111). All these practices are highly meaningful and supportive for newcomer learners in K-12 education.

Translanguaging for multilingual students

After talking about from teachers’ perspective, shifts can be turned into students’ points of view. First, translanguaging as a scaffolding tool for multilingual students would make the transition to normal classrooms more smoothly and more comfortably. Garcia et al., (2017) explain one of the purposes for translanguaging is supporting students’ engagement with complex content and texts. “Rather than watering down our instruction, which risks oversimplification and robs students of opportunities to engage in productive grappling with texts and content, translanguaging enables us to teach complex content” (García et al., 2017, p.8). For most immigrants and refugees’ language learners who are adults, are ideologically mature to understand complex topics and have more deep-thinking.

I worked and volunteered in two ESL class settings. Interviews and conversations were conducted with the learners to explore their perspectives on translanguaging. There were conversations after each class and a final interview at the end of the entire session. The conversations focused on scenarios where learners used their home languages, during which I received clarification on what they were discussing, the context in which it occurred, and the outcomes. Adult learners frequently use translanguaging in situations involving new vocabulary, complex concepts, or new grammar. Additionally, they often used it to compare their home language with English to avoid confusion and better understanding. Finally, they also use the home language when they need to fully express themselves. Then, I would like to share two short conversations.

The first group is from a class of a local ESL program, the family is from Russia. The parents and their son are learning English in a same level. During my several observations, the mom Natalia frequently helped another classmate from the same country to clarify and explain the teacher’s instructions

in Russian. You also could hear they were negotiating the meaning of English grammar in their home languages. After that, this classmate could speak out in English. As Natalia’s husband Alexander told me about using Russian in the class, “It helps, some people understand, some don’t; We help each other.” The second group are students from GECHO. They are two sisters from Mexico, the younger sister is 65 years old, one returning student, and the older one just arrived in the US several months ago. Sometimes, when they both could not catch up with teacher activities’ explanation, I used Spanish to help them to follow along with the teacher. Most of the time, the younger sister helped the older one translate or explain the meaning and organize answers. It is the combination of both languages that keeps the task moving forward (Creese & Blackledge, 2010, p.110). The younger sister told me “My sister English is good; she helps me to understand the teacher, and then I can speak.” The same situation happened with the Ukrainian daughter and her mother. As a beginner class, we could hear Spanish, Ukrainian, and English during the whole class session. All of them are using their ways to approach this new language. The advantage of educating adult migrants with translanguaging theory and pedagogy in mind is that in focusing on the practices of people, it gives agency to minoritized speakers, decolonizes linguistic knowledge, and engages all of us in the social transformations that the world so sorely needs today (García, 2017). All participants expressed positive attitudes toward using their native language in the learning process.

Conclusion

This paper explores the potential of translanguaging practices among newcomer students and adult ESL learners in Spokane. The study sheds light on several translanguaging strategies, including language grouping, where students in K-12 and adult ESL classrooms were grouped by shared languages to facilitate communication and collaboration, enhancing their understanding and engagement. Cultural and linguistic sharing was another key strategy, with teachers encouraging students to share vocabulary and cultural experiences in their home languages, fostering a sense of belonging and valuing their linguistic identities. Additionally, visual supports and home language integration were used, with teachers displaying multilingual materials like word walls and bilingual number charts to create an inclusive environment, allowing students to connect English with their home languages for improved comprehension.

Translanguaging is increasingly showing its influence on scholarship, education development, and social justice. “We should expect that translanguaging would be positioned as a tool, both for improving educational outcomes as well as for questioning and subverting hegemonic linguistic norms” (Poza, 2017 p.117). It will bring tremendous benefits to bi/multilinguals, particularly for newcomer kids and adults who gain less attention. Drawing on previous literature,

ethnographic observations, and interviews, this paper reflects on the significance of translanguaging. Given this learning experience, I intend to further explore and integrate translanguaging into my future teaching. Specifically, I plan to incorporate multilingual materials, promote peer support using home languages, and create opportunities for students to engage with content through their full linguistic repertoires. Furthermore, this work highlights the need for increased awareness among scholars and educators regarding the pedagogical value of students' home languages in the classroom.

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