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Translanguaging: Does It Work in EFL Contexts?

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Translanguaging is an idea that is often contrasted with previously dominant concepts in language education, e.g., monolingualism, interlanguage, native-speakerism. These concepts are now considered dated and when applied in language education, according to proponents of translanguaging, may harm rather than facilitate learning. The newer and more progressive terms today include bilingualism, multilingualism and plurilingualism (just to name a few) which are increasingly seen as major improvements over the linguistic imperialism of the past. Adopting these approaches is now seen as politically correct in that we are seen as championing inclusivity and diversity in education. The term translanguaging has become so trendy that it is not easy to find detractors.

A cursory look at recent publications in major journals shows that translanguaging is currently one of the hottest research topics in language education. Language researchers have now examined translanguaging from both theoretical and practical angles in diverse language learning contexts. Their collective insights are that translanguaging pedagogy can help (i) “address linguistic inequities and injustices in the classroom” and (ii) “develop flexible, plurilingual spaces in the classroom where learners’ full linguistic repertoires can be leveraged as a resource in meaning-making or communication” (Li, this volume). One wonders if anyone would disagree with such noble goals in education.

Some of the big names in the translanguaging movement include Li Wei, Ofelia Garcia and Suresh Canagarajah whose work has inspired numerous studies and publications on the topic in the past two decades. It is worth noting that translanguaging scholars are more sociolinguistically-inclined in their theoretical orientations than the typical TESOL scholars whose theoretical orientations are mostly informed by research in ELT. The former are typically more interested in how social and political factors affect language learning, while the latter are more interested in linguistic, cognitive, affective, and other classroom-related factors that can facilitate or hinder language acquisition.

Not surprisingly, there are comparatively few TESOL scholars who whole-heartedly embrace translanguaging pedagogy. In fact, the construct of translanguaging is often understood by

TESOL practitioners simply as an approach that allows L2 learners to make use of their L1 in the L2 classroom. Concepts such as code-switching/mixing and use of bilingual dictionaries are familiar ideas that TESOL practitioners, at varying degrees, are already using in their teaching. But for a good majority, the full concept of translanguaging as defined by sociolinguists may be a little foreign to them. Some may adopt the approach without fully understanding its theoretical orientations, while others may simply dismiss it as being of little relevance to language learning.

In a recent book by Cenoz & Gorter (2021), the authors provide a brief description of what translanguaging is and how it can be applied in numerous language learning contexts. It is a good read for those who know very little about translanguaging and its origins, theoretical underpinnings, and potential applications in language education. Overall, the authors are in favour of translanguaging and are advocating a wider adoption of translanguaging pedagogy.

Here is a quote from the book that caught our attention.

Pedagogical translanguaging is at the crossroads of several areas of applied linguistics because it is related to bilingual and multilingual education, second and foreign language acquisition and teaching and majority and minority languages (p. 43).

Reading the quote above, one may get the impression that translanguaging pedagogy can be applied regardless of our teaching contexts, i.e., whether we teach English in monolingual, bilingual, multilingual, plurilingual, or the more traditional EFL contexts where English is typically learned as a school subject and where students often start learning the language from scratch. Would translanguaging work in the EFL contexts? Would it help learners develop confidence in using the target language for social and academic communication?

Hard to say. Research on translanguaging to date seems to be done mostly in non-EFL contexts. In addition, the focus of the research seems to be more on content rather than language learning. Translanguaging research is typically done in EMI (English as the Medium of Instruction) contexts. While there is a focus on language, the primary goal of instruction is more on the mastery of course content than language development. A popular approach is CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), where content is presented using simplified language and further supported by the use of visual or graphical information to make the lessons more palatable.

Our thought is that translanguaging is probably more applicable in immersion or semi-immersion contexts (e.g., EMI, CLIL, or other Bilingual programmes) when students already have a certain level of proficiency in two or three languages. In these contexts, allowing students to translanguage when learning content makes a lot of sense.

We are, however, not so sure if translanguaging would help EFL teachers improve their students' proficiency in the target language. In order to help students increase their command of the target language, say from A1 to A2 or from A2 to B1, EFL teachers would need to draw theoretical wisdom from well-established second language acquisition theories (e.g., Ellis, 2014, Lichtman & VanPatten, 2021, and Krashen, Lee & Lau, 2017). EFL practitioners are also more likely to consult practice-oriented ELT resources (e.g., Hinkle, 2023; Richards & Renandya, 2002) when designing their day-to-day lessons and when assessing learning outcomes.

In conclusion, whether translanguaging is an approach that can help us achieve our curricular goals is for us to decide. But our decision should be guided by a set of evidence-based principles, and not by what is currently trendy or fashionable.

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