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Translanguaging and Effective Pedagogy

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Introduction

In recent years, translanguaging has gained much recognition and has challenged several established concepts regarding linguistic theory and language pedagogy. It represents a large shift in thinking concerning the use of learners' L1, or so-called dominant language, in classes and other academic settings. Translanguaging pedagogy challenges the conceptual framework that advocates the separation of languages in bilingual or multilingual educational environments. Translanguaging theory advances the idea that educators should create environments in which learners can freely, flexibly and dynamically use all of their linguistic repertoire to form meaning. This stance has the potential to augment and enhance deeper understanding of subject matter and also facilitate home-school cooperation, by supporting home language use and community involvement in education. Challenging unfair and imbalanced power dynamics, discrimination and the de-evaluation of languages, language practices and minoritized individuals and groups is also a pillar of translanguaging theory.

Although a full discussion of the epistemological and theoretical underpinnings of translanguaging is beyond the scope of this essay, strong advocates of translanguaging may actually balk at the above use of "L1" and "language". More will be explained about translanguaging in the next section, but the following are three core premises that undergird translanguaging theory (Vogel and Garcia, 2017):

1. It posits that individuals select and deploy features from a unitary linguistic repertoire in order to communicate.
2. It takes up a perspective on bi- and multilingualism that privileges speakers' own dynamic linguistic and semiotic practices above the named languages of nations and states.
3. It still recognizes the material effects of socially constructed named

language categories and structuralist language ideologies, especially for minoritized language speakers.

This article will focus on pedagogical theory, practice and potential difficulties regarding the application of translanguaging practices. Although the current author is well aware that a vigorous debate about theory and practice is vital for reform and innovation in education, it is also important to remember that most bilingual and multilingual educators share the same core values and goals as strong advocates of translanguaging. It is also important to reemphasize the importance of core premise number three, cited above, in educational settings, and also to add that these “material effects” do have an influence on educators and classroom practices and outcomes. The current author is not advocating accommodation with racist or discriminatory practices; however, fierce advocates of translanguaging should follow the tenet of maintaining a critical attitude toward all linguistic and pedagogical theories, including translanguaging itself. They should also be empathetic in regard to the position of educators who attempt to edify within unresponsive even repressive systems, duly described in translanguaging literature.

Translanguaging

Although translanguaging theories and practice have developed and expanded over time, as a concept and as a method or basis for education, translanguaging is not a new model. In modern times, translanguaging was codified by Cen Williams (1994), a Welsh researcher who saw translanguaging as a way to potentially develop bilingualism by having students engage in tasks that required them to use both Welsh and English to speak, read and write, etc. The concept has developed over time, but at its core is the idea that the use of language learners’ full repertoire of language skills and knowledge enhances their ability to increase their understanding and mastery of the linguistic features of language (Marrero-Colon, 2021).

Another basic premise is that people do not learn languages but *do* languages, which includes the idea that social interaction, context and position are key elements in the development of linguistic features and cultural knowledge. This dynamic process emphasizes the flexible use of people’s complex linguistic resources to make meaning in and of their lives, including of their communication with others (García, 2014). Otheguy, García and Reid (2015)

have defined 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). A more in-depth discussion of challenges to commonly held concepts of the nature and even the existence of languages is beyond the bounds of this article, but suffice it to say that advocates of translanguaging have adopted a heteroglossic position. This involves the idea that theories about “language” must begin at the individual level and that interaction is a primary basis for the formation of meaning. This even includes the idea that languages, often termed “named languages”, are sociopolitical constructs based on coercion, hegemony and discrimination.

In regard to bilingualism or multilingualism, supporters of translanguaging contend that bilingual or multilingual people draw upon one unitary system for their speak acts, not two discreet language systems. Bilingual and multilingual speakers select which language features to employ or suppress based on social context. Bilingual and multilingual speakers are not the amalgamation of two or more monolingual individuals, but “their language practices are seen as the deployment of different features from a unitary language repertoire for diverse social interactions with many social actors” (Kleyn and García, 2019, p. 72) . Moreover, through the dynamic process of translanguaging, individuals transcend both languages to form a “unique and specific linguistic configuration (Grosjean, 1989, p. 6). This is one meaning of the “trans” in translanguaging. Translanguaging supporters emphasize the internal language system of individuals, as opposed to the external sociocultural reality of named languages. In other words, educators must think about how they can construct an environment in which individuals can add new linguistic features to their linguistic repertoire in order to enhance and expand it. This is the so-called “strong version” of translanguaging theory, but it must be noted that the “weak position” does support national and state language boundaries, but calls for a softening of those boundaries (García and Lin, 2016). This does appear to be a “softening” of the translanguaging position in light of the sociopolitical realities faced by students and educators in various educational environments.

It must also be noted that translanguaging calls for more social justice in schools, and for respect and recognition for all cultures and linguistic practices. In the case of the United States, for many years the goal of “bilingual” programs

was or has been to help students transition into mainstream classes, of course, conducted in English. Students' home languages were or are not acknowledged, or have even been disparaged, and students have been regarded as being "defective" or "incomplete" English monolinguals. Foreign language education, often in the form of a European language such as French or German, has been seen as necessary and desirable for the intellectual and cultural development of English speakers, who are usually from relatively affluent backgrounds. However, in contrast, the home languages of relatively poor or immigrant populations have been seen as hindrances to proper English language development; not as valuable resources and a basis for dynamic bi or multilingualism (Crawford, 1992).

The popularity of dual-language or dual-immersion programs in the United States, particularly among relatively privileged groups, in which a roughly even number of majority and minority language students study each other's language within a system of language separation, could be interpreted as an extension of the idea that learning a "foreign language" is important for English speaking children with comparatively high socioeconomic status. These inequalities and systems of privilege are criticized by the advocates of translanguaging. They see translanguaging as a way to transform society so that the home languages and cultures of traditionally marginalized groups are not only respected but also recognized as resources through which individuals can not only enhance their linguistic repertoire but also expand their understanding of the world around them, and achieve higher levels of self-fulfillment and academic success.

Furthermore, in regard to education, García, Johnson and Seltzer (2017) have delineated three main components of translanguaging educational practices: stance, design and shifts. A teacher's stance encompasses their beliefs and ideologies in regard to emergent bilingual or multilingual individuals. As explained above, in order for translanguaging to be fully effective, teachers should regard each student, and that individual's linguistic and cultural background, as a resource for further learning; including academic achievement. Students possess extensive language practices that are "outside of" or beyond mandated standards and standardized tests. This stance can help to transform and disrupt socially and culturally embedded structures of power and privilege.

Design refers to the idea that a teacher's planning and methods should adhere to translanguaging theory guidelines. This includes establishing group work among speakers of similar home languages and the creation of tasks that provide students with opportunities to use their full linguistic repertoire. Moreover, educational resources should be bi or multilingual and multimodal, so that students have many opportunities to construct meaning out of new language features. This includes interaction and engagement with bi or multilingual resources and individuals, including local community members and other individuals throughout the world via technology.

The third component, shifts, is described as a teacher's flexible response to the pedagogical or learning flow, or *corriente*, in each classroom. Translanguaging should be a dynamic, interactive process that places students at the center of pedagogy and learning. Teachers must design appropriate class content and tasks, but must also make unplanned changes to facilitate student learning and the construction of meaning. A focus on standards, mandated curriculum and educational materials created for English monolinguals usually produces negative outcomes for minoritized students.

In summary, translanguaging for educational purposes “means that we start from a place that leverages all the features of the children's repertoire, while also showing them when, with whom, where, and why to use some features of their repertoire and not others, enabling them to also perform according to the social norms of named languages as used in schools” (García & Kleyn, 2016, p. 15). This seems to acknowledge the ideas that not only is the acquisition of linguistic and cultural knowledge important but that educators, and hopefully students, should also be aware of sociopolitical factors that influence education.

Translanguaging, Pedagogy and Cautionary Remarks

Translanguaging does represent a potentially potent tool and theoretical framework for enhancing the acquisition of linguistic and academic knowledge. The dynamic practices promulgated by translanguaging advocates have been applied in many educational settings. However, if the tenets of translanguaging are not fully understood and embraced by at least a majority of educators and staff in a given educational context, and preferably by members of the local community, then its positive effects will be mitigated and opportunities for

learning will be limited and lost.

As an example of misunderstanding on the part of teachers, Aleksić and García (2022) describe research that they conducted in Luxembourgian preschools. Luxembourg has established a trilingual system of education in which children usually start learning in preschool through the national language, Luxembourgish. They later learn to read and write in German and learn French beginning in the third grade. An important concern in this system is the education of children who are raised in homes in which Luxembourgish is not spoken. Children in the school that was the focus of research were mostly of an immigrant background and from families of relatively lower socioeconomic status. Portuguese and Serbian were the most prevalent non-Luxembourgish languages.

The three teachers who participated in the research were white Luxembourgian females with more than 10 years of teaching experience. The teachers participated in more than 17 hours of professional development concerning translanguaging, which was carried out over six months in seven approximately two-and-a-half hour sessions. It should be noted that this program was accredited by the Luxembourg Ministry of Education.

The teachers volunteered to be videotaped and were confident that they had included translanguaging theories and practices in their lesson plan. In the lesson, four Luxembourgian children of Portuguese and Serbian descent were asked to select a card featuring the flag of the language that they use at home. Three of these children said that they speak Luxembourgish at home and wanted to pick up the Luxembourgish flag. However, due to preconceived notions and prejudices connected with immigrant children or children from immigrant backgrounds, the teachers insisted that the children pick up either the Portuguese or the Serbian flag. They did not listen to the children's explanations and even used coercive rhetoric. After the lesson, the students displayed signs of confusion, and they became silent and demotivated.

Although the children insisted that they do speak Luxembourgish with a sibling or to some extent with a parent, and would like to identify themselves as Luxembourgians, the teachers still believed that these children cannot really be Luxembourgian because of their ethnic background. The teachers emphasize the students' "otherness" and connect them with foreign, poor, immigrant backgrounds. What began as a lesson to reaffirm, and perhaps even to celebrate

their ethnic and linguistic background, actually shamed the students. It also alienated them from their school environment, increased the space between the students' home language and Luxembourgish, and also increased the psychological distance between family members and their school. This reveals that even after training and education about translanguaging theory and practice, actual class content can be counterproductive and demotivating for students.

Laura Hamman's (2018) research of a two-way dual language immersion program in the United States provides another example of environments or conditions that can suppress the beneficial effects of translanguaging. Hamman conducted research concerning translanguaging practices at Rockland Elementary School, a kindergarten to second grade institution in a small Midwestern city. The subject of research was a Spanish-English dual language program that consisted of 14 students divided evenly between home language background. The Spanish students were mostly from low-income families, while the English speakers came from predominantly middle-class families. The program was designed as a 90/10 model; therefore, kindergarten students were supposed to receive 90% of instruction in Spanish and 10% in the majority language, English. In the second-grade class that Hamman studied, the language of instruction was supposed to be 70% Spanish and 30% English. However, due to resource limitations, pressure to prepare students for high-stake standardized tests in third grade and due to various inequalities and the amount of overall language input, the prescribed language ratio was not actually reflected in reality.

The two languages were separated in the classroom by subject. Reading, writing and mathematics were taught in Spanish, and science or social studies, depending on the day, were taught in English. However, since other classes, music, physical education and art, were taught in English, the actual ratio was 60/40. Furthermore, students could choose which language to use during lunch, recess and in their free time. Moreover, due to the fact that they could use English during pair and group work in class, regardless of the language guidelines, English maintained its dominant status throughout the day in school, and in the surrounding community.

The second-grade teacher, Maestra Gabriela, tried at first to maintain strict language separation, but after being exposed to translanguaging theory,

she began to more flexibly use and allow translanguaging practices in the classroom. Although Maestra Gabriela did carry out effective practices and students did frequently use both English and Spanish to negotiate meaning, overall, several negative trends prevailed in class. One problem was the fact that although students were shifting between languages, they were not doing so in the same way and frequency. English was clearly the preferred language, and although English speakers felt empowered to speak up and use English during Spanish instruction time, Spanish-dominant speakers were much less likely to do so when the language of instruction was English. Maestra Gabriela stated that she often had to ask, influence and redirect students to use Spanish. Thus, in this case, the creation of a flexible space for translanguaging ironically contributed to the increased dominance of English.

Conclusion

For translanguaging, and other bi or multilingual strategies and pedagogical practices, to be effective, students should be welcomed into the classroom as full members of a given educational environment. Their cultural, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, as well as those of their family members, should be respected and leveraged as vital resources for linguistic and academic development. Moreover, educators and staff members of educational institutions must be educated about translanguaging theory and methodology. Research-based, proven theory and practice should be embraced and serve as the basis for school-wide systems, programs, teaching and learning.

As explained above, translanguaging could play a role in language and academic learning, however, more research is needed to reveal appropriate methods and practice. With the two research examples above in mind, and the sociopolitical realities faced by educators and students, it is important to pose several questions for further research. What are effective ways to educate teachers, school staff members and local community members about translanguaging theory and pedagogical methods? Is the separation of languages needed for effective education? What is the proper ratio of language use and instruction? Is simply creating a free and flexible environment enough to promote the acquisition of linguistic features, academic knowledge and analytical skills, etc.? What about appropriate assignments, tasks and assessment? How can high-levels of academic knowledge and achievement be

promoted? Is there a suggested mix of students from different backgrounds? What are some clear guidelines for teachers who do not speak or understand their students' languages and who have only limited knowledge of ethnic or cultural backgrounds? Is there any influence or what are some pedagogical concerns when students translanguage between languages that are relatively "distant" from each other, such as Japanese and English? For full efficacy, advocates of translanguaging must continue to conduct credible research and provide guidelines, resources methods, models and clear standards regarding translanguaging theory, pedagogy and practice.

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