

TRANSLANGUAGING PEDAGOGY IN BILINGUAL PRIMARY EDUCATION: ENHANCING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE ACROSS LANGUAGES

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Abstract

This article examines translanguaging pedagogy as an instructional approach for bilingual primary school learners. The aim of the study is to determine how allowing children to draw flexibly on their full linguistic repertoire, rather than restricting classroom talk to a single target language, affects participation, collaborative writing quality, and classroom dynamics. Classroom observation, analysis of student writing samples, and a teacher reflective journal were used as the primary sources of data over a six week instructional cycle. The findings indicate that permitting translanguaging during planning and discussion stages increased both the length and the quality of student contributions, supported peer scaffolding, and reduced visible signs of language anxiety, while the final written products remained in the designated target language. The article also discusses practical implications for lesson design and teacher preparation in multilingual primary classrooms.

Keywords: translanguaging, bilingual education, primary school, communicative competence, language pedagogy, multilingualism.

Introduction

Classrooms serving bilingual and multilingual children have traditionally been organized around a strict separation of languages, on the assumption that mixing languages during instruction slows down acquisition of the target language. Over the past two decades, this assumption has been challenged by scholars who argue that bilingual speakers do not operate two separate, walled off linguistic systems, but rather draw on a single, integrated linguistic repertoire that includes all the languages and varieties they know.

The term translanguaging, developed and popularised by researchers such as Ofelia Garcia and Li Wei, refers both to this everyday linguistic behaviour of bilingual speakers and to a pedagogical stance that deliberately makes room for it in the classroom. Rather than treating a child's home language as an obstacle to be

suppressed, translanguaging pedagogy treats it as a resource that can support comprehension, participation, and the construction of new knowledge in the target language.

In multilingual settings such as Central Asia, where children frequently move between Uzbek, Russian, and increasingly English, the question of how much room to give home languages inside a lesson is far from theoretical; it shapes daily classroom practice. Yet empirical studies of translanguaging pedagogy conducted specifically with young learners in this region remain scarce, which motivates the present study.

The study addresses the following research tasks: to design a short instructional cycle that deliberately incorporates translanguaging strategies at the planning and discussion stages of collaborative writing tasks; to collect and analyse evidence of student participation and written output before and after the cycle; to identify recurring patterns in how children use their home language while working toward a target language product; and to draw practical recommendations for primary school teachers.

Methods

The study involved twenty third grade students, aged eight to nine, in a primary classroom where Uzbek was the dominant home language for most children and Russian was the medium of instruction for the target writing tasks. Over six weeks, students completed three collaborative writing assignments in pairs, each following the same three stage sequence: an oral planning discussion, a drafting stage, and a final written submission.

During the planning discussion, pairs were explicitly permitted, and in fact encouraged, to talk in whichever language felt most comfortable, including switching between languages within the same sentence. During drafting and the final submission, students were expected to produce a coherent written text in Russian, the designated target language for the assignment. This design allowed the researcher to observe whether relaxing language restrictions at the oral, generative stage would carry benefits into the written, evaluated stage.

Data were collected through structured classroom observation using a checklist that recorded turn length, frequency of language switching, and indicators of active engagement such as leaning in, gesturing, or requesting clarification from a partner. In addition, all final written texts were collected and scored using a simple rubric covering content development, vocabulary range, and grammatical accuracy, and the classroom teacher kept a short reflective journal after each session.

The combination of observation, written artefacts, and teacher reflection was chosen to triangulate findings across behavioural, textual, and pedagogical perspectives, rather

than relying on a single measure that might obscure how translanguaging functioned in practice.

Results

Observation data showed that average turn length during planning discussions increased once translanguaging was explicitly permitted, and that students who had previously participated only minimally began contributing more substantial ideas once they were no longer required to formulate them directly in Russian. Several pairs were observed negotiating vocabulary in Uzbek before settling on a Russian equivalent together, effectively using the home language as a bridge toward the target language term.

Analysis of the written products indicated a gradual improvement across the three assignments in content development and vocabulary range, even though grammatical accuracy improved more modestly. This pattern suggests that the oral planning stage, when conducted flexibly across languages, helped students generate richer ideas that they then worked to express in the target language, rather than limiting themselves to ideas simple enough to express correctly from the outset.

The teacher's reflective journal repeatedly noted a visible reduction in what she described as reluctance to speak, particularly among students who were less confident in Russian. She observed that these students appeared more willing to take conversational risks once they understood that switching to Uzbek during planning would not be treated as a failure to follow instructions.

At the same time, the journal also recorded practical challenges: managing a classroom where several conversations proceed in more than one language simultaneously requires additional teacher attention, and assessing the quality of oral planning discussions in real time was more demanding than simply monitoring for use of the target language alone.

Discussion

These findings are broadly consistent with translanguaging theory, which holds that restricting bilingual learners to a single language during a cognitively demanding task can constrain the ideas they are able to generate and express. By contrast, allowing students to draw on their full linguistic repertoire during the generative stage of a task appears to have freed cognitive resources that were then available for the more demanding work of composing in the target language.

The results also resonate with the concept of funds of knowledge, since students frequently used their home language not merely as a translation aid but as a means of

accessing prior experience and vocabulary that they might otherwise not have brought into the lesson at all. This suggests that translanguaging pedagogy can support content development in writing, not only comfort or participation.

The study has clear limitations. The sample was small and drawn from a single classroom, the instructional cycle was short, and no comparison group completing the same tasks under a strict target language only policy was included. Future research with a larger sample and a comparative design would help clarify how much of the observed improvement can be attributed specifically to translanguaging rather than to increased practice with the writing task format itself.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that deliberately incorporating translanguaging at the planning stage of collaborative writing tasks can increase student participation, support richer idea generation, and reduce visible language anxiety, without compromising the requirement that final written work be produced in the target language. For teachers working in multilingual primary classrooms, these results offer a practical rationale for treating students' home languages as a pedagogical resource rather than a distraction to be managed away.

References

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