



CAL *commentary*

Translanguaging: *Theory, Concept, Practice, Stance... or All of the Above?*

Marybelle Marrero-Colón

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by Marybelle Marrero-Colón

BACKGROUND

In its basic form, translanguaging is a theory of language practice. And, as in any theory applied to practice, translanguaging offers a principled choice between competing interpretations (Wei, 2018). Originally, the term translanguaging was devised to describe a specific bilingual language pattern of use by Welsh students. Cen Williams (1996), coined the term as a pedagogical term to describe the natural ways that bilinguals (multilinguals) use their languages in their everyday lives as they make sense of their bilingual worlds. From this perspective, translanguaging represents a holistic and dynamic view of bilingualism with language practices shifting from context to context and relationship to relationship (Baker & Wright, 2017). In recent years the concept of translanguaging has been receiving recognition in the field of education, especially by those that believe that individuals naturally use their known languages to amplify their learning (Baker & Wright, 2017; Garcia & Wei, 2014; Williams, 1996).

This article discusses the theoretical concepts and practices of translanguaging. Included is a brief

discussion highlighting current working definitions, the purposes for using translanguaging in the classroom, and its uses in language assistance programs in such as *English as a Second Language, Transitional Bilingual Education, and Dual Language* programs. Each of these programs approaches bilingualism or multilingualism differently. As a result, translanguaging practices may be implemented differently in each case.

EMERGENT QUESTIONS THROUGHOUT THE FIELD

- ▼ *What exactly is translanguaging?*
- ▼ *How is translanguaging defined?*
- ▼ *What is the difference between translanguaging and codeswitching, as well as the other terms that are used to describe this type of language use?*
- ▼ *Are there multiple definitions of the term/concept?*
- ▼ *How is translanguaging defined and applied within the context of the classroom?*
- ▼ *How do different program models provide opportunities for translanguaging in classroom instruction?*



DEFINITION: TRANSLANGUAGING AS PART OF DAILY BILINGUAL DISCOURSE

In this instance, translanguaging refers to the language practices of bilingual/multilingual individuals. It may include discourse where individuals speak to each other in one language or another. It includes simultaneous use of two or more languages; engaging everyone in conversation whether they are familiar with all of the languages represented or not. The practice emphasizes the participants' flexible use of their complex linguistic resources to make meaning of their lives and their complex communications (Garcia, 2014).

For example, consider a large family reunion at the Rodriguez home where several members get together to prepare a meal. Tía Carmen and Tío Ramón are speaking in Spanish trying to figure out the ingredients needed for the main dishes. They call to some of the teenagers, Juan, Tania, and Michelle, in Spanish to take out some of the ingredients for food preparation. Juan

asks Tía Carmen questions in Spanish asking what she needs from the refrigerator. Michelle calls out in English that she has found the beans but asks which variety they want. Tío Ramón calls out in Spanish that he wants the red beans. Tania uses a mixture of Spanish and English to ask Tía Carmen which condiments she wants, “*Tía, what else do you need? I have the salt, adobo, y ajo. ¿Necesitas el vinagre, or just the oil?*” Their neighbor Russo walks in with the rotisserie chicken he has prepared for the get-together that evening, calling out greetings in Italian. Although no one in the house speaks Italian, they all call out excited greetings in either Spanish or English, knowing instinctively what Russo is saying. In this aspect, translanguaging takes the position that language is action and practice (i.e., a family discussion about meal preparation), not a discrete system of structures or sets of skills.

DEFINITION: TRANSLANGUAGING AS PART OF PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE

Translanguaging represents an approach to language pedagogy that affirms and leverages students' diverse and dynamic language practices in teaching and learning (Vogel & Garcia, 2017). When asked how translanguaging can be used as a pedagogical practice when it involves familiar bilingual discourse, Ofelia Garcia (2014) stated:

“Translanguaging refers to both the discourse practices of bilinguals, as well as to pedagogical practices that use the entire complex linguistic repertoire of bilingual students flexibly in order to teach rigorous content and develop language practices for academic use.”

In other words, translanguaging as pedagogy means that the teacher is aware that the linguistic capabilities of the students go much further than classroom language practices. The teacher knows that he/she can tap into the students' knowledge base and capabilities as a resource, and that the students' home language practices can be used to further learning. For example, the teacher knows that her newcomers can count, add, and subtract in Spanish. She uses the content knowledge in the first language to bridge the vocabulary from Spanish to the

language of the same content in English so the students will be able to express the math knowledge they know in both Spanish and English. Beeman & Urow (2013) distinguish between “bridging” and “The Bridge.” In “bridging,” the two languages are brought together to encourage students to explore their similarities and differences from a language-systems perspective (orthographic, phonological, semantic, morphological, syntactic, pragmatic). The Bridge is the systematic development of units of study in dual language programs in which one language is used to teach concepts and skills; at the close of the unit, those concepts and skills are deliberately bridged to the other instructional language through an activity such as a bilingual anchor chart or comparison of language forms. Finally, an application unit in that other language follows. Whether used as an active teaching methodology, or as a student support system, instructional translanguaging is always used deliberately and strategically.

CONSIDER THIS: *If you were to combine both definitions to create your own personal definition of translanguaging, what would it be?*

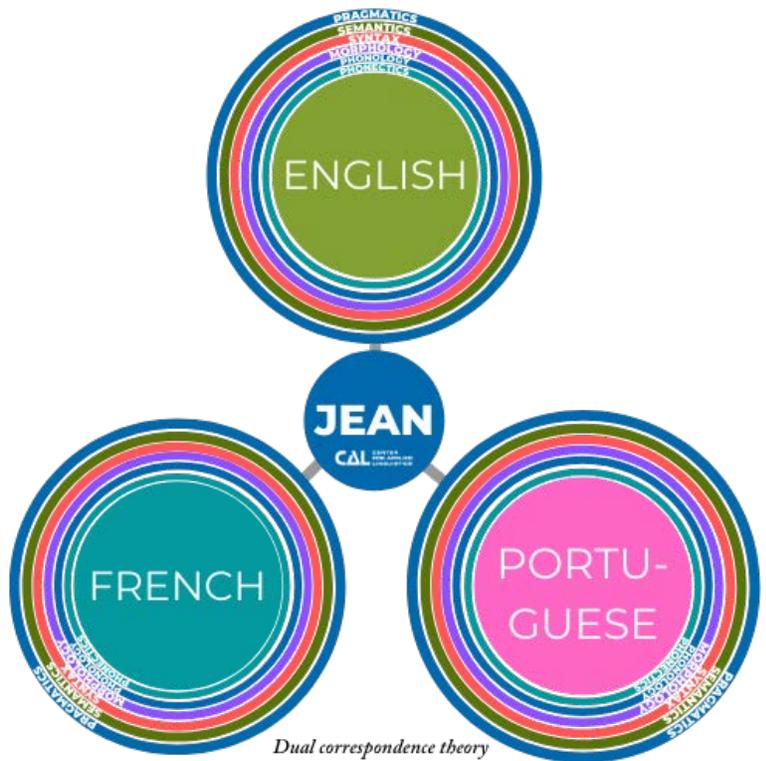
DEBATES ABOUT TRANSLANGUAGING

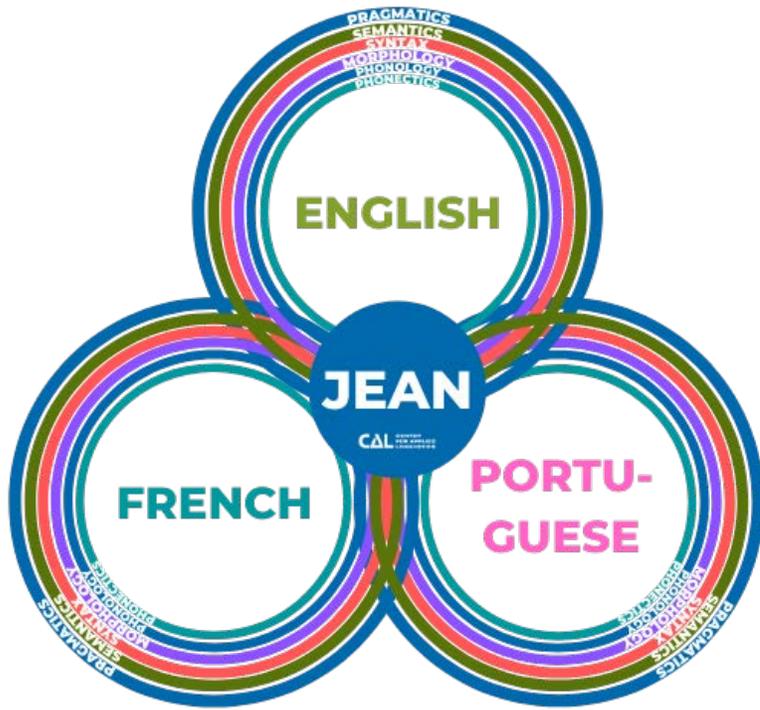
“Translanguaging concepts have been deepened, built upon, or clarified as scholars have compared and contrasted them with competing and complementary theories of bilingualism. Scholars debate aspects of the theory's definition and epistemological foundations. There are also continued debates between scholars who have largely embraced translanguaging and those who resist the theory's premises or have accepted them only partially.”
(Vogel & Garcia, 2017).

There are various theories of translanguageing which are debated across different fields of study. One such debate is that of dual correspondence theory vs. unitary theory of language use; in other words, two language systems vs. one.

The premise of the **dual correspondence theory** (Otheguy, Garcia, & Reid, 2019) follows that each language spoken by an individual has a specific grammar, and therefore when a person acquires multiple languages, he or she adopts and uses the system of grammar of that language exclusively. It describes the concept that a bilingual individual's linguistic system is internally divided into two parts that parallel two externally named languages, and that there is some type of internal differentiation that maintains the languages as separate systems (MacSwan, 2017). For example, if a person, Jean, speaks English, French, and Portuguese, then he has three different language systems that run parallel courses.

The opposite premise, the theory of a **unitary language system**, upholds that there is only one language system, one grammar, from which speakers select features. This selection of features is guided not by grammar of a particular language, but by the social information that each individual speaker has regarding the particular communicative context in which the social interaction takes place (Otheguy, Garcia, & Reid, 2019; Vogel & Garcia, 2017). This does not mean that there are not two or more separate language systems, but rather that the bilingual/ multilingual individual uses a single, internal system that accesses all learned language. For example, let's go back to Jean, the man who speaks three languages. Jean is speaking in French during a conversation with a friend, and someone approaches him asking for directions in English. According to the unitary system theory, Jean would be able to access that information immediately regardless of which of the three





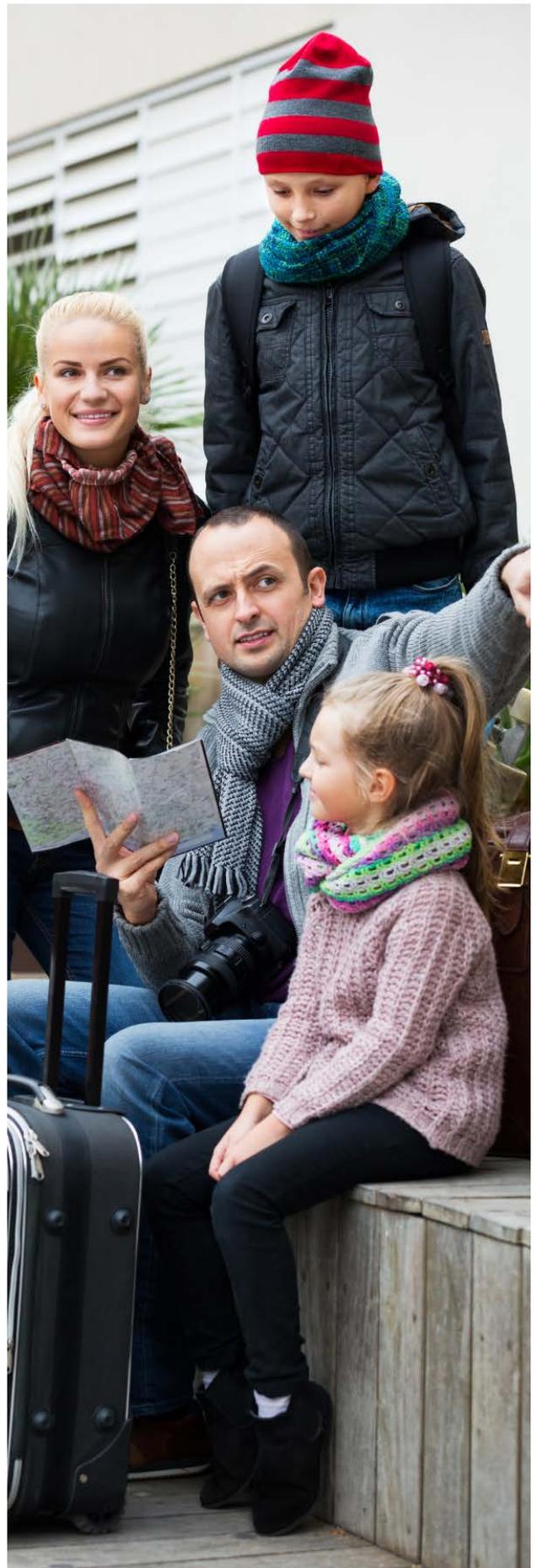
Integrated multilingual model

languages he is speaking. Likewise, he would fluidly switch from one language to another due to the social information and context available to him.

However, there is another way of explaining Jean’s ability to transition from one language system to another. The third premise discussed by MacSwan (2017) is the **Integrated Multilingual Model** where multilinguals have both shared and discrete grammatical resources; therefore, multilingualism is seen as universal and that each of us has multiple overlapping rule systems acquired through our participation in divergent speech communities. MacSwan (2017) offers a diagram that exemplifies the three linguistic systems.

CONSIDER THIS: *Do multilinguals use one system, two, or a combination – what do you think?*

The Council of Europe has worked diligently to promote the idea that bilinguals or multilinguals do not have two or more monolingual language systems running parallel to each other (Garcia, 2018). In this effort the



Council introduced the idea of plurilingualism. Plurilingualism is defined as the ability to use several languages to varying degrees and for distinct purposes. In plurilingualism, the native language is always dominant, with additional languages taking a lesser role as a result of partial competence. In other words, the additional languages one speaks never reach the same competence or level of mastery as the native language (Garcia & Wei, 2014). So, if one were to think about Jean, from the earlier example, if his native language is French, he will never reach native-like proficiency in either English or Portuguese. He can reach high levels of proficiency in each, but not native-like dominance. The translanguaging approach, on the other hand, starts from the premise that bilingual speakers along all points

of the bilingual continuum have, in fact, linguistic competence across language systems and allow multilinguals to acquire comparable levels of competence in each language (Garcia & Wei, 2014). Whereas plurilingualism views language as a system of grammatical structures, translanguaging views language as a system of fluid language practices (Garcia & Wei, 2014). So, what does this mean for Jean? It means that Jean can acquire comparable levels of competence and fluidity when using all three of his languages.

CONSIDER THIS: *Do you believe that a person can obtain near native-like fluency in two and/or multiple languages?*

CODE-SWITCHING AND TRANSLANGUAGING: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Code-switching occurs when a speaker alternates between two or more languages, or language varieties, in the context of a single conversation or an email exchange. Multilinguals sometimes use elements of multiple languages when conversing with each other (Treffers-Daller, 2009). In early language acquisition in bilingual contexts, children learn to associate the target word within a specific context or individual. For example, a child named Maria has a father who speaks Spanish and a mother who speaks Mandarin. She learns both languages simultaneously as her first languages. As Maria grows older, she begins to associate the contexts where either language is acceptable, giving rise to the possibility of code-switching. For example, Maria knows to speak Mandarin to her mother and Spanish to her father. At a dinner as she switches her conversation from one parent to the other, and given the context, she might codeswitch between languages. Codeswitching and translanguaging vary according to who is in the conversation, what the topic is, and in what kind of

context the conversation occurs. Where codeswitching revolves more around the actual language code and word/concept development, translanguaging is more about the kind of context in which the conversation occurs (Baker & Wright, 2017).

Why does this happen? Some theories state that languages are probably not stored separately, but rather they form subsets within a larger unit in the brain (Treffers-Daller, 2009). Neuro-imaging evidence suggests that there are no major differences in brain activity when individuals process information in either the first language or the second among highly proficient bilinguals, but that there are different patterns of brain activity with less proficient bilinguals performing the same task (Abutalebi, Cappa & Perani 2005; Abutalebi, 2008). Abutalebi's research (2008) indicates that a bilingual or multilingual's languages cannot be easily located in separate areas of the brain of proficient bilinguals. This research lends credence to the idea that as a person learns a second language, he/she has two or

more subsets of language that interact, and therefore, borrow from each other as information or vocabulary is needed. As the individual becomes more proficient, the separation of the two systems may fade once a more ‘native-like’ proficiency is established, reflecting a change in language processing from two separate systems to more automatic processing. This automatic processing can be identified as translanguaging.

An example of this is seen in Maria’s kindergarten classroom. Maria attends a kindergarten class at a local elementary school where she is learning English. The day’s lesson is about comparing and contrasting farm and zoo animals. Maria recently visited a zoo with her parents. As the teacher reviews the names of the animals, Maria will code-switch back to either Spanish or Mandarin whenever she forgets the name of the animals in English or is more familiar with her animal names in her home languages. The teacher praises Maria’s knowledge of the animals in her home languages and helps Maria remember the names of the animals in English, providing her with pictures, flash cards, and verbal cues to help her. When she goes home that evening and is doing her homework, Maria is able to fluently move between the Mandarin and Spanish that her family understands; it is in school where she sometimes codeswitches to her more familiar languages when she cannot recall the word or associates the word with her home languages.

CONSIDER THIS: *What should a teacher do when his/her students code-switch in class?*

TRANSLANGUAGING IN THE CLASSROOM

In most classroom contexts, the use of language in teaching content is still largely based on instructional practices that view language as separate and independent

of the content. Contrary to best practices, often there is little to no reference to students’ home or dominant language.

“Educators and researchers working collaboratively have begun to identify multiple ways in which teachers can use bilingual instructional strategies to support this transfer process both in order to increase students’ overall metalinguistic awareness and promote academic development in both languages.” (Cummins, 2017)

Languages do transfer throughout the learning process, and literacy transfers across languages and language systems as learning advances (Cummins, 2017, Celic & Seltzer, 2012). So, what are the instructional implications for the use of both languages in the content classroom?

One implication is represented by a paradigm shift in how the interconnection of language and content are regarded. Rather than seeing language and content as two separate, independent systems, this more flexible methodology views language as playing a strategic role in content mastery (Celic & Seltzer, 2012; Cummins, 2017; Garcia & Lin, 2017). According to Colin Baker (2001; Baker & Wright, 2017), there are four educational advantages to translanguaging:

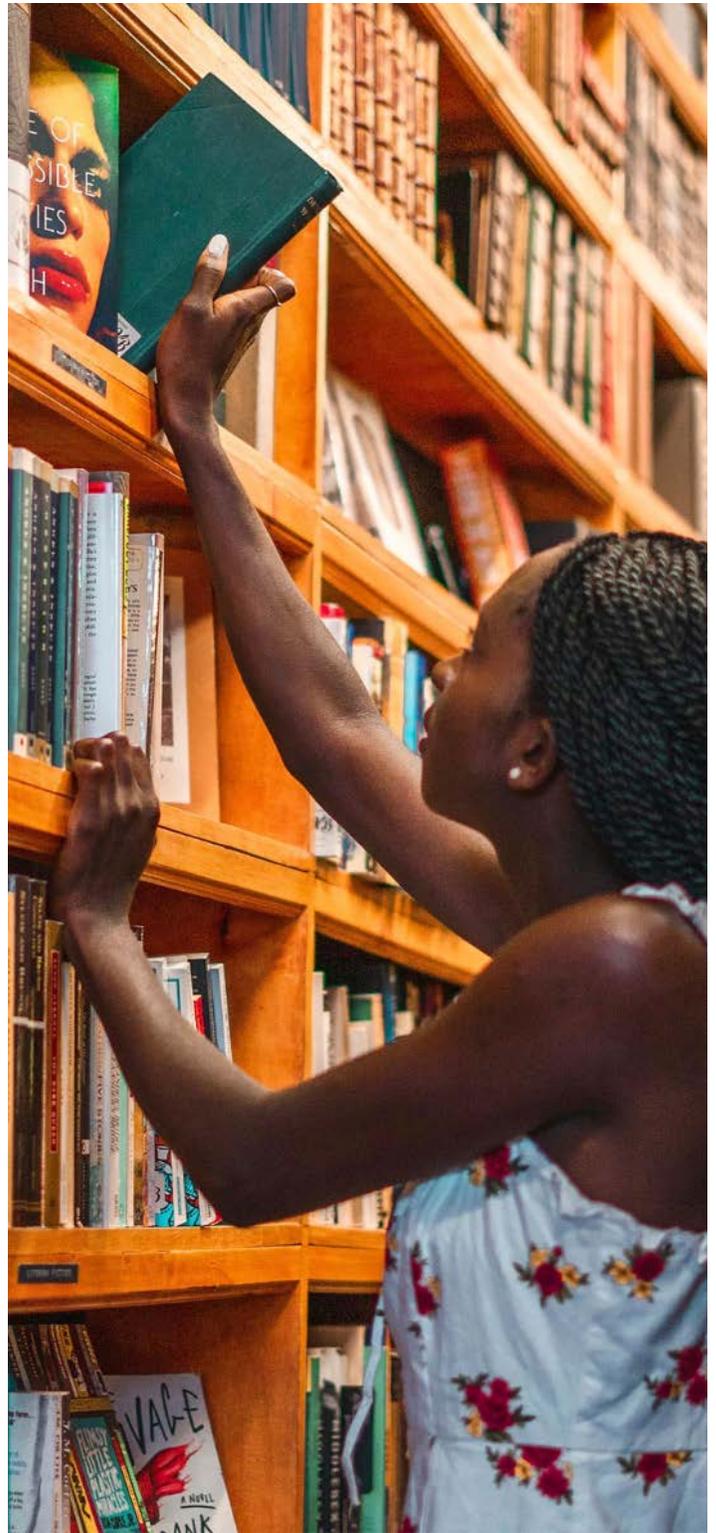


EDUCATIONAL ADVANTAGES TO TRANSLANGUAGING

- ▼ *It may promote a deeper and fuller understanding of the subject matter.*
- ▼ *It may help the development of the less dominant language.*
- ▼ *It may facilitate home-school connections and cooperation.*
- ▼ *It allows the integration and collaboration of language learners from all proficiency levels, from advanced or native multilingual speakers to those who are in the earlier stages of second language acquisition.*

For example, a fifth-grade general education teacher, Mrs. Simpson, assigns her students an independent reading book for which they need to complete a written book report. Mrs. Simpson, a proponent of translanguaging, allows her students to use their stronger home languages as a scaffold for accessing their second, less proficient language (Cummins, 2017). In the case of Josue, his receptive skills exceed his productive skills in English. He is able to read the book in English but makes all his annotations and notes in Spanish for better comprehension.

He writes his first draft in Spanish since that is his more proficient language. Josue then rewrites the book report in English using the same key ideas, examples, and citations, thereby using Spanish as a tool for English language development. In addition, strategic use of code-switching, along with a variety of other instructional strategies, allows Mrs. Simpson to scaffold instruction for Josue's emerging bilingualism (Celic & Seltzer, 2012).



CONSIDER THIS: *In what types of programs can translanguaging be used?*

CLASSROOM PROFILES: MR. ARROYO

A high school earth science teacher, **Mr. Arroyo**, is reviewing the different stages in the water cycle in order to prepare students for a unit on weathering and erosion.

His class of twenty-eight has seven students who have already passed the state's English proficiency test, but who are still being monitored by their EL teacher. He has six students who have never been identified as English learners, but who are Spanish and Portuguese balanced bilinguals. He also has two students whose parents opted out of EL services and who are having difficulty with science terms, although they seem to understand the basic concepts.

Mr. Arroyo's lesson presents the different stages of the water cycle on a large diagram. He identifies the names of each stage in the cycle, and asks students to identify the cognates, gives a short explanation in their home languages that matches his diagram, discusses the Latin roots of these cognates, and allows students to take notes in the language they feel most comfortable. He then creates heterogenous groups where students will do a human timeline activity with multilingual cards.

Here, Mr. Arroyo is not only reinforcing the content using familiar words in Spanish and Portuguese, but he is also exploring the linguistic properties of the terms, validating the importance of the home language, and exposing his native English speakers to other languages and ways of identifying key vocabulary.



ENGLISH MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION

Classrooms where English is the medium of instruction have four types of English learners: students who are eligible for services because they have not yet met exit criteria; students who have reached proficiency levels as per state language proficiency assessment; students who are English proficient and come from bilingual homes; and students whose parents have opted out of English language support services. In these instances, the teachers' use of translanguageing strategies supports their students' language systems, builds their self-esteem, and gives students the sense that their home languages are a viable resource for achieving academically (Garcia, 2014; 2018). In addition, for those students who are native English speakers, having opportunities to observe and participate in tasks and activities that translanguage opens up opportunities and exposure to other languages and cultures, while simultaneously validating the importance of bilingual/multilingual practices.

CLASSROOM PROFILES: MRS. MANN

Sixth grade ESL/sheltered math teacher, Mrs. Mann, is teaching a lesson on the orders of operation. She has sixteen English learners in her class. She has nine Spanish Speakers, four Somali speakers, and three Tagalog speakers. The students in the class range from level 1 through level 4 English language proficiency. As per district and state mandates, the language of instruction is English. The teacher is expected to use ESL methodologies to teach the content. For this activity, the students must read a word problem, identify the operations they would need to solve the problems, create an equation that represents all of the operations, and solve the equation. They must also create a short presentation that explains how they solved the equation. Mrs. Mann broke the students up into four groups based on linguistic proficiency and language background. She formed three groups of students at levels 1-3 based on their common languages: Somali, Spanish, and Tagalog. The final group is comprised of all the students at level 4 proficiency and their only common language is English. Each group receives a different word problem. Students work together on their tasks. They may use their home languages for discussions, annotations, and groupwork. Students may use bilingual math glossaries and dictionaries for connecting English and home language terms. Each group creates a poster and work summary in English using their groupwork notes and annotations to support their comprehension. The heterogenous group members were allowed to make their personal annotations and notes in the home language, but all discussions and group work was completed in English. They practice explaining their posters in English before a group gallery walk.



ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

Everything people know about language, regardless of how many they might speak, is part of only one language system (Jimenez, 2015). For students, this language system also reflects their approach to language and literacy development, whether in a bilingual or an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom environment. An important consideration regarding translanguaging in the ESL classroom is that the students' need to communicate drives them to send and receive messages using all of the resources at their disposal (García and Kleifgen, 2018). Even if the language of instruction is English, the teacher can still provide students with the opportunity to make sense of the new language using their home language. (Song, 2016). The ESL teacher, or the general education teacher working in an ESL program school/district, can set up collaborative structures in their classroom where students from the same language group are able to discuss or interact with the content concepts, tasks, and activities in their home languages, while still producing all products in English (Garcia, 2014).



TRANSITIONAL BILINGUAL EDUCATION

One of the challenges of transitional bilingual education is the question of when and how to transition from home language to target language use. The other challenge involves how to meet the overall goals of this program type; mainly the use of the home language in school to maintain content area mastery, and the transition from home language dependency to English language proficiency. Translanguaging allows the teacher to adjust the linguistic complexity of the task at hand for newcomers, as well as for those who have higher second language proficiency. Translanguaging builds the explicit connections that bridge language practices in the first language to those of the second language, thus enabling positive transfer (Garcia, 2014). This bridging of the two language systems is deliberate and well planned.

Translanguaging is used strategically so that what is learned in one language is then practiced and internalized in the other. The job of translanguaging is to not only facilitate the transition from the home language to the target instructional language, but also to transfer language and literacy skills from the target language back to the native language (Garcia, 2014, Cummins, 2017).

CLASSROOM PROFILES: MS. COLÓN

Ms. Colón will be teaching a 7th grade American history course in a transitional bilingual education program. She will cover topics beginning with the Age of Exploration (1400s through the early 1600s) through the Reconstruction Era (1870s). The course will begin in early September and end in late June.

The class is made up of 28 Spanish speaking bilingual education students, all beginning the school year at the Intermediate range in English (high level 2, low level 3).

The semester begins with content area materials covered in Spanish 90% of the time with English vocabulary being introduced and bridged with each unit covered. Slowly. Ms. Colón reinforces the bridge between the two languages with content material, text, video clips, and activities transitioning into English that are complementary with the Spanish instruction.

Ms. Colón works with Ms. Proctor, the ESL teacher, to frontload content material and vocabulary, as well as introduce and support reading and writing assignments in English. Students are encouraged to use both Spanish and English annotations and discussions, depending on their level of comfort and English proficiency.

By the end of the school year, content materials are now covered in English 85% - 90% of the time with Spanish used as a comprehension and vocabulary support. Ms. Proctor continues to work with the students in ESL to assist in the transition from Spanish to English.



DUAL LANGUAGE EDUCATION

According to Ofelia Garcia's (2014) research on translanguaging and the dual language classroom, *"Having translanguaging spaces for instruction does not in any way dismiss the need for separate spaces in which children are asked to perform in one language or the other."* Therefore, although in dual language programs the two target languages maintain separate spaces to ensure language acquisition, there is still room for the use and support of the native language to ensure content comprehension. Just as teachers allocate time to different content areas, but still make connections among them, teachers in dual language classrooms at certain pre-planned intervals, make connections among the different language practices (Garcia, 2014; Garcia & Kleyn, 2016; Garcia & Kleifgen, 2018; Hesson, Seltzer, & Woodley, 2014).

CLASSROOM PROFILES: MS. RAMIREZ AND MR. SIMMONS

Ms. Ramirez and Mr. Simmons are side-by-side partners working together in a Spanish/English 3rd grade dual language program. Their school is focusing on teaching specific thinking skills in each grade. These

include comparing & contrasting, drawing conclusions, inferencing, sequencing, classification, predicting, and synthesizing information.

Ms. Ramirez and Mr. Simmons plan their instruction carefully so that they address the topics without repeating the lessons in the two languages. Instead, they coordinate instruction to build upon each other's lessons. In this way, the instruction is scaffolded by the preceding lesson in the language the student may know best, and the vocabulary and language forms for the topic are learned in both languages. They decide, as an introductory activity, to use the same book in both English and Spanish: *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears? / ¿Porque Zumban los Mosquitos en los Oídos de la Gente?*¹ The introductory use of the same book is especially helpful for scaffolding understanding for students who may be at much different levels of comprehension in the two languages.

As the unit proceeds, each teacher chooses different books in Spanish and English but on the same theme so that vocabulary, concepts, and forms will overlap. Students use the language they need to perform their assignments, but the teachers maintain the target language of the classroom and the end-product represents the target language. At pre-planned intervals, the teachers bridge the content vocabulary and language forms relying on abundant observations and input from the students.

As a culminating activity, the students create a bilingual reader's theater, indicative not only of their content knowledge but of their understanding and abilities in their two languages and enact the book for the rest of the third grade.

¹ Aardema, V., Dillion, L., Dillion, D. (1975). *Why mosquitoes buzz in people's ears: A west African tale*. Puffin Books.

Aardema, V., Dillion, L., Dillion, D., Blanco, O. (1998). *¿Por qué zumban los mosquitos en los oídos de la gente: un cuento de Africa Occidental*. Dial Books for Young Readers-Penguin Edition.

THE BENEFITS OF TRANSLANGUAGING IN THE DUAL LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

- ✓ *The ability to build on students' metalinguistic awareness by comparing and contrasting language forms and systems.*
- ✓ *Students' recognition that they can use different languages strategically to enable comprehension and production, creating a bridge between the languages and content concepts*
- ✓ *Student awareness and validation of the role language practices play in their lives at home, in school, and in the larger community*
- ✓ *The ability to address multilingual audiences and negotiate meaning across languages*
- ✓ *Language resources to engage with complex and abstract content area information and material; to acquire content information and academic skills from different sources; and to self-regulate*
- ✓ *Experimentation and interaction with language resources to develop/use divergent thinking and creativity.*

CONSIDER THIS: *What are some other ways translanguaging can be used in different approaches, programs, and methodologies?*

CONCLUSION

Academically, students must learn the language of instruction at the same time as they are expected to learn academic content through that language of instruction (Cummins, 2006). However, students using only the language of instruction may need additional language supports to comprehend content material and perform tasks and assignments. Multilingual students benefit from being able to use their additional language repertoires to facilitate comprehension of content materials and instructions for completing tasks and assignments. The practice of translanguaging offers the language support to differentiate and adapt instruction to make content comprehensible. It offers respect for students' home languages and cultures. It activates prior knowledge and builds background that leads to success in the second language while validating the first language. Translanguaging can serve to deepen student understanding and allows for the expansion of new knowledge, enhances critical thinking skills, and promotes metalinguistic awareness. Translanguaging facilitates cross-linguistic transfer and affords flexibility of first and second language use (Garcia & Wei, 2014; Garcia & Kano, 2014). Translanguaging allows students and teachers to engage in complex conversational language practices that include all of the elements of language learning and use in order to develop new language practices. This allows students to maintain those practices already in place, communicate effectively in two or more languages, as well as gain knowledge and skills needed to succeed academically. Fundamentally, translanguaging promotes both first and second language development while honoring the home languages and identities of the students.

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