



FROM MOTHER TONGUE TO MULTILINGUAL RESOURCE: TRANSLANGUAGING IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract:

English Language Teaching (ELT) has traditionally been influenced by approaches that emphasise maximum exposure to English and one among them is translanguaging. Translanguaging has emerged as an important pedagogical concept that views learners' entire linguistic repertoire as a resource for meaning-making, learning, interaction, and identity formation. Rather than treating the mother tongue as an obstacle to English language development, translanguaging allows learners to strategically draw upon multiple languages while engaging with English. This article examines the pedagogical significance of translanguaging in English Language Teaching, particularly in multilingual educational contexts such as India. It discusses the theoretical foundations of translanguaging, its potential contribution to comprehension, vocabulary development, speaking confidence, learner participation, and academic achievement, as well as the challenges associated with its classroom implementation. The article argues that a carefully planned translanguaging pedagogy

can create more inclusive, participatory, and learner-centred English classrooms.

Keywords: Translanguaging, English Language Teaching, multilingualism, mother tongue, L2 learners, linguistic repertoire, language pedagogy

1. Introduction

The global spread of English has resulted in increasingly multilingual and multicultural classrooms. English is now learned by students who possess diverse linguistic backgrounds and who regularly move between languages in their homes, communities, educational institutions, and digital environments. This multilingual reality challenges traditional assumptions about how English should be taught and learned.

In this context, translanguaging has gained increasing attention as an alternative perspective on multilingual language practices. The term was originally associated with educational practices in Welsh classrooms and was later developed theoretically by scholars such as García and Li Wei. Translanguaging recognises that

multilingual speakers do not necessarily keep their languages completely separate.

Instead, they draw flexibly upon their entire linguistic repertoire to understand information, communicate ideas, solve problems, construct knowledge, and express their identities. In an English classroom, translanguaging does not mean replacing English with another language. Rather, it involves the strategic use of students' linguistic resources to support learning and ultimately strengthen their ability to communicate in English. This article explores how translanguaging can be incorporated into English Language Teaching and examines its potential benefits and challenges in multilingual classrooms.

Conceptualising Translanguaging

Translanguaging is more than simply switching between two languages. Traditional descriptions of bilingual communication often use terms such as code-switching to describe movement from one language to another. Translanguaging, however, adopts a broader perspective by focusing on how multilingual speakers use their complete linguistic repertoire to construct meaning. According to this perspective, multilingual individuals possess an integrated linguistic repertoire rather than completely separate linguistic systems.

Translanguaging therefore challenges the assumption that languages should always be maintained as isolated systems during classroom interaction. A multilingual learner may, for example, read a passage in English,

discuss its meaning in Tamil, formulate an answer using a combination of linguistic resources, and finally present the response in English. From a traditional English-only perspective, some of these practices might be viewed as inappropriate. From a translanguaging perspective, however, they represent meaningful strategies for learning. In multilingual classrooms, translanguaging can serve several functions. Learners may use their familiar language to clarify difficult concepts, understand instructions, discuss complex ideas, brainstorm before writing, collaborate with peers, or overcome communication barriers. Teachers can also use translanguaging strategically to introduce difficult concepts, provide explanations, compare linguistic structures, and establish stronger connections between the classroom and learners' linguistic experiences. Thus, translanguaging represents a pedagogical shift from language separation to linguistic integration.

Translanguaging in the Indian ELT Context

India provides a particularly relevant context for examining translanguaging because of its extraordinary linguistic diversity. English frequently exists alongside regional languages and other languages within educational institutions. Learners may use one language at home, another language with friends, and English in academic or professional contexts. In many Indian classrooms, multilingual interaction is already a natural reality and the presence of multiple languages can be viewed differently.

Learners' first languages provide cognitive, cultural, and linguistic resources that can support second-language development. Instead of asking students to leave their linguistic identities outside the classroom, teachers can use those identities and resources to create meaningful learning experiences. For example, an English teacher teaching a complex prose passage may first allow students to discuss the central theme in a familiar language. Students can then identify important English vocabulary and prepare an English summary. Similarly, during a speaking activity, students can brainstorm ideas using their preferred language before presenting their final response in English.

Such practices can be especially valuable for learners who have limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom. Translanguaging can provide a bridge between what learners already know and the new linguistic knowledge they are expected to acquire.

Translanguaging as a Pedagogical Strategy

Translanguaging can be incorporated into ELT through carefully designed classroom activities. It should not be understood as unrestricted movement between languages without a pedagogical purpose. Effective translanguaging requires teachers to identify when and how multilingual resources can facilitate learning.

Translanguaging for Comprehension

One of the most immediate applications of translanguaging is the explanation of difficult concepts. Teachers can introduce a new concept in English and provide clarification using learners' familiar language when necessary. This allows them to access their existing knowledge while simultaneously developing English vocabulary.

Translanguaging for Vocabulary Development

Vocabulary acquisition can also benefit from multilingual connections. Teachers can encourage learners to identify similarities, differences, cognates, and conceptual relationships between English and their other languages by creating a multilingual vocabulary notebook containing: the English word; its meaning, an equivalent or explanation in a familiar language an example sentence in English; and a visual or contextual association. This strategy enables students to connect new English vocabulary with previously established knowledge.

Translanguaging for Speaking and writing Skills

Translanguaging can provide a temporary linguistic scaffold. For example, students can first discuss a topic in pairs using their available linguistic resources. They can then identify key ideas and English expressions before participating in an English discussion.



This staged approach can increase confidence and reduce the pressure associated with immediate English-only communication. Translanguaging can therefore function as a bridge between what learners want to say and what they are currently able to express in English.

Benefits of Translanguaging in ELT

Translanguaging can help learners understand complex academic content by allowing them to connect new information with previously acquired knowledge. Students who are reluctant to speak English may participate more actively when they are permitted to use their broader linguistic repertoire during selected stages of an activity. Translanguaging can consequently create a more inclusive classroom environment. Strategic use of familiar languages can reduce cognitive and emotional barriers and provide learners with greater confidence to experiment with English.

Development of Metalinguistic Awareness

Comparing languages can encourage students to notice differences and similarities in vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, and meaning. Such comparison can contribute to metalinguistic awareness and help learners understand how language works. Language is closely connected to culture and identity. When students' linguistic backgrounds are recognised as legitimate classroom resources, they may feel that their identities are valued. This can contribute to a stronger sense of belonging.

Translanguaging encourages learners to become strategic users of their linguistic resources. Instead of depending entirely on the teacher, learners can use translation, comparison, peer discussion, and multilingual resources to overcome linguistic difficulties.

Translanguaging and Learner Engagement

One of the significant pedagogical possibilities of translanguaging lies in its potential to enhance learner engagement. Engagement involves behavioural, cognitive, and emotional participation in learning. In multilingual classrooms, an English-only policy can sometimes result in passive learning. Strategic translanguaging can provide a scaffold that enables them to participate while gradually increasing their use of English.

Challenges in Implementing Translanguaging

Despite its potential benefits, translanguaging also presents challenges. Teachers may have limited knowledge of the languages spoken by their students. In linguistically diverse classrooms, it may be impossible for one teacher to understand every language represented.

Excessive dependence on familiar languages may reduce opportunities for English exposure. Translanguaging should therefore be strategically planned rather than used as a substitute for English instruction. Some teachers and institutions continue to associate English proficiency with English-only classroom practices.

Changing these attitudes requires professional development and greater awareness of multilingual pedagogies. Translanguaging should have a purpose: clarifying meaning, facilitating discussion, developing vocabulary, supporting writing, or building confidence. Without such objectives, multilingual classroom practices may become unfocused.

Role of the English Teacher

The role of the English teacher in a translanguaging classroom is not diminished; rather, it becomes more strategic. Teachers act as facilitators who determine when learners can benefit from multilingual resources and when they need to focus exclusively on English production.

A translanguaging-oriented teacher can identify learners' linguistic resources. Design activities that connect familiar languages with English. Encourage multilingual brainstorming. Use translation strategically rather than mechanically. Facilitate comparisons between languages. Gradually increase the amount of English used for productive tasks. Create a classroom atmosphere in which linguistic diversity is respected. Assess learners primarily according to the objectives of the particular language task.

Pedagogical Implications

The implications of translanguaging extend beyond individual classroom activities. ELT institutions may need to reconsider policies that automatically equate effective

English teaching with English-only instruction. Teaching materials can also incorporate multilingual activities, comparative language exercises, and culturally relevant content. Digital learning environments provide additional possibilities. Learners can use bilingual dictionaries, translation tools, multilingual videos, online discussion platforms, and digital storytelling to move between languages while developing English proficiency. However, digital tools should be used critically, with teachers helping students evaluate translations and maintain attention to accurate English production. Translanguaging can also support inclusive education by acknowledging that learners do not enter the classroom as blank linguistic slates. They bring experiences, knowledge, cultural practices, and languages that can contribute to the learning process.

Conclusion

Translanguaging represents an important development in contemporary English Language Teaching because it challenges the assumption that learners' first languages necessarily interfere with English acquisition. Instead, it views multilingualism as a resource that can support comprehension, communication, confidence, engagement, and identity. The goal of translanguaging pedagogy is not to reduce the importance of English. English proficiency remains central to academic, professional, and global communication.

Rather, translanguaging provides learners with strategic support on their journey towards greater proficiency in English. In multilingual contexts such as India, the approach is particularly significant because students already possess rich linguistic repertoires. Effective ELT can build upon these resources rather than attempting to suppress them. The classroom can therefore become a space where languages interact productively and where learners move from familiar linguistic knowledge towards more confident English communication. The transition from mother tongue to multilingual resource represents more than a change in classroom technique. It reflects a broader transformation in the philosophy of language teaching – from viewing linguistic diversity as a challenge to recognising it as an educational asset. When carefully planned and pedagogically purposeful, translanguaging can contribute to a more inclusive, participatory, and effective model of English Language Teaching.

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