Title of Project:
Shared Language, Shared Learning: The Role of
Multilingual Learners' First Language in Scaffolding
Collaborative English as a Second Language Learning

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Project Summary:
Terms such as plurilingualism, codeswitching, and translanguaging feature prominently in the current literature on second/foreign language learning. Although these terms differ in their definitions and conceptualizations, at the heart of all of them is the idea that learners who know different languages have a diverse repertoire of linguistic skills and resources that they bring to their learning. Researchers (e.g, Cummins, 2001; Garcia, 2013) have argued for the importance of allowing learners to use their first language (L1) when learning another language because of its cognitive, social, and affective benefits. However, teachers in many English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms still continue to implement English-only policies in their classrooms. This monolingual approach limits the opportunities for multilingual learners with shared L1(s) to scaffold each other's learning through the use of their shared languages.

My research is conducted in three Grade 5 ESL classes in a primary school in Malaysia where all learners speak three languages – Tamil, Malay and English. Although EMI is enforced in these classes, learners still translanguage, that is, they move naturally between all three languages, treating them not as separate but as part of their whole linguistic repertoire (Canagarajah, 2011). Using data from interviews and video recordings of learners' interactions during collaborative learning activities over 6 months, I examine these research questions: (1) How do ESL learners translanguage to scaffold each other's learning during collaborative learning activities? (2) How does learners' translanguaging reflect their shared sociocultural knowledge? My research contributes to TIRF's research priorities by suggesting how educators and policy makers can develop more equitable and pedagogically-sound medium of instruction policies which provide opportunities for multilingual learners, especially those with minority and marginalized languages, to draw on their L1 as a resource for more effective L2 learning.