



**Title of Project:**

Translanguaging as an Agentive, Collaborative and Socioculturally Responsive Pedagogy for Multilingual Learners

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**Final Report**

**Motivation for the Research**

Classrooms around the world are becoming more linguistically and culturally diverse as a result of global migration. The rich diversity of these classrooms calls for pedagogical practices that draw on learners’ linguistic and cultural resources to support their learning. Research has demonstrated the advantages of using multilingual strategies, which allow learners to use their home languages to communicate with others, express their ideas, talk about themselves, and engage in meaning-making, rather than in silencing learners until they develop the capacity to “speak” in English (Wiley & García, 2016). Many of these multilingual strategies are based the theory of *translanguaging*, which posits that multilingual learners can use *all* their language practices in a dynamic, flexible and functionally integrated way, shuttling between them to co-construct meaning, shape their experiences, and gain new understanding and knowledge (Canagarajah, 2011a, 2011b; García, & Li Wei, 2014). Most studies on translanguaging in school contexts have found that translanguaging usually occurs with minimal pedagogical effort from the teacher, usually behind the backs of their teachers (Canagarajah, 2011a). Although the natural and spontaneous translanguaging of multilingual learners may be of pedagogical value in their language learning, it remains under-researched as a legitimate pedagogical strategy. This study aims to address this gap in the research by documenting the pedagogical affordances of collaborative peer-to-peer translanguaging in a unique trilingual educational context.

**Research Questions**

This research explores the affordances of translanguaging during collaborative language learning among trilingual students in two Grade 5 English language classrooms in Malaysia. The concept of *affordances* refers to “what is available to the person to do something with” (van Lier, 2004, p. 91). From this perspective, “learning arises from, and is mediated through, various types of affordances or a myriad of opportunities for meaningful action and interaction offered to an



engaged participant” (da Silva Iddings, 2018, p. 509). Van Lier’s concept of affordances also relates actions to social context, and learners’ actions are believed to be “mediated by social, interactional, cultural, institutional and other contextual factors” (van Lier, 2008, p. 171). My study positioned collaborative learning as a social context that provided opportunities for learners to engage in translanguaging through peer interactions. I proposed that within the social context of the collaborative small groups and the broader context of the classroom, there were factors that could enable or constrain the affordances of translanguaging. Thus, my study aimed to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the affordances of translanguaging in collaborative learning among multilingual learners in two Grade 5 English language classrooms in Malaysia? (2) What are learners’ reasons for translanguaging during their collaborative peer interactions, and the factors influencing their use of translanguaging?

### **Research Methodology**

My research was a case study (Yin, 2014) of two Grade 5 classrooms (referred to as 5 Seroja and 5 Kekwa) in a public elementary school in Malaysia. The official medium of instruction in this school is Tamil, and English and Malay are taught as compulsory subjects from Grade 1 onwards. There were 55 students in the two classrooms, and all of them are Malaysian-born Indians who speak Tamil, Malay, and English. In 5 Seroja, learners were of an upper-intermediate proficiency level and the English teacher, Ms. Shalini, had an English-only policy in place. In 5 Kekwa, learners were of a lower-intermediate proficiency level and the English teacher, Ms. Kavita, did not have an English-only policy in place. I collected the data for my study during the English lessons in both classes four times a week over 6 months. I video-recorded students’ interactions as they worked in groups of three to five on various collaborative activities, such as writing poetry and stories, planning and presenting dramas, and creating a graphic novel. Data for this study also included interviews with the 55 students and two teachers, classroom observations, field notes, researcher’s reflexive journal entries, and artifacts of learners’ work. I selected 100 30- to 90-minute long videos for transcription and analysis. I conducted a qualitative and quantitative sociocultural critical discourse analysis (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Mercer, 2004) of the 100 transcripts. My unit of analysis was the *speech act*, which Cohen (2004) defines as “an utterance which serves as a functional unit in communication” (p. 302). I coded each speech act inductively according to the specific function it fulfilled within the context of the collaboration. After coding 8257 speech acts in 100 transcripts, I grouped the resulting 100 codes into four categories according to the broader affordances they served in the collaboration. I corroborated these findings through member-checking interviews with the learners. I also conducted an inductive thematic analysis (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017) of the interviews to find out students’ reasons for translanguaging and the factors that influenced their language choices.

### **Summary of Findings**

The findings revealed that learners in both classrooms used translanguaging widely during all their collaborative learning activities, regardless of their proficiency level or classroom language policy relative to English. The analysis of 8257 speech acts across 100 transcripts produced a comprehensive list of 100 specific functions accomplished through translanguaging. These functions were grouped into four categories: *cognitive-conceptual*, *planning-organizational*, *affective-social*, and *linguistic-discursive* affordances. The cognitive-conceptual



affordances of translanguaging allowed learners to share information and knowledge; engage with one another's ideas critically and constructively; build on their peers' suggestions; use higher-order, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills; and apply cognitive strategies to scaffold their peers' understandings of concepts. The planning-organizational affordances of translanguaging helped learners to demonstrate autonomy in coordinating their collaborative work, planning tasks, distributing roles and responsibilities, and collaborating effectively. The affective-social affordances of translanguaging enabled learners to build rapport, provide socio-emotional support, show interest in their peers' lives, and assist their group members. These affective-social affordances resulted in a collective sense of self-efficacy. The linguistic-discursive affordances of translanguaging helped learners to acquire the grammatical structures and discursive features to complete tasks and support one another's linguistic knowledge. Through translanguaging, learners demonstrated metalinguistic awareness and the metacognitive ability to use specific features of their repertoires purposefully.

The first reason why learners used translanguaging was to support their peers' language learning. The linguistic scaffolding that learners received from their peers helped them learn new vocabulary, understand the content of the lesson better, and internalize and apply their knowledge to other tasks. Second, learners translanguaged to build rapport with peers, resolve misunderstandings, increase cohesion between group members, and create a more friendly and social atmosphere within the group. In groups where translanguaging was used widely, there was a non-hierarchical collaborative structure, and all groups members contributed to the success of the task. Third, learners used translanguaging to maintain their cultural identity. Learners brought elements of their culture into the classroom through their use of translanguaging. Fourth, translanguaging helped learners to mobilize and transfer their knowledge and skills across languages and content areas, which reinforced their learning. However, there were several factors that influenced learners' use of translanguaging. First, learners' use of translanguaging was influenced by their teachers' classroom language policy and practices. The use of translanguaging by Ms. Kavita in 5 Kekwa to explain concepts, translate vocabulary, ask and answer questions, and check comprehension motivated learners to do the same with their peers. In contrast, the English-only policy of Ms. Shalini and the peer-to-peer language policing in some groups dissuaded learners in 5 Seroja from using translanguaging as often. Second, learners' language choices were influenced by parental discourses about the importance of different languages. Learners in 5 Seroja who were mostly from upper middle-class families recalled their parents' advice that they should prioritize English over other languages because of its linguistic, social, cultural, and economic capital. On the other hand, learners in 5 Kekwa who were mostly from lower middle-class families were encouraged by their parents to focus on Tamil as a way of maintaining their culture and communicating with non-English speakers. Third, there were political and social constraints to learner's use of translanguaging. Although translanguaging should involve the use of learners' whole linguistic repertoire without regard to individual named languages, learners' feelings towards and use of the different named languages in their repertoire were influenced by the ethnic tensions they experienced in the country.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study hold several implications for language education. First, this study demonstrates that translanguaging is collaborative and agentive. Learners who used translanguaging frequently to accomplish a wide range of affordances did so through dialogic



negotiation with their peers within the collaborative environment of their groups. In small groups, where multiple languages were used copiously by all group members, learners felt empowered to exercise their agency in translinguaging for the purposes of supporting learning, building rapport, resolving conflict, asserting their culture and identity, and drawing on their knowledge across languages and subject areas. Second, this study demonstrates that the *process* of translinguaging is in itself an act of learning because learners are able to practise and develop a wide range of cognitive, linguistic and social skills while translinguaging. Many studies position translinguaging as a temporary scaffolding structure for lower proficiency learners to promote mastery in English. In contrast, the type of scaffolding that learners provided one another had the element of *continuity* (van Lier, 2004; Walqui, 2006) because learners used translinguaging recurrently, and their use of translinguaging went beyond using their first language (L1) to develop English. Rather, they continuously expanded their multilingual repertoire as a whole by adding new language features and functions to it through a continuous process of meaning-making. Third, this study suggests that translinguaging is socioculturally situated and culturally responsive. While translinguaging, learners wove together the personal, social and cultural domains of their lives. However, teachers need to be critically aware of the political and social constraints to translinguaging, so that they can work with learners to mobilize *all* their language practices despite those constraints. As an outcome of this study, I provide recommendations for a collaborative translinguaging pedagogy that involves both teacher- and learner-directed translinguaging through a dynamic and participatory process of learning. The effective implementation of this pedagogy will require a school environment where multilingualism is valued, school structures that enable collaboration among teachers and learners, the positive engagement of families and communities, a critical attentiveness to the broader sociocultural context, and more equitable and transformative language policies.



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