



Perspectives on Translanguaging as a Pedagogical Strategy in English-only teaching and Learning to ESL Educational Settings: The Nigerian Contexts.

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Abstract:

Nigeria is a multilingual and multi-ethnic nation where English serves as the lingua franca and official language. Exposure to the English language begins in elementary/primary school in Nigeria and continues through secondary school, with English used as the language of instruction in tertiary institutions, contrary to the Federal Republic of Nigeria National Language Policy (2022). With English established as the dominant global language, particularly in academic and professional spheres, many ESL students around the world receive their education exclusively in English. However, this research suggests that translanguaging is a pedagogical rationale for looking beyond 'English-only' approach to teaching and learning to ESL students. This research aims to deeply explore perspectives on translanguaging pedagogical strategies to bi/multilingual ESL learners. Discussions would inform pedagogical practices to better bi/multilingual students in English-only educational contexts. The researchers' interest lies in proposing a paradigm shift from a monolingual to a bi/multilingual language practise in the Nigerian education system.

Keywords: Translanguaging, mother tongue, bi/multilinguals, pedagogy, ESL, L1, L2.

Introduction

The imposition of English as the sole language of instruction and communication in educational settings has long been a contentious issue, particularly for students who speak other languages natively. The practice of "English-only" teaching and learning is often justified as a means of ensuring academic success and future opportunities for non-native English speakers. However, this has negative impacts on the cognitive development, academic outcomes and sense of identity on the ESL learner. The approach of English-only teaching and learning can also be seen as a form of linguistic imperialism that devalues and even "murders" students' mother tongues.

Robert Phillipson (2018) in his book, *Linguistic Imperialism*, argues that "the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages". By privileging English over other languages in educational contexts, we reinforce its hegemonic status and marginalise the linguistic and cultural identities of non-native speakers.

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In countries where English is used as a second language (ESL), the language has continued to function as the primary language of teaching and learning as well as an official language. The English language serves as the mediating language with the assumption that it would mitigate the challenges of linguistic pluralism in those ESL countries. Unfortunately given the prominence of the English language, the mother tongues are suffering from extinction and endangerment as more users, especially the more youthful population are becoming monolingual speakers of English.

The term “mother tongue” itself highlights the deeply personal and formative role that one’s native language plays. As linguist Joshua Fishman (1991) notes, “the mother tongue is more than a mother to its speakers. It is their psychological blood”. By denying or limiting opportunities for learners to use and develop their mother tongues academically, English-only policies can inflict a kind of violence, cutting learners off from a vital part of themselves.

Moreover, research has shown that maintaining and developing proficiency in one’s native language can support the acquisition of additional languages like English. Jim Cummins (2007), a leading scholar of bilingual education, has developed the theory of “linguistic interdependence”, which holds that “the level of L2 (second language) competence which a bilingual child attains is partially a function of the type of competence the child has developed in L1 (first language) at the time when intensive exposure to L2 begins”. Despite these insights, English-only ideologies persist, often framed as a practical necessity for non-native speakers to succeed in a globalised world. As the linguist Suresh Canagarajah (2016) observes, “the monolingual orientation to learning and communication has been institutionalised in all domains of public life – in education, employment, mass media, and social interaction.” this normalisation of monolingualism obscures the fact that translingual practices – drawing on multiple languages in a single interaction or text – are actually widespread and valuable. In this research, we consider the perspective of translanguaging as a rationale pedagogical strategy for teaching and learning in ESL educational settings. In Nigeria, not much has been discussed on translanguaging as it affects formal education. Akinpelu (2020: 37) had considered how translanguaging can be an effective tool for promoting the use and contribution indigenous languages to formal education. But this research focuses on how translanguaging strategies can really be used in the classroom to dis/institute English-only teaching and learning in Nigerian schools. Embracing translingual approaches in the classroom is about more than just effective language pedagogy; it is a matter of social justice. Consequently, bilingual educational policies with different linguistic configurations have been planned and deployed in the educational systems of multilingual countries like Nigeria. The Federal Republic of Nigeria National Language Policy (2022: 16) spells out these policies thus:

Government recognises the importance of language policy in education in the effort to develop, preserve, promote, and use of all Nigerian languages in all sphere of human endeavour. The objective of the language policy in education is amongst others to promote the effective teaching and learning of Nigerian and foreign languages at all levels of educational system... However, a combined use of English language and the mother tongue or language of immediate environment shall be encouraged accordingly.

Despite this language policy, English language has continued to function as the primary language of teaching and learning in Nigerian classrooms and this has contributed immensely



to the mother tongue becoming non-existent in formal education in Nigeria. As the sociolinguist Nelson Flores writes, “translanguaging is a political act that challenges the marginalisation of the language practices of language-minoritised students and their communities.” by validating and leveraging students’ full linguistic repertoires, we can begin to dismantle the “linguistic hierarchies that have relegated the language practices of language-minoritised students to the bottom of the linguistic hierarchy.”

Theoretical Framework/Conceptualisation:

Translanguaging is a relatively new and developing term that was coined by Cen Williams and his colleague, Dafydd Whittal during their in-service training for deputy head teachers in Llandudno, North Wales (Lewis, Jones and Baker 2012). The term translanguaging is well known for this historical conception; helping to ease the language conflict that arose between English, the dominant language, and Welsh, the endangered language. In this case, translanguaging strategies in bi/multilingual context help the language user to view both languages as important and effective rather than favouring the dominant language. Lewis, Jones and Baker (2012, p. 643) quoted in Mwindu (2015: 102) point out that translanguaging was first known by the Welsh word, “Trawsiethu” in Welsh schools to describe the pedagogical practice where systematically shift from one language to another for specific reasons, for example, reading in one language and discussing the text in another, or listening to one language and writing in another. Translanguaging is rooted in the principle that language practices are dynamic and fluid and assumes that bilingual speakers have one integrated language system from which they strategically select features to communicate effectively (Canagarajah, 2011b; Garcia, 2009). The framework adopted for this study is the “Translanguaging Corriente” Classroom model by Garcia, Johnson, and Seltzer (2017), which contains three pillars of stance, design and shifts. Stance is the teacher’s philosophical belief that students’ home languages are a resource, and not a deficit. Design hinges on the strategic planning of lessons that intentionally incorporate multiple languages (multilingual word walls, bilingual reading groups). And shifts focuses on the teacher’s ability to pivot and adapt in the moment based on the students’ linguistic needs.

Translanguaging as A Pedagogical Strategy

Recently, translanguaging theories have questioned the idea that languages can be conceptualised as separate entities and have argued that they operate as one dynamic, integrated system in the minds of bi or multilingual speakers, whose verbal exchanges are often characterised by the use of multiple languages, dialects, and discursive practices (Garcia & Wei, 2014:14; Garcia and Otheguy, 2014: 644).

Indeed, translanguaging, which Garcia and Wei (2014: 22) define as the ‘language practices of bi/multilinguals’, which are ‘complex and interrelated’, and rooted in ‘one linguistic system’, is quite common among multilingual speakers.

Within this framework, English language limited students (ELMS) would not be restricted by their limited command of their second language while engaging with academic discourse, but they could draw on their whole linguistic repertoire, within which their mother tongue plays a central role, especially in the earlier stages of second language acquisition.



As Shank Lauwo (2018: 141), puts it, one of the goals of translanguaging pedagogy is “to create a space in which these multiple identities (as regards languages) can be brought productively into conversation with each other”

Pedagogical translanguaging when planned by the teacher helps the learners to alternate language in the input and the output based on the students’ multilingual repertoire as a resource (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021). Translanguaging as a pedagogical strategy can be used to develop vocabulary, grammar, pragmatics, pronunciation or discourse.

In the area of optimising translanguaging pedagogy, Hornberger (2005: 607), suggested that “bi/multilinguals’ learning is maximised when they are allowed and enabled to draw from across all their existing language skills (in two + languages), rather than being constrained and inhibited from doing so by monolingual instructional assumptions and practices)

Creese and Blackledge (2010: 105), while discussing translanguaging in the bilingual classroom, opined that language separation is vital in the teaching and learning of languages. According to them, keeping the languages separate will help the child maximise its linguistic repertoires. It is believed, as Zentella (1981), in Creese and Blackledge (2010), is said to have recorded a teacher in her study, saying, “when they (learners) don’t understand something in one language, they’ll go to other, which is easier for them. All points to fact that a flexible approaches to pedagogy which will mean increasing the inclusion, participation, and understandings of learners in the learning processes; developing fewer formal relationships between participants; conveying ideas more easily; and accomplishing lessons. In educational contexts, translanguaging can take many forms, from allowing students to discuss concepts in their native language before producing work in English, to analysing texts that blend multiple languages, to encouraging students to develop metalinguistic awareness by comparing the grammatical structures or idiomatic expressions of different languages. These practices recognise that “named languages are socio-political rather than linguistic constructs”, as Ofelia Garcia (2014) puts it, and that real-life linguistic practices are far more fluid.

In a country such as Nigeria, where whether or not a person can speak the English language ‘affects a person’s chances in education, a job or teaching credentials, and social status, every student is now put in a position where language other than English (LOTE) is not enticing. But there is a mismatch experience by the students between the language of teaching and learning (LOTL) and their mother tongue or language of immediate environment. This mismatch has a profound implication for educational outcomes. Most recent studies also suggest that first and second language literacy development are interrelated, and that ‘among students learning English as a second language (ESL), those with more solid academic grounding in their home language have a much easier time both learning English and learning new academic content and skills through the medium of this language (Luke, 2015: 64).

Statistics have shown that 93% of all classes in Nigerian schools starting from early child to pre-primary, to primary or secondary to tertiary institutions are taught exclusively in English, although the National Language Policy states otherwise. Ibrahim and Gwandu (2016), in their survey of basic education teachers, reported that 93% were said to be teaching in English due to lack of necessary instructional materials to teach in local languages. This lack of resources ultimately forces teachers to use English exclusively, even in early childhood and primary stages where the policy mandates use of the ‘Mother Tongue’ or ‘Language of the Immediate Environment.’ Obiakor (2024) in his survey, reported that only about 26% of teachers in some regions are aware of and 7% are implementing the multilingual provision of the NPE and NLP.



Although the Nigerian NLP supports the use of local languages alongside English, this principle is not embraced fully by many schools.

Translanguaging and Formation of Linguistic Identity

Language has been an important marker of the identity of a person, group or nation. Benwell and Stokoe (2006: 6) as quoted in Aboh (2018: 10) surmise that identity is understood “in terms of who the people are to each other and how different kinds of identities are produced in spoken interaction and written discourse.” In terms of formation of linguistic identity associated with language, Jorgensen (2010: 19) posits that multilinguals make use of available resources to make meaning, which serves to create and negotiate identities. These linguistic identities are then enacted and negotiated in social interactions. Furthermore, identities may be affected when multilinguals position themselves into a non-negotiable or partly negotiable situation. What this means is that one language does not necessarily represent an accurate scale of a multilingual’s identity, and that multilinguals make use of available linguistic resources to perform different social meanings to construct that identity. Aboh (2018, 10) further cites Omoniyi and White (2006) as isolating the following as the features commonly agreed among scholars to be the defining elements of identity:

- that identity is not fixed;
- that identity is considered within the established contexts and may vary from one context to another;
- that these contexts are moderated and defined by intervening social variables and expressed through languages;
- that identity is a silent factor in every communicative context whether given
- prominence or not;
- that identity informs social relationships and therefore also informs the communicative exchanges that characterise them;
- that more than one identity may be articulated in a given context in which case there dynamic of identities management.

From the above, we can see that translanguaging acknowledges the multiple identities and languages of its speakers through creating space where values, culture, language, and history is shared. In this space, one is languaging, which is the process to gain knowledge, make sense, or communicate by putting one’s thought into actual form (Swain, 2006; Wei, 2010). Wei (2010, p. 223) continues to describe how the translanguaging space “is not a space where different identities, values and practices simply co-exist, but combine together to generate new identities, values and practices.” Although this space is fluid and ever changing for those who inhabit it according to Kasula (2016: 3), it provides “the opportunity for expression of multilinguals, as many multilingual environments are falsely perceived as monolingual. A vivid example is the Nigerian education system and the U.S education system. Notwithstanding that Nigeria is a multilingual society and multilinguals make up a large portion of students attending public schools in Nigeria and the U.S, many are forced into speaking in English through the “English-only” policy, and in turn multilinguals are put at a disadvantage, inevitably forced



into circumstances where their linguistic identities and translanguaging space are suppressed (Garcia, Zakaria, & Otcu, 2013).

Guzula et al (2016) avers that translanguaging understands language as a “socially, culturally, politically and historically situated sets of features.” Instead of being limited by the social constructs of named languages, speakers make strategic use of various features of their linguistic repertoires to meet their communicative and identity construction goals in a particular situation. Translanguaging disrupts the mindset that a “normal” or “ideal” speaker is monolingual, rather, positioning multilinguals and their communicative practices as normative.

In Nigeria, linguistic identity is a complex interplay between indigenous heritage, the colonial legacy of English, and emerging performance of “edulingualism” (Uwem et al., 2025). Linguistic identity in Nigerian education is not fixed; it is dynamic and negotiated through discourse (Musa, 2012). This fluid model brings about “edulingualism”, an emerging theory that describes how Nigerian university students perform ‘multilingual identities’ by intermixing registers and codes such as (English, Pidgin, and indigenous languages) to accomplish academic tasks and signal group belonging.

Translanguaging in the English-only Classrooms.

When educators embrace translanguaging, they support students’ full range of language abilities. This in turn allows students to utilise all their skills for academic development. Translanguaging validates and humanises bilingual students’ learning processes and empowers them to fully participate in learning. In the classroom, the learners can be encouraged to engage in activities that empower them to choose which language they want to use, for instance, in note making (e.g., making their own notes from a text, graphic organiser or during practical work), in their first language, English or a mixture.

English-only policies in school will limit bilingual students’ literacy experiences (Batista-Morales et al., 2019; Smith, 2016) as well as their social existence (Medina, 2004). In ESL class, when the teacher allows it, students often than not bring to bear translanguaging identities as they often use their mother tongue to carry out academic literacy tasks that are assigned to them in the target language. One way to make it work in the classroom is when teachers take into account bi/multilingual learners’ unitary linguistic system and managing to offer learners opportunities to leverage their full linguistic repertoires instead of considering using a particular named language (Ping Wang, 2022: 1).

Teachers want to be conscious of each language identity and engage in a variety of activities that deliberately encourage translanguaging, ranging from providing vocabulary in multiple languages to collaborative translation opportunities. Onukak and Nwaedozie (2016), made a case on the linguistic repertoires of learners in Nigeria from primary to tertiary institution where learners speak to teachers/lecturers in English, to friends in indigenous language or pidgin and even codemixing to make the linguistic atmosphere relaxed for easy communication. For example, two learners could be assigned to solve a word problem, and one might be stuck on a word in English. The two students can then use an equivalent word in their home language to make sense of what the word problem is asking of them. Or in a group activity, students can be prompted to share with the rest of the class how something taught in English would make sense in their native language or mother tongue by highlighting similar and different grammatical structures between the different languages.



Research has found that once teachers start these activities, students who have not spoken freely before in the class, start speaking and students who were not as engaged in text-comprehension activities suddenly are. The findings of this study demonstrate that the implementation of translanguaging activities acts as a catalyst for student agency and cognitive breakthroughs. As observed in the classroom, when the rigid boundaries between languages are removed, students who were previously “silent” or hesitant to participate undergo a visible transformation into active contributors. This mirrors the observations of Lauwo (2018), who noted that a translanguaging space allows for the emergence of “polyphonic identities,” where students who felt muted by monolingual policies finally find the linguistic freedom to express themselves.

Furthermore, the increase in text comprehension documented in this research aligns with the “Translanguaging Corriente” framework proposed by García, Johnson, and Seltzer (2017). They argue that when a teacher’s pedagogical design intentionally incorporates a student’s full repertoire, it removes the cognitive load of struggling with a target language in isolation, allowing the student to focus on high-level analytical tasks. This transition from passive decoding to active meaning-making is further supported by Makalela (2015), whose work in South Africa proved that fluid linguistic movement or Ubuntu Translanguaging, significantly enhances literacy engagement. Collectively, these results suggest that translanguaging is not merely a linguistic tool but a vital pedagogical intervention that fosters inclusivity and deeper intellectual engagement in multilingual contexts. That is occurring because they are being encouraged to use their home language in class to think about language use overall.

Benefits of Translanguaging Strategy in English-only Classroom

More research has found that allowing students to participate in translanguaging helps English learners eventually outperform their monolingual peers because they become more flexible in thinking about and using language in academic contexts.

Translanguaging as a pedagogical strategy like content and language integrated learning (CLIL) does not have a negative effect on target language development, content learning or cognitive development, but provides an effective and authentic setting for second/foreign language learning (Onukak et al, 2020). Translanguaging students generally acquire a wider vocabulary range, higher fluency, better comprehension and production skills, and better motivation to speak the foreign/second language than students with English-only monolingual learning. (Jappinen, 2005). It helps to bring about a cultural-linguistic identity amongst the learners and promote a bidirectional alignment.

Applying translanguaging in the classroom breeds a communicative condition that make possible learners’ affective learning domain and psychologically motivate them to learn freely. To back up the claim that translanguaging supports the affective domain (emotions, values, and attitudes) and psychological motivation, we can look at a practical classroom scenario often cited in the “Translanguaging Pedagogy” framework.

Practical Example: The “Linguistic Identity Map” and Collaborative Synthesis.

In a multilingual middle school social studies class, a teacher is introducing a complex topic like “Climate Change.” A student named Omar, a recent migrant who is proficient in Arabic but hesitant in English, typically remains silent and displays signs of “Foreign Language Anxiety.”

The Affective Trigger (The Stance):



Instead of a “Strict English” lecture, the teacher begins by asking students to create a Linguistic Identity Map. Students write “Climate Change” in the centre and branch out keywords in any language they know.

Psychological Impact: By seeing his home language (Arabic) validated on the board alongside English, Omar’s Affective Filter (as defined by Stephen Krashen) is lowered. He feels a sense of belonging and “linguistic safety,” which reduces the stress associated with potential failure in the target language.

The Communicative Condition (The Design):

The teacher groups Omar with another Arabic speaker and a proficient English speaker. They are given an infographic in English but told they can discuss the meaning in Arabic.

Practical Action: Omar explains a complex concept like “irrigation” or “drought” in Arabic to his peer. They then work together to find the English equivalent.

Result: Because Omar is using his Unitary Linguistic Repertoire, he isn’t “trapped” by his developing English. He realises he understands the science, even if he is still learning the labels. This realisation boosts his Self-Efficacy (the belief in one’s ability to succeed).

Psychological Motivation (The Shift):

When it is time to present to the class, the teacher allows Omar to present his key finding using a “sandwich” method: a sentence in English, a clarification in Arabic, and a concluding thought in English.

Outcome: The class applauds his contribution. Omar moves from a “deficiency” mindset (what he can’t do in English) to an “asset” mindset (what he can do with his full mind). This creates Intrinsic Motivation; he is now eager to participate in the next lesson because the classroom has become a space where his intelligence is visible.

Evidence from Research

This example is a practical application of the “Translanguaging Corriente” theory.

Lauwo (2018): Confirms that this “polyphonic” expression allows the student to move from the margins to the centre of the classroom community.

García, Johnson, and Seltzer (2017): Note that such “Shifts” in pedagogy are what transform the classroom from a site of linguistic struggle into a site of socio-emotional growth.

Translanguaging is more encompassing and transformative in its approach, particularly as related to monolingual, bilingual, foreign and second language education (Garcia & Wei, 2014). It is a learner-centred approach and helps to promote deeper and fuller understanding of the subject matter and may help the development of weaker language through cross-linguistic transfer (Baker, 2006: 201)

Conclusion

This paper states the obvious that by privileging English over other languages in educational contexts, we reinforce its hegemonic status and marginalise the linguistic and cultural identities of non-native speakers. We recommend adopting a strategy of constructive engagement with proponents of the English-only medium to build consensus for multilingual pedagogical



initiatives and embrace translanguaging as a viable pedagogical strategy to achieve academic success. The paper argues that it is important to look beyond ‘English-only’ approaches to academic literacy to bring about higher student engagement for effective teaching and learning in a non-native English school system. One key principle to look beyond “English-only” approaches as classroom pedagogy is to reframe bi/multilingualism as an asset rather than a deficit. As Cummins (2007) argues, “when students’ language, culture and experience are ignored or excluded in classroom interactions, students are immediately starting from a disadvantaged situation.” By contrast, when we value and build upon the linguistic and cultural knowledge that students bring, we create a more equitable and engaging learning environment.

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