

Translanguaging in Discussion Class: Investigating the Viability of a Bilingual Pedagogy in a Japanese University EFL Context

Omar Shelesh

Abstract

This study originated from reflective teaching practices tentatively engaging with the bilingual-focused pedagogy of translanguaging in a Japanese university setting. While initial findings have been encouraging, there is a clear need for more empirical research into the viability of translanguaging in this context. Therefore, in light of its initial research findings, it is the purpose of this study to propose a suitable research setting, appropriate research questions, and practical suggestions for a research methodology.

Keywords: *translanguaging, English discussion, bilingualism, Japanese university*

Introduction

The linguistic segregation of learners' first language (L1) from the second "taught" language (L2) in educational settings has long been accepted as the norm. In English language teaching (ELT) contexts, in particular, practitioners have continued to maintain traditional methods and approaches in ELT, teaching the target language in immersive, English-only environments; any use of the learners' L1 is considered to be counterproductive "interference" (Ooi & Abdul Aziz, 2021). However, interest in the advantages of incorporating learners' L1 into the L2 teaching and learning process has generated a great deal of excitement among scholars in recent years (see Cummins, 2007; Lin, 2015), adding momentum to the progressive notion that considers all second language learners as "emergent bilinguals" (García, 2009). This ideological movement aims to establish bilingualism as a key objective of conventional foreign language education, through the normalization of the combined and deliberate use of multiple languages in the foreign language classroom (Canagarajah, 2013; García & Wei, 2014). This has consequently raised interest in the development of effective bilingual teaching and learning pedagogies, with the concept of *translanguaging* (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017, 2022; García & Wei, 2014) receiving much attention from educational scholars and practitioners. However, despite this extensive interest generating a substantial body of research, there is still a lack of context-specific studies documenting the viability of pedagogical translanguaging in Japanese tertiary EFL education, and English oral communication contexts, in particular. Therefore, this study proposes that a further examination of the viability of this emerging bilingual pedagogy be carried out. This study introduces literature pertaining to the theoretical context of translanguaging, referencing relevant prior research. This will be followed by an evaluation of the nominated EFL course as the potential subject of this study, a presentation of some pertinent research questions, along with practical suggestions for a research methodology. The study concludes with a brief discussion of the initial findings.

Background

The term *translanguaging* is a prefix-extended form of *linguaging*, a concept introduced by Swain (1985) and later developed by scholars such as Becker (1988) who defines language not only as a code or system of rules but as a dynamic and potentially limitless process of context-sensitive communication and interaction. With this concept of linguaging in mind, it was Welsh educationalist Cen Williams who, in the course of conducting research on bilingual secondary education in Wales in the 1980s, conceived of the Welsh term *trawsieithu* (Williams, 1994), as an all-encompassing label for the complex bilingual pedagogical practices that he was studying among Welsh- and English-speaking learners. Although Williams' idea at first only appeared in an unpublished doctoral thesis, the term was subsequently translated into English by scholar Colin Baker, adopting the word *translanguaging* (Baker, 2001), after which the concept would receive wide recognition from other scholars and academics. This initiated a paradigm shift in bi- and multilingual education exploration, which is still evolving to this day, as evidenced in a significant—and increasingly complex—body of contributory research from scholars, such as Baker (2001, 2011), Canagarajah (2011, 2013, 2018), Cenoz and Gorter (2017, 2022), García (2009), to name a few.

In order to gain a more practical and in-depth understanding of what translanguaging means in its original educational context, we should look to one of Baker's many contributions to the conceptual arena. It is here that he describes four important potential benefits of translanguaging, namely, (1) promoting a more complete understanding of the subject matter; (2) promoting the development of L2, or the “weaker” language; (3) enhancing links and co-operation between learners' homes and institutions; and (4) facilitating the integration of advanced speakers with beginners (Baker, 2001, as cited in García & Lin, 2017). Therefore, translanguaging can be described from a teaching and learning perspective (and relating to benefit points [1] and [2] specifically), as an applied process in which the subject matter or content of a lesson is taught through the use of two languages. More specifically, the subject matter is presented in one language, after which learners can demonstrate their understanding by producing it in another (Baker, 2011). As Baker explains in this often-quoted example, “To read and discuss a topic in one language, and then write about it in another, means that the subject matter has to be processed and ‘digested’” (Baker, 2011, p. 289). This notion of *internalization* taking place within bilingual learners as they are translanguaging is a key tenet of the concept and should not be underestimated. Moreover, as seemingly innocuous and simple as some of these practices appear to be, translanguaging activities require that learners activate and engage with highly complex cognitive processes on both a conscious and subconscious level. This suggests that while translanguaging practices could be relatively simple to implement, they may induce profound and transformative changes within bilingual learners (García & Wei, 2014).

Extending the concept

While the meaning of the “trans” prefix of translanguaging mostly aligns with the characteristics and practices described thus far, that is meaning to go “across”, or “between” languages as per Williams' (1994) original concept, it was academic Ofelia García, who extended the meaning to include the notion of “beyond”, by which the concept transcends the classroom and pervades the wider world (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022). García, a North American-based academic responding to the complex sociolinguistic realities of bilingualism in the U.S., saw fit to redefine translanguaging as “multiple discursive practices in which bilinguals engage in order to make sense of their bilingual

worlds” (García, 2009, p. 45). The context of García’s description is based on the experiential practices of bilingual English–Spanish speakers, as they navigate and negotiate all aspects of their lives through the prism of two different languages. Extending the translanguaging concept in this way would have far-reaching implications for the movement as a whole, promoting further discourse and delineation of its features and characteristics, giving rise to the notion of *weak* and *strong* translanguaging (García & Lin, 2017). These terms form a key part of the theoretical research for this brief, and can be defined as follows:

- *Weak translanguaging*, primarily used in educational contexts, represents Williams’ (1994) original translanguaging concept that acknowledges that bilingual learners have two official, “separate” languages. However, figuratively speaking, engaging in translanguaging can cause the boundary between the two to become “soft” and “permeable”, as observed by Williams (1994) in his study of the bilingual practices of English- and Welsh-speaking learners.
- *Strong translanguaging* is based on García’s (2009) extended theory of the concept, which states that bilingual people do not speak separate languages, but possess a single language “repertoire”, the features of which they deploy selectively, and at will, in response to the demands of a specific communicative context (García & Lin, 2017).

The notions of weak and strong translanguaging have subsequently become commonly used expressions when describing translanguaging practices in education and will be referenced in subsequent sections of this brief. Furthermore, the application of translanguaging practices in educational contexts will now be referred to as *pedagogical translanguaging*, elaborated in the following section.

Pedagogical translanguaging

Pedagogical translanguaging is a term denoting the specific application of translanguaging practices in the classroom. In their authoritatively written guide on the subject, Cenoz and Gorter (2022) reinforce the definition of pedagogical translanguaging as, “a theoretical and instructional approach that aims at improving language and content competences in school contexts by using resources from the learner’s whole linguistic repertoire” (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022, p. 1). They also posit that “[t]ranslanguaging is learner-centered and endorses the support and development of all the languages used by learners. It fosters the development of metalinguistic awareness by softening boundaries between languages when learning languages and content” (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022, p. 1). It is clear from this description, which includes phrases such as “whole linguistic repertoire” and “softening boundaries”, that Cenoz and Gorter readily accept both the strong and weak notions as a framework through which pedagogical translanguaging practices can be described. Going further, they explain that pedagogical translanguaging practices are designated as strong or weak, “... depending on the degree of pedagogical intervention that takes place in the process of learning...” (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022, p. 30). This definition is particularly useful, as the practical research proposed for this brief aims to utilize certain strong interventional practices which can raise learners’ “metalinguistic awareness”, that is using more than one language in a class to teach specific subject matter (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022, p. 31). Overall, what is understood from Cenoz and Gorter’s contribution, is that pedagogical translanguaging, particularly in the context of EFL, can be a flexible pedagogical process, over which the teacher has a considerable degree of governance. Therefore,

through deliberate planning and activity design, the teacher can leverage learners' metalinguistic awareness to simultaneously achieve goals in both language acquisition and subject knowledge, aims that would be otherwise difficult to reach in a purely monolingual setting.

Translanguaging in a Japanese educational context

While this study provides an introduction and theoretical context to the concept of translanguaging, it still only represents a small fraction of the academic discourse available on the subject. However, as the author has discovered, there is still an apparent scarcity of concrete, context-specific studies of the practical application of pedagogical translanguaging in tertiary foreign language education, particularly in settings such as English education in Japanese university. There is one important exception to this, however. It is a case study conducted by Blake Turnbull (2019) who investigated the effects of weak and strong translanguaging practices in the planning of English academic and creative writing within a Japanese university's EFL program. Turnbull's study demonstrates the effective operationalization of pedagogical translanguaging in an as yet comparatively untested academic context and presents new insights and avenues of potential inquiry into its strategic application.

The methodology of Turnbull's study was to use a relatively small sample of two English writing classes consisting of first-year Japanese EFL students. The classes were sub-divided into three groups, each group being tasked with a discussion activity within which students were to plan for writing an essay on a given topic. Importantly, the first group was limited to preparatory discussions using monolingual English only (no translanguaging); the second group could use a weak form of translanguaging, and the third group could engage in strong translanguaging (Turnbull, 2019, p. 237). For empirical data collection, a mixed-methods approach was used involving qualitative audio conversation analysis of student discussions, as well as quantitative analysis of students' composition assessment scores (Turnbull, 2019, p. 242).

In addition to providing a strong basis upon which further studies could be modeled, Turnbull's research methodology yielded important findings consistent with notions advocated by the conceptual literature on multi-competence, as espoused by Cook (1991) and García and Wei's (2014) theories on translanguaging. For example, Turnbull was able to observe significant differences in writing scores between students using monolingual English (L2) only and those engaging in strong translanguaging practices (Turnbull, 2019, p. 245). He concludes that "The freedom and confidence that allowing [foreign language] learners to engage in translanguaging practices as the emergent bilinguals they are not only raises their ability to produce the [target language] in desired settings but also affords them the ability to express themselves, to make meaning, and to learn as whole individuals acting in their bi- or multilingual worlds" (Turnbull, 2019, p. 248).

Building upon the encouraging conclusions drawn in Turnbull's study, it is the intention of this brief to propose an expansion of research in translanguaging pedagogies to encompass practical English oral communication programs within a similar Japanese university's EFL setting. For the purposes of this research brief, a specific English discussion course at a Japanese university was proposed as the teaching context and subject of investigation.

Context: The Discussion class

The Discussion class (DC) at Rikkyo University is a compulsory course for all first-year

undergraduate students, consisting of practical, discussion-based English language classes delivered weekly, over a 14-week semester. The program's original concept and curriculum documents, authored by Hurling (2012), stipulate that a near-identical procedural and methodological communicative language teaching approach is followed by instructors, whatever the topical or language learning objectives may be. Teaching groups are divided up according to their faculty of major study, and designated one of four ability levels, based on the student's TOEIC test performance: Level I (TOEIC score band 680 or above) to Level IV (TOEIC score band below 280). A level-specific textbook is also issued to all students, chronologically covering all target language and discussion topics for the semester. All scheduled classes last for 100 minutes and are typically made up of between 9 and 10 students, which is intended to facilitate greater student-centered learning and student-to-student interaction time. The intimate group learning environment is an essential element of the course, as one of its primary aims is to develop fluency through maximizing opportunities for student interaction and enable students to better participate in the exchange of views by performing various oral functions commonly utilized in discussions (Hurling, 2012). These functions are introduced in the DC curriculum as Discussion Skills (e.g., giving and asking for opinions, reasons, and examples) and Communication Skills (e.g., appropriately reacting to others' ideas and checking understanding). In a typical lesson, students are presented with new Discussion Skills phrases (e.g., "In my opinion, ...") alongside a predefined topic on a contemporary issue, through which they practice and apply the new language. This is enacted through the DC lesson plan, which follows a set menu of practical and interactive stages, that is the Fluency stage; the Function Presentation stage; the Practice stage; and two main production stages, Discussion 1 and Discussion 2 (Hurling, 2012). In addition, students are more formally assessed on their ability to apply the discussion skills at regular intervals throughout the semester, by way of a summative discussion test.

In order to ascertain the suitability of the DC as a candidate for conducting pedagogical translanguaging research studies, the course was evaluated against three qualifying criteria:

- (1) The course's inherent compatibility in the form of evidence of pre-existing bilingual or translanguaging concepts available in the theoretical framework of the course.
- (2) Potential for the course to accommodate pedagogical translanguaging strategies on a practical level, without unduly disrupting standard lesson procedures and/or timing.
- (3) Potential for the course to accommodate pedagogical translanguaging strategies without disrupting or undermining the functional, linguistic objectives of the course.

As for criterion point (1), Hurling's (2012) founding documentation on the course's curriculum design was examined for references to bilingualism or translanguaging that could be exploited, however, no evidence of this was found. The apparent absence of any bilingual considerations at the course's conception could be viewed as a disadvantage; however, it also indicates potential opportunities for the introduction of fresh teaching practices onto fertile new ground. Criterion (2) was evaluated positively, as DC lessons are principally based on uniformly consistent and repeatable teaching methods that would allow for strategic and systematic implementation of supplementary pedagogical translanguaging activities. Moreover, the course's well-resourced institutional context makes it possible to conduct research over multiple lessons and across multiple teaching groups. Criterion (3) was also given a positive assessment, as the linguistic scaffolding provided by certain functional Discussion Skills, that is organizational phrases, such as "Who would like to start?" and "What shall we discuss first?" could facilitate a bilingual framework within which English and the

learners' L1 (in this case Japanese) could be used interchangeably in any given translanguaging task, and without interfering with the target language and/or aims of the lesson.

It should also be mentioned that a research study conducted in this teaching context may benefit wider, institutional-level objectives, as the course is administered by the Center for Foreign Language Education and Research (FLER), which alludes to translanguaging in its core statement of philosophy, citing the concept as part of efforts to promote intercultural understanding through multilingual interaction and “translanguaging dialogues” (The philosophy of the FLER establishment, 2022).

Therefore, taking the above criteria into consideration, the Discussion course was determined to be a suitable testbed for conducting a pedagogical translanguaging research study.

Methodology

Based on the aforementioned previous research studies and proposed research context, the following research questions were formulated in order to provide focus for subsequent research activities. It should be acknowledged that this is not an exhaustive list and that these questions may require adaptation in response to variations in teaching context, and/or in order to optimize research outcomes. However, for the purposes of this brief, the following questions were adopted as a representative sample in this particular discussion class context, which informed suggestions for the research methodology. The research questions are as follows:

- (1) *What are the effects on students' English (target language) output in terms of fluency and accuracy when implementing translanguaging pedagogies in an English discussion course?*
- (2) *To what extent does the intervention of translingual pedagogies influence students' attitudes toward using L1 in the English discussion classroom?*
- (3) *To what extent does the intervention of translingual pedagogies affect students' self-identity as “bilingual” speakers?*
- (4) *What are the practical planning considerations when implementing translanguaging pedagogies on an English discussion course?*
- (5) *To what extent do teachers' attitudes toward bilingualism and the use of L1 in English classes affect the implementation of translanguaging pedagogies?*

From a methodological perspective, these research questions encompass a wide range of potential data sources, variables, and other influential factors related to the use of translanguaging; therefore, research carried out for this study was assessed to be best conducted under the umbrella of *action research*, combined with a *mixed-methods* approach. Action research is known as “[a] powerful tool for change and improvement” (Cohen, et al., 2007, p. 297) as it encourages a more disciplined investigative approach from researchers, requiring that they “plan, act, observe and reflect more carefully, more systematically, and more rigorously than one usually does in everyday life” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1992, p. 10, as cited in Cohen, et al., 2007, p. 297-8). Moreover, incorporating a mixed-methods approach into action research enhances the ability of practitioners to triangulate multiple sources by “making use of all available data (both qualitative and quantitative) in order to build a rigorous, cohesive set of conclusions” (James, et al., 2008, p. 81). Therefore, in the course of implementing both strong and weak pedagogical translanguaging strategies, the principles of action research dictate that researchers/practitioners record and respond effectively to what they are observing while students are translanguaging. It is therefore recommended that researchers

maintain documentation in the form of *retrospective field notes* (Murphy, 2014) written shortly after the lesson has finished, also documenting *reflections on and for action* (Murphy, 2014). Journaling is a form of qualitative, longitudinal data collection that could also be adapted to involve student participants. For example, students could be asked to make brief weekly journal entries regarding their experiences of how translanguaging is affecting them, answering questions to help researchers gain insights into changing attitudes toward L1 use in the EFL classroom (based on research question 2), as well as expose issues pertaining to bilingualism and identity (research question 3).

Other mixed qualitative and quantitative methods, such as pre- and post-discussion course surveys could be deployed for student participants to complete in order to assess the comparative impact of translanguaging on changing attitudes. Surveys could be extended to teaching staff to obtain further background data concerning attitudes and beliefs toward bilingualism and L1 use in the EFL classroom (research question 5), which could be cross-examined for correlations with corresponding student attitudes toward converging issues.

Preliminary Results and Discussion

As stated previously, this brief is based on preliminary research consisting of exploratory reflective teaching practices tentatively engaging with the bilingual-focused pedagogy of translanguaging. The author initially set out to gauge the practical effectiveness of the pedagogy, as per research question (1) *What are the effects on students' English (target language) output in terms of fluency and accuracy when implementing translanguaging pedagogies in an English discussion course?* To this end, casual experimentation was conducted by devising and implementing certain weak and strong translanguaging practices (García & Wei, 2014) at strategic stages of a discussion lesson, while observing the reactions of students as they were exposed to new bilingual activities, along with any changes in their fluency or accuracy when producing the target language. This yielded noticeable results, as witnessed when conducting preparatory hybrid L1 L2 (Japanese–English) translanguaging discussions prior to the main Discussion stages, in an average ability class. This consisted of deploying the functional target language, that is organizational English Discussion Skills as an L2 framework of phrases, around which students could conduct their discussions and add the L1 content of their ideas. Looking back reflectively at this intervention, students were afforded an opportunity to experience a strong form of deliberate, teacher-directed translanguaging (Jones, 2017). This particular hybrid discussion task demanded that students should not shift between English and Japanese arbitrarily, but do so in a controlled and intentional manner. Students clearly demonstrated the ability to cognitively engage with the task on multiple linguistic levels, that is simultaneously synthesizing their knowledge of the interactional Discussion Skills patterns in English (Hurling, 2012), while effectively rehearsing ideas in their L1, in interactions that resembled *strategic planning* and *rehearsal* (Ellis, 2005, 2009). As a consequence of this intervention, the monolingual English discussions started off with students visibly more confident and enthusiastic about the task they were to undertake. Furthermore, they were able to interact fluidly, with little or no hesitation when recalling and applying the target language phrases mid-discussion.

This limited intervention demonstrates that the effective implementation of pedagogical translanguaging practices is possible with relatively minor adjustments in the planning of regular classroom activities, while also producing tangible, practical outcomes in terms of target language output and fluency. At the time of writing, the author continues the reflective journaling process of documenting experiences of experimenting with pedagogical translanguaging practices in the

discussion class context, the findings of which will guide the development of a future research study.

Conclusion

This research brief set out to draw attention to the possibilities and advantages of conducting research into the application of pedagogical translanguaging in an English discussion course in a Japanese university setting. As the existing literature and preliminary research presented in this brief have demonstrated, there is both a clear need and opportunity for further empirical research in this area. There are still many questions to be resolved; therefore, the framing of relevant research questions may need further consideration. The design of surveys and other research instruments will also require careful attention in order to harvest the most relevant data. Most importantly, the development of effective pedagogical translanguaging activities to implement during this study will be paramount.

Finally, it is expected that this study will provide the best opportunity for both learners and teachers alike to have a collective translanguaging experience, while exploring the many tangible potential benefits that can be had from engaging in pedagogical translanguaging practices, not only in terms of increasing attainment levels in L2 acquisition but also on a sociolinguistic level, through reinforcing the identities of learners as *true* bilingual speakers.

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