

2020 Premier’s Kingold Chinese Language Teacher Scholarship

**Exploring Translanguaging in Primary Language Classrooms**

An Australian Context

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# Introduction

In Australia, the most common model in primary school is to learn a language other than English (LOTE) as a subject. Some programs differentiate themselves from LOTE, for example, bilingual immersion programs and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) programs.

Regardless of the language teaching model adopted by a school, one of the most inevitable challenges is the highly diverse linguistic profiles of our language learners. That includes students who have had exposure to both the target language and the culture of the target language (L1), students who have had exposure only to the target language, students who have some background in the target language, students who have had exposure to the culture of the target language, students familiar with more than one script, students who speak a dialect of the target language, and students who have no background in either the target language or the culture of the target language.

This is the reason why it becomes increasingly difficult to draw a line between L1 (Chinese) and L2 (English) as to which should be the medium for instructions. On one hand, teachers strive to avoid the monolingual approach (L1 only) (Wang, 2019); on the other hand, it is important that students receive comprehensible linguistic input and produce adequate linguistic output in meaningful interactions (García, Ofelia & Wei Li. 2014).

# Focus of Study

While current translanguaging research was carried out predominantly in a non-Australian-based setting with a focus on EAL/D (English as an Additional Language or Dialect) students, new immigrants, in a secondary or adult education setting, this report focuses on translanguaging within the Australian primary school context where the majority of students have had Australian schooling for a sustained period of time. It will draw on existing research findings by influential scholars in this field and provide some implications for teachers who are interested in this topic.

As the translanguaging pedagogy is still underdeveloping and few teaching recommendations are available in this topic, the purpose of the research is to gather data on translanguaging teaching pedagogies currently being used, intentionally and unintentionally, in a selected range of language programs within Australia. It is hoped that this data provides some practical implications into the use of translanguaging as a way of differentiated instruction to ensure all students are being cognitively, socially and creatively challenged, while receiving appropriate linguistic input and producing adequate linguistic output in meaningful interactions.

# Significant Learning

### Definitions

Translanguaging was initially defined as ‘the process of making meaning, shaping experiences, gaining understanding and knowledge through the use of the two languages (Baker, 2011). It allows individuals to draw from their entire linguistic repertoire strategically to convey their thoughts and ideas accurately. An example could be an emerging bilingual student talking to her parents in English and meanwhile making a comment with her brother (enrolled in the same language program) in Chinese so that the parents couldn’t eavesdrop them.

Williams (2002) believes that translanguaging happens when teachers or students use one language to reinforce the other in order to increase understanding and activity in both languages. Translanguaging is a naturally occurring practice that can be readily found and followed in all language classrooms.

For example, a teacher wrote the learning intention for a writing lesson “写三个⚪因”[write three reasons (for your argument)]. The teacher was drawing on visual cues and sounds (Khubchandani, 1997; Norris, 2004) as students had previously learnt the word “circle”, which pronounces the same- yuán – as “原” [reason] in Chinese. Similarly, another teacher pointed to her knee to signify the word “你” [nǐ - you] when she verbally co-constructed a sentence with the whole class.

### Benefits of Translanguaging

Hornberger & Link (2012) suggest that an individual’s biliteracy skills is enhanced when they have resources to all their existing skills including their first (L1) and second language (L2). Lantolf (2000) believes that translanguaging provides opportunities of metatalk (talk about talk), metalanguage (talk about language) and metacognition (talk about tasks) that eventually extend students’ zone of proximal learning. Learners initiate and use translanguaging as a unique way to empower their participation in classroom learning and to enhance their learning experience (Wang, 2019). Below is an observed example of how students mediated meanings with each other via translanguaging.

A few emerging bilingual students were working together and brainstorming sentences together using the sentence stem given. One of them was “我的书要到期了，我要去图书馆借新书”[My books are about to expire; I have to borrow new ones from the library.] One student was stuck writing the word ‘new’ in Chinese and he asked “how do you write the word ‘新’(xīn)?” Another student said “I know how to. It was from the book we read in kindergarten, 《妈妈的新衣服》” [Mum’s New Clothes]. “Oh yes, I remember it now,” said the first student.

### Phases of Translanguaging

Translanguaging is heavily used at the beginning phase of the bilingual continuum as new knowledge can only be acquired through language instruction that they are familiar with (Ofelia & Li, 2014). This is prevalent in LOTE programs where students and teachers converse and interact 80% of the time in English, which is the mainstream language of instruction in Australian schools.

Research suggests that emerging bilinguals use translanguaging to support and expand what they already know how to say and do. During a kindergarten lesson, one beginning language learner responded “我喜欢tiger” [I like tiger.] This is a typical example of how beginning bilinguals combine a lexical item they learnt with their home language to support their learnings.

While beginners rely heavily on formulaic expression and intensive teacher’s support and prompts, emerging language learners start to show confidence experimenting verbally using well-rehearsed and common sentence patterns and expanding their output using their first language to clarify and translate. Below is an interview script with a Year 5 emerging Chinese learner who has attended a bilingual immersion program since kindergarten. She did not shy away from using all the resources in her repertoire to communicate without losing any meaning.

T: When do you use English and Chinese in your daily life?

S: Sometimes，我忘记要说英文跟妈妈[I forgot to speak English with my mum]，我 [I] randomly chuck in some Chinese words, like 妹妹 [sister].

As for advanced bilinguals who are confident in using both languages, research found that they could potentially use translanguaging actively to enhance their learnings and understanding by, for instance, accessing information via both languages and selecting the best available to support their linguistic output. This provides a useful insight into how Australian language teachers can support and extend their fluent bilinguals' language learning.

### Teachers & Students’ Views of Translanguaging

According to the teachers’ interviewed, use of translanguaging is at its peak when teaching lower grades where students are beginning to learn Chinese (L2). English (L1) is needed when it comes to behavior management, safety rules, explaining new or complicated phrases and language conventions. It is also understood that translanguaging is not the end goal but the means to identify students’ gaps of communicative skills in Chinese. One teacher observes that more advanced students tend to use free translanguaging to experiment using a familiar sentence structure with unknown words replaced by English.

From the students’ point of view, some found themselves using translanguaging more often when they proceed to higher grades and as the difficulty of content increases (Juan & Finn, Year 3). One student expressed that she translanguages, not because she could not keep it in one language, but because she feels more comfortable saying certain words in a certain language (Jasie, Year 3). Most students found translanguaging helpful in asking questions, understanding unfamiliar content and making themselves understood while some found mixing languages confusing and preferred not to. (Ginnie, Year 3 & Audrey, Year 6)

### Major Functions of Translanguaging

To answer the question, *when do teachers use translanguaging?* I have drawn on Macaro’s (2006) use of L1 in language instructions and Wang’s (2019) major translanguaging functions. Combined with my observations, this table shows the most frequently used functions of translanguaging by teachers in primary bilingual classes of emerging language learners.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Functions of Translanguaging** | **Example** |
| Asking questions/confirmation | 怎么说[How to say] bird?  |
| Comprehension check | T: 还可以有自己的...? [You can also have your own…?]S: opinion. |
| Positive reinforcement | 我最喜欢你了因为 [I like you the best because] you always repeat what I say. |
| Indirect translation | S: I want to go to the toilet.T: 谁说想要去厕所？[Who says he needs to go to the toilet?] |
| Activity instructions | Talk to the person next to you - 狗有什么？[what does dog have?] |
| Metalanguage - talk about language | T: “边” 的英文叫...?S: Edges. |
| Grammar instruction | “要...了” means something is about to happen. |
| Reinforcement | 今天很棒[Well done today]- Right place, right time (school rules). |
| Behaviour management | 你在干什么？你在读什么？[What are you doing? What are you reading?] |
| Build Personal relationship  | I met 你的狗 [your dog] before. |
| Clarification | 一个点[one vertex is] 是vertex, 两个点[two vertices…] 是vertices…一百个点[one hundred vertices]是vertices. |

Figure : Major functions of translanguaging observed during the study tour

# Implications for Practices

The three major translanguaging implications in teaching (Ofelia & Li, 2014) informs the discussion for this section.

### Explicit Teaching

Teachers’ preferences of medium of instruction are based on three major guiding principles – comprehension, efficiency, motivation, that is, whichever language that is more comprehensible, efficient and motivating to students will be used at the moment of teaching. On top of that, teachers can be more attentive to meaning-making, for instance, allowing students’ use of translanguaging to make meaning and for inner speech or self talk. During my visits, I observed some strategies used by language teachers that mirror Wang’s theory (2019) mentioned above.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Strategies** | **Games/Examples** | **Appropriate for** |
| **Build on kinetics**The activities below mostly take the form of circle games. |  |
| The Bomb | On the screen it shows different sentences students have learnt. They say the sentence, e.g. 我六岁[I am six years old.] and jump six times; whenever they see a bomb on the screen (alternatively ring a bell) everyone sits down with hands on their heads. | Early Stage 1 & Stage 1 |
| The Buzz  | Number game:Teacher nominates a single digit number; the circle counts as the teacher moves clockwise along the circle. The person sits down if he/she is the target number. Restart the process again and again until there is only one person left. It works better with a rhyme so that it is repetitive and children can seek a pattern and chant together.  | Early Stage 1 & Stage 1 |
| The Chase | Flashcard game: Line the flashcards up in a straight line, choose one pair of students at a time to stand on both sides. Call out one of the vocabulary and whoever stands next to the correct card first wins. Multiple rounds are played.  | Early Stage 1 & Stage 1 |
| The Terminator | Sentence game: Secretly choose one student as the terminator. Pass a soft ball around and everyone needs to come up with a sentence using the scaffold/vocabulary until the ball reaches the terminator. | Stage 2 & 3 |
| The Target | Flashcard game: A volunteer will move away from the circle and close eyes while the teacher hides a flashcard in one of the students’ hands (target). The circle keeps repeating the word in an increasingly louder volume as the volunteer approaches the target and the circle does the opposite when the volunteer moves away from the target. | Stage 2 & 3 |
| The Race | Vocabulary game. Teachers write their learnt vocabulary on the board. Choose a pair to come up and race to cover the word said by the teacher. Safety reminders is needed and the use of flappy-hand tools for students is recommended. | All Stages |
| **Use Songs and Rhymes**Every teacher has an excellent collection of them including some adapted from some catchy songs on Tick Tock or familiar nursery rhymes. Students are usually highly engaged when singing the song and they recall the chunks from the songs easily; meanwhile, it is equally important that teachers seize the opportunities and develop follow-up activities. | All Stages |
| Create performance opportunities | Make students’ favourite song as an assembly item and include students’ voices when rehearsing for gestures etc. Alternatively, simply invite students to come to the front of the classroom and sing the songs in front of an audience.  |
| Adapt the song and rhyme | Let students create their own by adapting the song and changing the lyrics.  |
| Make it interactive | A kindergarten teacher was teaching the caterpillar song in Japanese. She used flashcards of the fruits and asked students to choose which fruit they are up to and to display them in sequence on the board.  |
| Use it as a stimulus | Sometimes teachers do not necessarily have to teach the students to sing the song or the rhyme. They can be a piece of stimulus, letting students to discuss what they notice, anything they are familiar with or not familiar with; pointing out interesting words or phrases, and so much more.  |
| **Mirror, Mirror**Students copy exactly what the teachers say; it can be used as an attention catcher, to model new vocabulary/phrases, to praise and teach growth mindset. | All stages |
| Counting | Simple but effective way to catch students’ attention and regain focus of the class. | All stages |
| Attention catcher | [5Ls] 眼睛看老师； 耳朵听老师， 手放膝盖， 要安静，不说话。 | All stages |
| Teach new words | During a shared reading session, the class came across a word “分心” [distracted]. The teacher extends it and made it into a sentence “...让我分心” [... distracts me.] and she let students copy a few examples until the use of the new word is understood. | All stages |
| Group praise | Students love hearing positive feedback from their peers. Let students sing the praise words into a choir to make someone feel special.  | All stages |
| **Encourage Linguistic comparison** |  |
| “生病的句子” [Bandaged Sentences]   | e.g. 我游泳去河边。Students are to fix the sentence and rip the bandage off.  [I swim to the river]   我去河边游泳。 [I go to the river to swim]Teachers can collate these bandaged sentences from previous students’ work samples. | Stage 1 |
| Chinglish Game | Make up an English sentence using the Chinese word order. | Stage 3 |
| **Make it authentic**Students love seeing their teacher outside of school. Use photos of yourself when teaching the topic of My Family or Travelling, which lends a lot of opportunities for meaningful discussions.  | All Stages |

Figure 2: Strategies and games that allow effective use of translanguaging in primary classroom

### Resources

#### Availability of multimodal/multilingual texts

It is important that a diverse range of texts are available to be accessed by students, not just readers that are relevant to their level, but multimodal texts like picture books to provide space and opportunities for students to translanguage. I observed a pair of Stage 2 students reading a ‘spot it’ book in which there are different items in each page for readers to spot. These emerging Chinese learners took turns to flip through each page, counted the nominated item in Mandarin and named the item of interest in English. It is obvious that they were highly engaged, reading for pleasure and making meanings with each other without the teacher's intervention.

#### Students and teachers co-creating multimodal texts

As an example, a kindergarten bilingual teacher set up rotation activities and let students choose their stations, including dramatic play, painting, fine motor skills development and constructive play (i.e. building blocks). The teacher then took photos of each student working at their activity and let students share in Italian during their fruit break. The simple act of capturing authentic contents and co-constructing a story talk combined provided students a rich context to engage in translanguaging.

#### Production of multimodal/multilingual texts

As Ofelia & Li (2014) put it, language learning and teaching in the 21st century has a stronger emphasis on deeper comprehension and critical thinking than merely communicative skills. For language learners, having the opportunities of production of multimodal/multilingual texts is as important as having access to them.

One school I visited developed a Mandarin drama club where students are engaged in brainstorming, filming, script writing, acting, editing and publishing videos via the school’s Youtube channel. One of the early creations is entitled “跟熊猫教授学中文“ [Learning Mandarin with Professor Panda]. Students initiated naming and designing the mascot (Professor Panda) and creating a well-illustrated poster as part of a promotion video for the drama club.

In the examples above, the teacher’s role is as a facilitator, generating learning opportunities for language use and seeing herself as a co-creator instead of the linguistic authority. Student agency is fully activated with a guided structure set by the teacher. The production is predominantly conducted in students’ L1 (English), however, the theory of translanguaging assures educators that instruction through English can benefit the development of the targeted language if a space is provided where students can ‘act linguistically by being both creative and critical’.

#### Multimodal & Multilingual classroom display

Multimodal and multilingual displays including word wall, cognate wall, and posters are easily accessible by students to interact with on a frequent basis independently and with others. One student interviewed suggested that even though he feels challenged learning Chinese, he knows he could always look at the posters to find the words he struggles with. In another observation, a beginning bilingual student made connections with alphabets on the word wall using self-talk. It attracted the attention of another student nearby and she pointed to the Italian word ‘Rosa’ [pink] and said, ‘I like pink.’ Even though the students’ self-talk were in L1 only, it demonstrated the power of multimodal/multilingual displays students can use to mediate understanding among each other, co-construct meanings with others and within themselves, to include others and to demonstrate knowledge, all without a teacher’s deliberate setup instructions.

#### Design of Curriculum Structure

It is important that the design of curriculum and classroom structures provides opportunities for translanguaging, for example, project-based learning to build on multimedia and kinesthetics, research tasks that encourage finding new information, or curriculum thematic unit and language-inquiry tasks that encourage cross-linguistic comparison (Ofelia & Li, 2014).

I visited an IB school where the Mandarin teacher collaborates with the Year 4 mainstream teacher on the PYP key concepts around imagination and cultural studies. She has cleverly chosen one of the most famous pieces of literature “《西游记》” [Journey to the West] and focused on main characters e.g. 孙悟空 [Monkey King] and his supernatural powers e.g. 七十二变 [Morphing Powers] as well as the religion’s influences reflected in the literature. Students were asked to develop their own imaginative text titled “Journey to…” using the chosen characters and key concepts provided.

Their final products were written in English while the elements chosen needed to be typed in Chinese. One of the student work samples titled “Journey to Basketball Tournaments” depicts the main character Monkey King as a potential basketball player and how he made his way to the Basketball Championships. The design of the curriculum generated comprehensible input, engaging interaction with the content and therefore resulted in quality, creative linguistic output from the students.

# Conclusion

To conclude, there is no straightforward answer as to which medium of instruction should be used during explicit teaching in primary settings; however, teachers can be assured that translanguaging is an effective tool to promote the learning of the targeted language as long as students are given the opportunities to activate their repertories of linguistic resources with creativity and critical thinking. All in all, students’ engaged participation and meaningful interaction should be the center of the language teaching and learning. The role of the primary language teacher is to ensure our programs provide comprehensible input and allow adequate linguistic output from students. Ultimately, we hope to instill the love of learning language in students during their primary school years, making continuance of language learning more likely in their secondary schoolings.

Primary bilingual teachers are found to use translanguaging to ask questions, check for understanding, encourage metalanguage process, and manage students’ behaviour etc. Translanguaging is a naturally occurring practice adopted by both teacher and students, and teachers need to be aware that some students might find mixing languages confusing. There are different phases of translanguaging used in the classroom depending on how proficient the students are in the targeted language.

It is recommended that teachers be more attentive in meaning-making during explicit teaching and provide ample opportunities for students to produce and engage in multimodal and multilingual displays and texts. Project-based or inquiry-based learning, if carefully planned and structured, can be very effective in delivering a rich environment for translanguaging.

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