PEDAGOGICAL TRANSLANGUAGING IN MULTILINGUAL EFL CLASSROOMS: FUNCTIONS, TENSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: This article reviews pedagogical translanguaging as a multilingual approach to teaching English in higher education. Drawing on theoretical studies, classroom ethnographies, recent empirical research, and doctoral dissertations, it examines how teachers and students mobilize more than one language to scaffold comprehension, discuss disciplinary content, manage participation, and develop metalinguistic awareness. The synthesis identifies recurring pedagogical functions of translanguaging but also highlights tensions related to English-only ideologies, unequal proficiency, assessment, and the status of minority languages. The article argues that translanguaging is most useful when it is planned as a purposeful pedagogical resource rather than treated as unrestricted language mixing. Implications are proposed for multilingual EFL and English-medium instruction contexts.

Keywords: translanguaging; multilingualism; EFL; higher education; English-medium instruction; language ideology; scaffolding.

I. Introduction

The traditional foreign-language classroom has often been organized around a separation principle: English is treated as the legitimate classroom language, while students' other languages are minimized or excluded. Translanguaging research challenges this assumption by viewing multilingual speakers as users of integrated linguistic and semiotic repertoires. García and Li Wei (2014) describe translanguaging as a perspective on bilingual practices that moves beyond rigid boundaries between named languages. In education, this perspective has prompted renewed attention to how learners use all available linguistic resources to understand, explain, negotiate, and create meaning.

Pedagogical translanguaging does not simply mean returning to translation-based teaching. Cenoz and Gorter (2020) distinguish purposeful pedagogical use of multiple languages from spontaneous multilingual practices. The central question is functional: when does a shift across languages increase epistemic access, participation, or metalinguistic awareness, and when might it reduce opportunities for sustained target-language use? This question is particularly important in EFL higher education, where English may simultaneously function as a subject, a medium of disciplinary instruction, and a marker of academic prestige.

Empirical studies show that translanguaging is already present in many classrooms. Wang and Curdt-Christiansen (2019) identified several translanguaging practices in Chinese-English bilingual university education, including cross-language recapping and dual-language substantiation. Zhang and Chan (2022) examined pedagogical translanguaging across English, Mandarin Chinese, and Uyghur in Xinjiang university classrooms.

Atas (2023) documented translanguaging in English-medium literature content courses in Turkey. More recent research in Thailand and Indonesia continues to show that teachers use students' first languages strategically for explanation, confidence, classroom management, and conceptual development.

II. Methods and Methodology of Research

This article uses a focused qualitative review of scholarship on translanguaging in EFL, bilingual education, and English-medium instruction. The corpus combines foundational conceptual publications with classroom-based empirical studies and doctoral dissertations. Sources were selected when they provided evidence about pedagogical functions, teacher or student perceptions, multilingual classroom interaction, or tensions between translanguaging and English-only expectations.

The analysis was organized around four questions: (1) What pedagogical functions are repeatedly attributed to translanguaging? (2) How do these functions differ between language classes and content classes? (3) What ideological or practical constraints influence implementation? (4) What principles can guide planned translanguaging in higher education? The texts were compared thematically rather than statistically because the studies differ substantially in educational level, sociolinguistic setting, data collection, and analytical framework.

Doctoral research was included to strengthen the analysis of teacher and learner perspectives. Zong's (2023) qualitative dissertation on an international high school in China examines language practices and attitudes through translanguaging and humanizing pedagogy. Although its setting is secondary rather than university education, the study is relevant

because it documents tensions between policy, teacher beliefs, and learner experience. Additional recent research was used to situate these tensions within broader EFL and EMI debates.

III. Results

The first major function identified in the literature is conceptual scaffolding. Translanguaging allows teachers to connect unfamiliar English terminology with concepts learners already understand in another language. Wang and Curdt-Christiansen (2019) show that cross-language recapping and dual-language substantiation can support subject learning in bilingual university courses. In English literature classrooms, Atas (2023) likewise demonstrates that multilingual resources may mediate the interpretation of disciplinary content. This function is especially important when a lesson simultaneously demands language processing and complex conceptual reasoning.

A second function is participation. Learners who hesitate to contribute in English-only interaction may enter the discussion through another language and then move toward English. Recent work in Thai EFL classrooms reports that pedagogical translanguaging can increase clarity, confidence, and engagement, although higher-proficiency learners may sometimes prefer greater English immersion (Pawapootanon, Poopatwiboon, & Ambele, 2025). This suggests that translanguaging should not be uniformly imposed; it must remain sensitive to proficiency, task demands, and learner goals.

A third function is metalinguistic comparison. When teachers deliberately juxtapose lexical, grammatical, rhetorical, or pragmatic patterns across languages, students can notice differences that might remain invisible in monolingual instruction. Cenoz and Gorter (2020) argue that pedagogical

translanguaging can be planned to activate crosslinguistic awareness. This is particularly valuable in academic writing, terminology work, and translation-related activities, where students must understand not only what an expression means but how discourse conventions differ across languages.

A fourth function is affective. Translanguaging can reduce anxiety by allowing learners to confirm meaning, formulate ideas, or seek clarification before producing extended English. Zong (2023) links language practices to students' attitudes and to humanizing pedagogy, emphasizing that classroom language choices communicate whose linguistic resources are recognized as legitimate. The issue is therefore not only efficiency. Language policy also shapes belonging and authority.

The fifth result concerns multilingual hierarchy. Translanguaging is often described as inclusive, yet not all languages enter the classroom with equal status. Zhang and Chan (2022) demonstrate this complexity in a trilingual context where English and Mandarin hold greater institutional power than Uyghur. A flexible pedagogy can create space for a minoritized language, but it can also reproduce existing hierarchies if the language is used only for low-status functions while English remains associated with formal knowledge.

The sixth theme is the persistence of English-only ideology. Teachers may value multilingual explanation but fear that frequent use of other languages reduces exposure to English or appears professionally inadequate. Thongwichit and Ulla (2024) report favorable teacher perspectives on translanguaging in Thailand while also situating those practices against monolingual instructional expectations. The recurrent pattern across contexts is not a simple opposition between English-only and multilingual

teaching; teachers continually negotiate how much multilingual support is appropriate for particular students and tasks.

IV. Discussion

The reviewed research suggests that the most productive question is not whether translanguaging should be permitted but how it should be designed. Unplanned language shifts may be useful, but planned pedagogical translanguaging makes the instructional purpose visible. A lecturer can, for example, introduce a key concept in English, invite brief comparison with an equivalent or near-equivalent term in another language, and then require the analytical discussion to return to English. The multilingual move then becomes a scaffold rather than a replacement for target-language practice.

A functional model can distinguish several stages. Translanguaging may be used before a task to activate prior knowledge; during a task to negotiate difficult concepts; after a task to verify interpretation; and in reflection to compare rhetorical or semantic choices across languages. Different functions require different degrees of teacher control. Vocabulary comparison may be tightly planned, while peer discussion may allow more spontaneous repertoire use. Assessment should also reflect the instructional aim: if the goal is disciplinary understanding, multilingual evidence may be legitimate; if the goal is extended English production, final performance can remain predominantly in English.

The humanities offer a particularly rich field for this pedagogy because interpretation often depends on culturally embedded meanings. Literature, history, cultural studies, and linguistics involve concepts for which direct lexical equivalence may be partial or contested. Translanguaging can make

these differences visible. In a literature course, for example, students may compare translations of metaphor, culturally marked terms, or forms of address before discussing interpretive consequences in English. Such activity deepens rather than bypasses language analysis.

At the same time, a multilingual pedagogy must avoid romanticizing all language mixing as inherently equitable. Access to languages is uneven, and a dominant local language can marginalize students who do not share it. Teachers therefore need explicit norms: multilingual support should expand participation rather than create closed side conversations; important concepts should eventually be made accessible to the whole group; and minority-language contributions should not be treated as merely informal or remedial.

V. Conclusion

Pedagogical translanguaging offers a principled way to use multilingual resources in EFL higher education, especially when students must learn complex content through English. Across the reviewed scholarship, recurring benefits include conceptual scaffolding, participation, metalinguistic awareness, confidence, and greater recognition of learners' linguistic repertoires. Persistent tensions involve English-only ideology, unequal language status, assessment, and the need to preserve sufficient opportunities for sustained English use. The most defensible approach is therefore purposeful and task-sensitive: teachers should specify why another language is being used, what cognitive or communicative function it serves, and how learners will reconnect that support to English. Future research should examine longitudinal effects, multilingual assessment practices, and translanguaging in humanities disciplines where cultural interpretation and language form are closely intertwined.

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