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Translanguaging in Bilingual and ESL Classrooms

by Ann Ebe, Mary Soto, Yvonne Freeman, and David Freeman

There is evidence of translanguaging all around us in every part of the world. Delicatessens advertise delicacies on signs in several languages, governments post announcements in languages most often spoken by citizens, and advertisers draw on the languages of their potential customers. Translanguaging is the typical way bilinguals use language as they communicate in their communities. García (2009) defines translanguaging as the "multiple discursive practices in which bilinguals engage in order to make sense of their bilingual worlds" (p. 45).

What Is Translanguaging?

Translanguaging

Although bilinguals naturally use all the languages they have acquired outside school, in many schools they are limited to using just one language. Even in bilingual programs, bilinguals often are required to use only the target language when studying different subjects. Cummins (2007) argues that this strict separation of languages, which he terms "the two solitudes," stems from a misconception that hinders both language acquisition and academic content development.

As García (2017) and others have explained, bilinguals have one complex linguistic system that has features of two or more languages that they refer to as a linguistic repertoire (García, Ibarra Johnson, & Seltzer, 2017). Students in bilingual and English as a second language (ESL) classrooms draw on their linguistic repertoires to communicate and to make sense of instruction. Teachers who incorporate translanguaging using all their students' language resources support the acquisition of both language and content.

Concurrent Translation

Strategic use of translanguaging supports learning, but translanguaging is not concurrent translation. In concurrent translation, the teacher translates instruction into students' home languages, an ineffective approach to teaching language. If teachers constantly translate, students only attend to the language that is easiest for them to understand. In contrast, translanguaging is the strategic use of the students' home languages to help them understand instruction and acquire a new language.

Code-Switching

Code-switching is a term that has been used to describe the use of two or more languages. This term is based on the idea that bilinguals have separate languages (or codes) and switch from one to another. In contrast, translanguaging views bilinguals as having one complex language system, and bilinguals draw on the features (phonemes, morphemes, syntactic structures, etc.) of all their languages as they communicate. Baker and Wright (2017) point out that "children [and adults] pragmatically use both their languages in order to maximize understanding and performance in any lesson" (p. 280). This use extends to adulthood as well.

Purposes of Translanguaging

When teachers use translanguaging strategically in ESL contexts, they allow their students to draw on the full range of their language resources to acquire English and develop academic content. In bilingual contexts, teachers affirm students' bilingual identities, build metalinguistic understanding by comparing languages, and scaffold instruction by strategically drawing on students' home languages while still systematically allocating a major portion of instructional time for each of the languages of instruction. In the following sections, we provide specific examples of using translanguaging strategies.

Translanguaging Examples

Using Translanguaging in the Classroom or Remotely

In an ESL or bilingual classroom, a teacher reads a story aloud to the class in English. Throughout the reading, the teacher has selected parts of the text for students to talk about with a partner. When the time comes for students to "turn and talk," they are invited to share their thoughts in their home language or English with their paired same-home-language partner. Depending on the classroom context, students can then share back with the whole group in English or bilingually.

During remote learning, students could be invited to respond to the whole group in either their home language or in English, be put into virtual rooms to talk about the story with same-language partners, or write a response in the home language or English. Teachers who do not speak their students' home languages can use Google Translate or other students to get the gist.

Whether learning in the classroom or virtually, there are opportunities to use students' language resources to involve families. Students can retell and discuss a story with a family member in the home language. Cynthia, a teacher in New York City, read the bilingual book *My Diary from Here to There* by Amada Irma Pérez (2002) about a girl keeping a diary as her family travels from Mexico to their new home in the United States. The teacher invited her immigrant students to write a diary entry about their own journey to their new country or interview relatives. The entry could be in English, the home language, or a combination.

Translanguaging as a Literary Device

Many authors use translanguaging as a literary device. Translanguaging in a text can make it more authentic and culturally relevant for students. Texts with translanguaging can be used as a model for student writing. For example, an eighth-grade English language arts teacher had her multilingual students write New Year's poems following the model of the New Year's poem in the novel *Inside Out and Back Again* by Thanhhà Lại (2013). In the story, the author describes New Year in Vietnam using English and Vietnamese. The students wrote poems describing their own country's New Year's traditions using their home languages and English as a literary device in their poems.

Translanguaging in Science

Translanguaging can be planned in all subject areas to meet standards. Typically, standards can be met in any language. For example, during science time in one first-grade class, students read about and discussed plant growth in home language groups. They measured the plants they were growing and then recorded their findings in their plant growth journal in their home languages. They then discussed the findings in English and in their home languages in same-language groups.

They met the science standards because the standards did not specify that students were to "gather information using simple equipment such as non-standard measurement tools" and "communicate findings about simple investigations" *in English*. Translanguaging opportunities can be made available to students to meet learning standards wherever there are multilingual students, regardless of whether teachers are bilingual or speak their students' home languages.

Using Translanguaging to Meet Language Arts Standards

When teaching English language arts to emergent bilinguals, teachers must meet rigorous standards and are often asked to do this using mandated curriculum designed for native English speakers. In order to provide equitable access to their students, teachers can create units of study that incorporate engaging activities and translanguaging into their language arts curriculum (Soto, Freeman, & Freeman, 2020).

As a final example of using translanguaging strategies, we describe how teachers can meet the challenge of teaching grade-level content in a unit focused on a topic that is often covered in the upper elementary grades: natural disasters.

In order to make any unit topic more engaging, teachers can help to promote inquiry by coming up with big questions to explore throughout the unit. Big questions for investigation in a Natural Disasters unit might be "What are the causes of natural disasters? or "How do people respond to natural disasters?"

To scaffold the content of inquiry-based units, teachers provide access for ESL and bilingual students by using translanguaging with a preview/view/review design:

- *Preview*: Students first engage in preview activities in the home language or English that help them build background and key vocabulary.
- *View*: Students participate in carefully scaffolded lessons in the target language.
- *Review*: Review activities are designed to show what students have learned throughout the unit and can be done bilingually.

In the Natural Disasters unit, students begin the preview by working in same-language groups, looking at photos of several different types of natural disasters. In their groups they discuss questions, such as "Which are the most dangerous?" and "Why are they so dangerous?"

Once students discuss in groups, the teacher can lead students in completing a KW chart: What do we know about natural disasters? What do we want to know? In addition, the teacher can work with the students to create a bilingual or multilingual wall chart with an image of a natural disaster in the first column, the word in English in the second column, and the word in the students' home languages in the third column (see Figure 1).

Figure 5.3 Multilingual Word Wall for Natural Disasters

English	Image	Spanish	Hmong	Arabic	Vietnamese	Punjabi	Laotian
Earthquake	*Source:* Pixabay.com/Angelo_Giordano						
Forest fire	*Source:* Pixabay.com/YIvers						
Flood	*Source:* Pixabay.com/jsptoa						
Hurricane	*Source:* Pixabay.com/12019						
Tornado	*Source:* Pixabay.com/lurens						

(*Continued*)

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Figure 1. Multilingual word wall for natural disasters. From the companion website for *Equitable Access for English Learners, Grades K-6: Strategies and Units for Differentiating Your Language Arts Curriculum*, by M. Soto, D. E. Freeman, and Y. S. Freeman, 2020. Copyright 2020 by Corwin. https://resources.corwin.com/equitableaccessk6/student-resources/chapter-5

During the view portion of the unit, students read a variety of historical fiction and fiction stories, such as the I Survived series by Tarshis and Dawson, as well as texts from the language arts textbook. As they read, the teacher provides a graphic organizer where students can summarize main events and make predictions about whether the events and characters are fact or fiction. These graphic organizers can be completed in the student's home language or in English. After reading, students can do research to find out if their predictions were correct.

At the end of the unit, as a review activity, students can pick a natural disaster that they find especially interesting and do research about the specifics of that event. They can use the information they gather to create their own historical fiction story. In order to incorporate translanguaging, students can be encouraged to do research and brainstorm ideas in their home language and in English. They can also work in same-language groups to write and edit their stories. Then, they can type up their stories and share them with classmates. Using the preview/engage/review approach enables teachers to make mandated English language arts content accessible to our emergent bilingual students.

Translanguaging in the Classroom

Translanguaging is a term to describe the language practices of emergent bilinguals. These students have a single linguistic repertoire with features of two or more named languages, such as English and Spanish or Mandarin. When teachers use translanguaging strategies, such as the ones we have described in this article, in a planned and strategic way, they draw on all the language resources their students bring to the classroom. The strategic use of translanguaging promotes students' bilingual identities and helps them develop both academic language and academic content knowledge.

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