

Teachers' Pedagogical Reasoning for Translanguaging in Multilingual EFL Classrooms: Evidence from Indonesia

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ABSTRAK

Translanguaging has increasingly been recognized as a significant pedagogical approach in multilingual education, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. This study explores the pedagogical reasoning behind teachers' use of translanguaging in multilingual EFL classrooms in Indonesia. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with five English teachers and analyzed thematically. The findings show that translanguaging is deliberately used to support comprehension, encourage participation, and address varying proficiency levels. Teachers also regulate its use to balance multilingual support with continued exposure to English. These results suggest that translanguaging operates as a strategic and context sensitive pedagogical resource rather than a spontaneous practice. The study highlights the importance of teacher decision-making and recommends integrating translanguaging into teacher education and professional development.

INTRODUCTION

Translanguaging has increasingly been recognized as a significant pedagogical approach in multilingual education, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. It challenges traditional monolingual ideologies by viewing learners' languages as an integrated repertoire rather than separate systems, allowing multilingual speakers to draw on their full linguistic resources to make meaning and learn (García & Wei, 2014; Canagarajah, 2011). In multilingual classrooms, this perspective enables teachers to utilize students' diverse linguistic backgrounds to support comprehension and participation.

However, despite its growing prominence, the use of translanguaging in EFL classrooms remains contested. Many instructional practices continue to prioritize target-language-only approaches based on the belief that maximizing exposure to English leads to more effective language acquisition (Macaro, 2001; Hall & Cook, 2012). While this assumption may benefit learners with higher proficiency, it often overlooks the realities of multilingual classrooms, where students possess varying levels of English competence. As a result, strict monolingual practices may limit students' understanding and reduce their engagement in classroom interaction.

In response to these challenges, translanguaging has been proposed as a pedagogical strategy that enables teachers to bridge language gaps and facilitate learning. Previous studies have highlighted its benefits in improving comprehension, increasing participation, and reducing learner anxiety (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; García & Lin, 2017). However, existing research has largely focused on classroom practices and general perceptions, with limited attention given to the underlying pedagogical reasoning that shapes teachers' language choices in real classroom contexts. This creates a gap in understanding how and why teachers strategically employ translanguaging in their teaching.

The issue becomes particularly relevant in the Indonesian context, where linguistic diversity is a defining feature of society. Students commonly use local languages and Bahasa Indonesia alongside English, creating inherently multilingual classroom environments. Despite this, teaching practices are often still influenced by monolingual norms, leading to tensions between maintaining English exposure and ensuring meaningful learning. In such contexts, teachers play a crucial role in making pedagogical decisions regarding language use during instruction.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how EFL teachers pedagogically justify the use of translanguaging in multilingual classrooms and how such reasoning shapes their instructional practices. By focusing on teachers' perspectives and decision-making processes, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of translanguaging as a strategic and regulated pedagogical practice in EFL education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Translanguaging in Multilingual Education

Language is widely understood as a social practice shaped by interaction, context, and the negotiation of meaning within specific sociocultural settings. From this perspective, language is not merely a system of rules but a dynamic resource that individuals use to construct meaning and participate in social life. This view provides a foundational basis for understanding translanguaging as a fluid and context-dependent linguistic practice in multilingual classrooms. Translanguaging has been increasingly recognized as a key pedagogical approach in multilingual education, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. It challenges traditional monolingual ideologies by conceptualizing language as an integrated and dynamic repertoire rather than separate systems (García & Wei, 2014). More recent studies further emphasize that translanguaging enables learners to mobilize their full linguistic resources to enhance meaning-making, learning, and participation in classroom interaction (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; Tai & Li Wei, 2021). In multilingual classrooms, this approach has been shown to support inclusive pedagogy and facilitate deeper cognitive engagement.

In EFL settings, translanguaging is often employed as a scaffolding strategy, allowing students to rely on familiar languages when engaging with complex content in the target language. Recent research indicates that translanguaging not only improves comprehension but also fosters learner agency, identity affirmation, and classroom interaction (Fang & Liu, 2020; Tai, 2023). These findings position translanguaging as a strategic pedagogical resource rather than merely a compensatory practice.

Teacher Cognition and Pedagogical Decision-Making

Building on the understanding of translanguaging as a dynamic and context-dependent practice, it is essential to consider the role of teachers in shaping how such practices are enacted in the classroom. Language use in multilingual EFL settings is not merely a reflection of instructional routines but is closely tied to teachers' cognitive processes and pedagogical judgments. Teacher cognition, which encompasses teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and experiences, has been widely recognized as a key factor influencing classroom practices. Early work highlights that what teachers do in the classroom is strongly shaped by how they think about teaching and learning. More recent perspectives further emphasize that teacher cognition is not static but evolves in response to contextual factors, including institutional expectations, student needs, and classroom dynamics (Li, 2017; Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015).

Within this framework, pedagogical decision-making is understood as a continuous and situated process. Teachers are required to interpret classroom situations and make informed choices about instructional strategies, including language use. In multilingual EFL classrooms, this often involves negotiating competing priorities, such as maximizing exposure to the target language while ensuring students' comprehension and engagement. Consequently, teachers' language practices are better understood as strategic and adaptive rather than fixed or predetermined (Basturkmen, 2019).

Pedagogical Reasoning in Translanguaging Practices

Extending from the broader concept of teacher cognition and decision-making, recent research has begun to focus more specifically on the pedagogical reasoning underlying teachers' use of translanguaging. Pedagogical reasoning refers to the processes through which teachers justify, regulate, and adapt their instructional practices based on specific learning objectives and contextual demands. In multilingual EFL classrooms, translanguaging is increasingly viewed not as a spontaneous or incidental practice but as a deliberate pedagogical strategy. Teachers may employ translanguaging to support comprehension, facilitate interaction, and create a more inclusive learning environment. At the same time, they often regulate its use to maintain the role of the target language and to prevent overreliance on students' first languages (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; Tai, 2023).

Despite these developments, there remains limited empirical research that explicitly examines how teachers articulate and justify their translanguaging practices in real classroom contexts. Most existing studies have focused on observable classroom practices or general attitudes, providing limited insight into the underlying reasoning that informs teachers' instructional decisions. This gap is particularly evident in underrepresented EFL contexts such as Indonesia, where multilingual realities are prominent but pedagogical practices are still often influenced by monolingual norms. Therefore, a closer examination of teachers' pedagogical reasoning is necessary to better understand translanguaging as a strategic and regulated practice in EFL classrooms. Such an approach not only highlights the complexity of teachers' decision-making processes but also contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how multilingual resources can be effectively integrated into language pedagogy.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative design with a phenomenological orientation to investigate teachers' pedagogical reasoning in the use of translanguaging within multilingual EFL classrooms. Such an approach was deemed appropriate as it allows for an in-depth exploration of teachers' lived experiences, perspectives, and instructional decision-making processes in authentic classroom contexts. The study was conducted in Indonesian secondary education settings, encompassing both vocational and general senior high schools. Five English teachers were selected as participants through purposive sampling, considering their experience in teaching EFL in multilingual environments. These participants were expected to provide rich and meaningful insights into the implementation of translanguaging in classroom practices.

Data collection involved two primary techniques: classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. The classroom observations aimed to document actual teaching practices and to examine how translanguaging was enacted during instructional activities. In parallel, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into teachers' perspectives and to uncover the pedagogical reasoning underlying their language choices. The integration of these data sources enabled a more comprehensive understanding of both observable practices and the cognitive processes behind them.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved systematic coding and the identification of recurring patterns across the dataset. The analysis specifically focused on revealing key themes related to teachers' pedagogical reasoning, particularly how they justified and strategically regulated the use of translanguaging in their classrooms. Additionally, aspects of classroom discourse analysis were incorporated to enrich the interpretation of interactional data, especially in examining how language choices functioned within classroom communication. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed, including data triangulation, prolonged engagement, and systematic coding procedures. These measures were intended to ensure the credibility, consistency, and overall rigor of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study reveal that translanguaging in multilingual EFL classrooms is not employed randomly, but is underpinned by clear pedagogical reasoning. Teachers demonstrated deliberate and strategic decision-making in regulating the use of multiple languages to support learning objectives. The analysis identified several key dimensions of pedagogical reasoning that shaped teachers' translanguaging practices.

Translanguaging as Cognitive Support for Learning

One of the primary reasons teachers employed translanguaging was to facilitate students' comprehension of complex content. Teachers strategically used Bahasa Indonesia and, in some cases, local languages to explain difficult vocabulary, abstract concepts, and instructional instructions. This practice enabled students to access meaning more effectively, particularly those with lower levels of English proficiency.

Rather than replacing English, translanguaging functioned as a cognitive scaffold that supported understanding while maintaining engagement with the target language. This finding aligns with recent research suggesting that translanguaging can enhance comprehension and promote deeper cognitive processing in multilingual classrooms (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021). It also indicates that teachers consciously balance language use to ensure that learning objectives are achieved without overwhelming students.

Translanguaging as Affective and Interactional Support

Beyond cognitive considerations, teachers also used translanguaging to create a more supportive and inclusive classroom environment. The use of familiar languages helped reduce students' anxiety and encouraged greater participation, particularly among those who were less confident in using English. In this sense, translanguaging served an important affective function by fostering a sense of comfort and belonging in the classroom.

Moreover, translanguaging facilitated smoother classroom interaction by enabling students to express their ideas more freely. This supports the view that translanguaging can enhance learner agency and participation by allowing students to draw on their full linguistic repertoire (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; Tai & Li Wei, 2021). Teachers' decisions to incorporate translanguaging were therefore not only instructional but also relational, aimed at building a more engaging and interactive learning environment.

Translanguaging as a Strategy for Inclusive and Differentiated Instruction

Another important aspect of teachers' reasoning was the need to accommodate diverse proficiency levels within the classroom. In multilingual EFL settings, students often demonstrate varying levels of English competence, which presents a challenge for teachers in delivering instruction effectively. To address this, teachers used translanguaging as a form of differentiated instruction, allowing them to adjust explanations and support according to students' needs. This strategy enabled lower-proficiency students to keep up with the lesson while still providing opportunities for higher-proficiency students to engage with English. As a result, translanguaging contributed to a more inclusive learning environment that acknowledged and leveraged linguistic diversity.

Strategic Regulation of Translanguaging

Importantly, the findings indicate that teachers did not use translanguaging without limits. Instead, they actively regulated its use to ensure that it supported rather than replaced English language learning. Teachers demonstrated awareness of the potential risks of overreliance on students' first languages, particularly in relation to reduced exposure to English. As a result, translanguaging was used selectively and purposefully, often at specific moments such as clarifying difficult concepts or managing classroom interaction. This reflects a form of pedagogical control, where teachers carefully balance multilingual support with the need to maintain the role of the target language. This finding challenges the assumption that translanguaging undermines language learning, suggesting instead that it can be strategically managed to support both comprehension and language development.

Collectively, the findings indicated that teachers' use of translanguaging is not incidental but rooted in complex pedagogical reasoning. Through this process, teachers negotiate multiple instructional priorities, such as comprehension, participation, inclusivity, and language development. Consequently, translanguaging can be understood as a strategic and regulated pedagogical tool in multilingual EFL classrooms.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMENDATION

This study demonstrates that translanguaging in multilingual EFL classrooms should not be viewed as an arbitrary or incidental practice, rather, it is informed by teachers nuanced pedagogical reasoning. In practice, teachers intentionally draw on multiple languages to enhance students' understanding, participation, and engagement, while still preserving the central role of English as the target language. The findings further indicate that translanguaging operates as a carefully managed pedagogical resource through which teachers balance various instructional demands, such as promoting comprehension, supporting inclusivity, and addressing differences in students' proficiency levels. Instead of displacing English, translanguaging functions as a complementary mechanism that facilitates learning while maintaining opportunities for continued language development.

From a practical standpoint, this study underscores the importance for teachers to recognize translanguaging as a purposeful instructional strategy rather than a deviation from target-language teaching. Its effective implementation requires careful regulation and pedagogical awareness to ensure that it supports, rather than constrains, students' English proficiency development. In line with this, teacher education and professional development programs should provide structured guidance on how translanguaging can be integrated in a balanced and pedagogically sound manner. In addition, from a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the existing body of translanguaging research by highlighting the significant role of teachers' pedagogical reasoning in shaping classroom language practices. It further extends prior research by demonstrating that translanguaging is not merely an observable classroom phenomenon, but a deliberate and context-sensitive instructional decision.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Future studies are encouraged to broaden the scope of translanguaging research by examining its implementation across diverse educational settings, such as primary, higher education, and non-formal learning environments. Moreover, further investigation is needed to explore the long-term effects of translanguaging on students' language development, particularly in relation to their English proficiency and academic performance. Additionally, incorporating learners' perspectives and experiences would provide deeper insights into how translanguaging operates within multilingual EFL classrooms.

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