

Translanguaging Pedagogy in Leveraging Writing Skills of ESL Learners

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Abstract

Low performance of Chinese students in writing demands more research to afford pedagogy about how the academic writing skills of college students can be promoted. On the basis of analyzing the recent developments in writing pedagogy research, this paper introduces a new pragmatic tool for addressing writing pedagogy: translanguaging. It provides perspectives from leading scholars in the design and implementation of translingual writing teaching methods and procedures. By drawing upon the valuable resources of students' native language, English writing performance can be greatly facilitated.

Key words: Translanguaging pedagogy; Academic writing skills; ESL learners

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The biggest challenge for Chinese students in English learning seems to improve English writing skills. Chinese students' writing scores in IELTS and TOEFL might be the lowest in the world, despite higher performances in reading and listening. The previously conducted research with college students, aiming to find ways for them to improve their writing proficiency. These efforts were

mainly focused around the employment of a corpus, the comparison of western and Chinese teaching styles, and the comparison of the two language systems, but the reading this month gave me a new angle for addressing writing pedagogy: translanguaging.

TRANSLANGUAGING

“Translanguaging is the act performed by bilinguals of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximize communicative potential.” (García, 2009, p. 140). In this sense, bilinguals do not simply switch between two languages or codes for communication, but combine two languages in an integrated system—a linguistic repertoire. This is indeed valuable and meaningful for teaching bilinguals. For bilinguals, if their home language can be used in academic settings to facilitate their target language learning, it “provides a way to make rigorous content instruction comprehensible. Translanguaging as a pedagogical strategy offers more direct ways to teach rigorous content, at the same time that academic uses of language are developed.” (Celice & Seltzer, 2011).

This is not a new theory; in fact, it is purported in Cummins' Interdependence Theory (1981, 2000), which suggests that if bilinguals are taught in their home language, the proficiency of their first language is a valuable asset in the development of their second language. This Interdependence Theory can be viewed as a fundamental theoretical framework for translanguaging practices.

Besides allowing teachers to convey challenging content to students, the translanguaging pedagogy has been proved beneficial for bilingual students in various further ways. First, it cultivates students' metalinguistic awareness. The fact that translingual pedagogy employs two languages together offers students the opportunity to

compare language features, which gives them awareness in developing further linguistic abilities. The research by De Costa et al. (2017) proves that translanguaging pedagogy is able to grow students' "metalinguistic awareness and cultural sensitivities." Second, translanguaging practices can help strengthen the identities of bilingual students. Fielding (2015) points out that through translanguaging instruction, foreign language teachers "play a key role in providing the support required to foster students' connection to their background languages and cultures and to make explicit links to their learning of and in new language(s) in the classroom" (p. 52). Finally, translanguaging practice can also help build equity and alleviate the inequity faced by bilingual students when their minority language is not used and valued. An ELL student once told me, "No one speaks my language and I do not want to be different. I can only speak English to fit in." Herrera (2017), a PhD student advised by Ofelia García, examined dual language bilingual education (DLBE) programs in New York City in her dissertation, arguing that only by using a translanguaging pedagogy can we achieve educational equity for bilingual students. However, despite these benefits, translanguaging practice has faced multiple challenges in the area of writing instruction.

TRANSLANGUAGING PEDAGOGY FOR WRITING

Presently, there are a considerable number of studies about translanguaging writing, but few have been done from the pedagogical perspective. For example, Canagarajah (2011) describes the translanguaging essay writing strategies of a Saudi Arabian college student that contributed to the growth of her metalinguistic awareness. Despite such positive findings, the author stated that his own classroom was still dominated by monolingual ideologies in writing. Most of the time, he and his students had to "negotiate the competing orientations" to writing, choosing not to use translanguaging. Instead, they tried to meet the requirements of the "dominant policies" on writing. Similarly, Velasco & García (2014) analyze five writings composed by bilingual writers who received a biliteracy course in the "planning, drafting, and production stages of writing." They emphasize that although translanguaging theory was discussed in the course, it is hard to say if those discussions affected the students' written work at all. Still, in their research, translanguaging in writing is only put forward as "a self-regulating mechanism" for bilingual students, instead of a pedagogy to be used in writing instruction. Kiramba (2017) conducted an empirical study of the writing practices in a multilingual classroom in Kenya. The author suggests that translanguaging in writing can alleviate inequity and language hierarchies. However, no translanguaging pedagogy was adopted in

this research. In contrast, the mix of languages in essay writing was viewed as a mistake and the students were asked to use vocabulary to communicate solely in the target language. The curriculum demanded monolingual academic writing and teachers tried to communicate this ideology to students to control their language practices and conform to the conventions. Ironically, however, the teachers could not control the translanguaging practice at all, as proven by the high percentage of translanguaging practices in students' writing processes. They did not limit themselves to the one target language required by the task; instead, they drew from their whole linguistic repertoire to communicate. Adamson and Coulson (2015) study how the academic writing skills of college students can be promoted by using translanguaging as a pragmatic tool. Their empirical research exemplifies the improved learning performance of students of "lower proficiency" that a translanguaging method can provide. Translanguaging writing curricula are discussed in this research in length, but the aspects of assessment and administration—necessary supporting elements—have not been explored.

The newly edited book, *Crossing Divides* (Horner & Tetreault, 2017) can be seen as a complement to the above research and fills some gaps in translanguaging research to date, such as the aspects of assessment and administration in translanguaging writing. It provides perspectives from leading scholars in the design and implementation of translanguaging writing teaching methods and procedures. Asao B. Inoue, in chapter 7, "Writing Assessment as the Conditions for Translanguaging Approaches: An Argument for Fairer Assessments," believes assessment to be something that can allow writing courses to "find ways to cultivate a degree of fair conditions that agree with the basic assumptions translanguaging approaches hold" (p.119). In chapter 8, "Seizing an Opportunity for Translanguaging FYC at the University of Maine: Provocative Complexities, Unexpected Consequences," Dylan Dryer and Paige Mitchell posit a "documentary" approach to writing program administration. They explore "networks of documents and administrative structures" by which translanguaging pedagogy can be scaffolded (p.135).

POSSIBLE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

All these studies advocate the use of a student's entire linguistic repertoire in writing instruction. Such translanguaging pedagogy strongly "rejects a model of writing as simply a means of transmitting preexisting meanings, smoothly or not," and respects "the necessary labor of writers and readers" when they produce and try to make meaning out of language (Hornberger & Link, 2012, p.12). Thus, while the dominating monolingual instruction may continue to consider multilingual student writings as illogical, flawed, and ungrammatical, the translanguaging writing maintained by multilingualism gives credit to

these writings and values them as potential resources and a learning asset.

However, some scholars argue that, in fact, “we are still at the beginning stages of our learning efforts in this project” (Horner et al., 2011, p.310). There are aspects that remain to be further explored in this area at the K–12 level, where ELL students comprise 10 percent of all the students in the States and have been exposed to less English than international students in colleges. At this lower academic level, translanguing pedagogy might be a necessity rather than a complementary practice. Although the cultural and political values of bilingualism and multilingualism are accepted globally, schools in China seldom value Chinese in the classroom. Instead, teachers often consider a student’s home language to be a problem and cannot offer multilingual students the appropriate instruction they demand. (Hinchman & Appleman, 2016, p.290). In contrast to these negative views, we should value heritage languages as precious resources (Baker & Wright, 2017; Garcia, 2016) that should be used by educators. An instructional approach should be adopted built on all of the linguistic resources brought by students to the classroom. Some further study in college and K-12 levels can be conducted to reveal more about the seemingly paradoxical translanguing writing ideologies and practices discussed here. The possible research questions can be: Are ESL teachers employing translanguing and code-switching in local high schools, especially in writing, and what are their language ideologies? If so, are translanguing practices helpful? And in what ways? If not, is it possible to bring translanguing into class and what might the challenges be?

CONCLUSION

To conclude, translanguing as a pedagogical tool can be a promising solution to better equip Chinese students’ English writing level. More research needs to be conducted in this field to locate positive effects, and as well as the possible challenges.

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