

Reflecting on Translanguaging: ‘Across’ and ‘Beyond’ Multilingualism

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Originating from Welsh language as ‘trawsieithu’ (Lewis, Jones & Baker, 2012, p. 643), the term translanguaging has become a popular new term added to bilingual and multilingual education in many parts of the world. Apparently, the concept of translanguaging is supposed to broaden the fields of bilingualism and multilingualism to give them a more global perspective (note the title of García’s (2009) book. I have been invited by the editors of this collection to give my views on translanguaging within the second language education world. So in this brief article I give my reflections on what I think the term means to me as a second language teacher educator. As you will see I have more questions than answers about this new and interesting concept but nevertheless I try to apply it to a second language classroom.

Transling ‘Across’ and ‘Beyond’ in the ESL/EFL Classroom

Is it a theory? Is it a practice used by bilinguals/multilinguals? Can monolinguals translanguange? Does it happen across contexts? Can multilinguals use many languages at the same time or just one in a particular context? Do different languages actually exist or are we just using different lexical bundles, grammar and pronunciation in particular places and times? But then there is the concept of who we are as expressed by our ‘language’ which really means our identity. Perhaps our linguistic repertoire includes our ability to translanguange in particular settings by choosing the “correct” language for that setting? We must be able to “communicate” within the norms of a particular setting regardless of whether we are bilingual or multilingual or even monolingual. Is translanguaging in fact the same as code-switching?

The above are questions as I reflect *in* action but what about when I reflect *for* action and how this may apply in the second language classroom? I find myself returning to Jim Cummings’ (2006, 2007, 2009) work to find applications of what I think can be considered translanguaging in the second language classroom. Cummings (2009) questioned the notion of the monolingual principle that existed at the time (and still exists) where ESL/EFL instruction emphasized the target language only and excluded the students’ home language or their L1 because it was suggested that their use of L1 would interfere with their learning of ESL/EFL or their L2. An example of approaches and

methods that perpetuate such a notion is the popular communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) approaches, not to mention many individual teachers (and language schools) enforcing an ‘English Only’ policy and fining students who use their L1 during classes.

As Cummings (2006, 2007, 2009) noted, second language students come to second language classrooms with prior knowledge that is encoded in their L1 and this prior knowledge can be activated and built upon by linking English concepts and knowledge with the learner’s L1 cognitive schemata. Such a move within the ESL/EFL classroom can legitimize students’ L1 as a cognitive tool within the classroom challenges the subordinate status of many minority groups and affirms students’ identities, thereby promoting what Cummings calls, *Identities of Competence*. Cummings maintained that students in ESL/EFL classrooms can be encouraged to write in their L1 (Cummings (2006) called these *identity texts*) and get help translating this into English thereby using their higher order thinking skills because they are engaged in both languages at the same time. This to me would be the closest we come to the new concept of translanguageing in the ESL/EFL classroom because we are using the students’ L1 as a positive cognitive tool that is a resource rather than a hindrance for everybody involved.

Conclusion

What this article has reminded me again about is that we do not view our second language students as empty vessels coming into our classrooms to learn a second language without any prior resources, skills, and/or knowledge that can be used to enhance their learning. Perhaps all second language instruction can begin with activation of such prior knowledge of vocabulary, grammar as well as their prior knowledge of pragmatics and their overall metalinguistic awareness of their L1. This is my understanding of what it means to translanguage in the ESL/EFL classroom because such learner-centered classrooms make good use of more than one language at the same time.

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