



## Translanguaging Theory in EFL Classes: A Theoretical Account

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### Abstract

This theoretical study explores the concept of translanguaging as a dynamic and inclusive approach to language use and pedagogy in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Translanguaging challenges the monolingual assumptions of traditional language teaching, which typically emphasize exclusive use of only one language. It views bilinguals or multilinguals as if they are operating from a unified linguistic repertoire rather than just switching between separate language systems. The study provides a comprehensive overview of the historical background of translanguaging, theoretical underpinnings and distinctions from other related concepts such as code-switching and translation. It also categorizes the types of translanguaging according to the purpose of its use and students' language proficiencies and examines how it can be practically applied in classroom contexts. Furthermore, the study discusses the pedagogical benefits of translanguaging, including deeper comprehension, cultural affirmation, and enhanced student engagement. At the same time, it addresses the challenges that may hinder its effective implementation, such as resistance to bilingual practices, teacher preparedness, and assessment constraints. Overall, this study aims to enhance theoretical understanding and support the strategic use of translanguaging in EFL education.

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## التنقل اللغوي في تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية: دراسة نظرية

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الخلاصة

تتناول هذه الدراسة النظرية مفهوم التنقل اللغوي بوصفه نهجا ديناميكيا وشاملا لاستخدام اللغة وأساليب التدريس في فصول اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL). يتحدى التنقل اللغوي الافتراضات أحادية اللغة في تدريس اللغة التقليدي، التي غالبا ما تؤكد على الاستخدام الحصري للغة واحدة فقط. وينظر التنقل اللغوي إلى ثنائي أو متعدد اللغات على أنهم يستخدمون مخزونا لغويا موحدا، بدلاً من مجرد الانتقال بين أنظمة لغوية منفصلة. وتقدم الدراسة لمحة شاملة عن الخلفية التاريخية للتنقل اللغوي، وأساسه النظرية، والفروق بينه وبين مفاهيم أخرى ذات صلة مثل التناوب اللغوي والترجمة. كما تصنف أنواع التنقل اللغوي بحسب غرض الاستخدام وكفاءات الطلاب اللغوية، وتبحث في كيفية تطبيقه عملياً في سياقات الصف الدراسي. علاوة على ذلك، تناقش الدراسة الفوائد التربوية للتنقل اللغوي، بما في ذلك تعزيز الفهم العميق، وترسيخ الهوية الثقافية، وزيادة تفاعل الطلاب. وفي الوقت نفسه، تتناول التحديات التي قد تعيق تطبيقه الفعال، مثل مقاومة الممارسات ثنائية اللغة، وعدم جاهزية المعلمين، وقيود التقييم. وبشكل عام، تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تعزيز الفهم النظري ودعم الاستخدام الاستراتيجي للتنقل اللغوي في تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية. الكلمات المفتاحية: التنقل اللغوي؛ التعدد اللغوي؛ اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية.

### 1. Introduction

In recent years, particularly within EFL settings, translanguaging has emerged as a transformative concept. It has grown from a practical classroom

strategy into a robust theoretical framework that redefines how language is understood, taught, and learned (1). Unlike traditional models that treat the use of different languages as the use of separate

systems, translanguaging views bilinguals and multilinguals as users of a unified linguistic repertoire, enabling them to draw on all their language resources for communication, meaning-making, and learning flexibly (2). However, while many scholars advocate for translanguaging as a means to create more inclusive and responsive classrooms, confusion persists about how it differs from related concepts such as code-switching and translation. Additionally, teachers often lack clarity on how to strategically implement translanguaging in EFL classrooms. These concerns point to the need for a clearer theoretical understanding of translanguaging, its key features, and its pedagogical potential in EFL contexts.

Therefore, the present theoretical study aims to provide a comprehensive and systematic account of translanguaging in EFL education by tracing its historical and theoretical development, clarifying its conceptual boundaries and distinctions from related practices such as code-switching and translation, categorizing its main types according to structure, purpose, and language proficiency, exploring practical strategies for its classroom implementation, and critically evaluating its pedagogical benefits and challenges in order to guide educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers toward more inclusive and linguistically responsive approaches to language teaching.

## 2. Historical Background of Translanguaging

The educator Cen Williams introduced the concept of translanguaging in Wales in the 1980s. He coined the term “trawsieithu” to describe a pedagogical strategy in bilingual Welsh schools in which instruction was given in one language (Welsh) and student responses in another (English). This approach was designed to maintain both languages in the classroom and enhance a better bilingual proficiency (1,3). The term trawsieithu was first translated into English as translanguifying, and then Colin Baker (3) translated it to translanguaging. Originally, translanguaging was referred to as a language practice that entails “a deliberate alternation between the language of input and output in the classroom” (4, P. 643). For example, students read a text in English and either write a summary or discuss it orally in Arabic. The idea is that translanguaging provides a deeper understanding because the languages reinforce each other when both are employed.

The version of the concept of translanguaging introduced by Williams (1994) (5) was later described as “weak translanguaging”. García (2009) (6) expanded the concept, distinguishing between two types. She explains the first one as weak translanguaging, where languages are kept separate and used strategically for reinforcement, and the second type as strong translanguaging, which embraces the fluid, dynamic use of the full linguistic repertoire without strict language boundaries. Translanguaging was further developed by researchers such as Baker and Wei, but García has been the one who popularized the term in recent years by reformulating its original definition by Williams and expanding its implications to be not just as a pedagogical method but as an educational theory that views language practices of bilinguals as not bound by fixed linguistic systems. She states that 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” (6, Page 140). Monoglossic ideology of “one language at a time” are challenged by it as it advocates for a heteroglossic view where any linguistic resources are used in an integrated manner (1, 2).

## 3. Definition of Translanguaging

Conceptually, translanguaging refers to the use of more than one language to create meaning, shape experiences, enhance understanding, and knowledge (7). It is a phenomenon that allows people to use their full linguistic repertoire to achieve specific goals (8). As a theory, translanguaging is a language practice in its fundamental form. Similarly, when applied to practice, it offers a structured approach to understanding bilingual and multilingual interactions (9). In contrast to the conventional views that treat bilingualism or multilingualism as the use of two or more distinct language systems, translanguaging theory presents a blended approach. This is expanded by many scholars in clarifying that bilinguals and multilinguals, when using translanguaging, do not separate their languages but instead they utilize a singular integrated linguistic repertoire (2,6). García and Wei (2014) (1) describe that by saying “Bilinguals have one linguistic repertoire from which they select features strategically to communicate effectively”.

Various scholars provide definitions of translanguaging that reflect its dynamic and multifaceted nature especially after how the concept

has evolved over time. For example, Williams (1996) (10) defines it as: “translanguaging means that you receive information through the medium of one language (e.g., English) and use it through the medium of the other language (e.g., Welsh)” (p. 64). Additionally, García (2009) (11) defines it as “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” (p. 140). Turning to Canagarajah (2011) (12), he explains it as “The ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system” (p. 401). For Hornberger and Link (2012) (13), translanguaging is “a new approach to understanding long-studied languaging practices of multilinguals” (p. 3). As for Wei (2018) (9), he expands on this, stating that “the term translanguaging seems to have captured people’s imagination. It has been applied to pedagogy, everyday social interaction, cross-modal and multimodal communication, linguistic landscape, visual arts, music, and transgender discourse” (p. 9). As a pedagogical practice, translanguaging is increasingly used not only to help language-minoritized students engage in meaningful learning but also to support their ongoing language development (14). In their study of translanguaging practices in complementary schools in the UK, the authors note that “Both languages are needed simultaneously to convey the information, ... each language is used to convey a different informational message, but it is in the bilingualism of the text that the full message is conveyed” (P. 108). In sum, translanguaging is widely noted as a dynamic and evolving concept that goes beyond language alternation. It encourages integrated, strategic, and context-driven ways that bilinguals or multilinguals make use of all their linguistic capacities to improve communication, enhance learning, and expression across various domains.

#### **4. Translanguaging and Language Ideologies**

Translanguaging challenges long-standing beliefs about language use in education, particularly the monolingual ideologies. These ideologies, often taken for granted in formal schooling, construct languages as autonomous, bounded systems and promote the exclusive use of a single “target” language, such as English, in language classrooms (6). Such assumptions underlie conventional EFL practices, which discourage the use of students’ first

languages and equate proficiency with adherence to standardized norms. What sets translanguaging apart is not simply its linguistic flexibility, but its capacity to act as a critical intervention against hegemonic language ideologies. Scholars argue that translanguaging disrupts the ideology of the “native speaker” as the ideal model of linguistic performance, and instead affirms the legitimacy of diverse language practices in the classroom (15). These ideological disruptions are not only theoretical, but they shape real classroom dynamics, teacher expectations and student engagement. Translanguaging allows educators to reposition bilingual students not as linguistically deficient but as resourceful individuals capable of drawing from complex semiotic systems to access knowledge.

Moreover, some scholars have cautioned that even well-intentioned translanguaging practices can be co-opted by dominant ideologies. Pennycook (2019) (16) warns that translanguaging might be used superficially without meaningfully transforming how language and power operate in education. Likewise, Sun and Zhang (2022) (17) observe that in high-stakes academic environments, translanguaging can paradoxically reinforce standard language ideologies, as students may revert to English-only discourse to conform to institutional expectations. These critiques highlight the importance of adopting a critical translanguaging pedagogy, one that is not only linguistically inclusive but also conscious of the sociopolitical forces that shape language use.

In sum, translanguaging offers more than a set of pedagogical strategies; it provides a framework for interrogating and resisting exclusionary language ideologies. By recognizing the ideological forces that shape language policies and classroom practices, educators can create more inclusive learning spaces that affirm students’ linguistic and cultural identities. This requires a shift from viewing multilingualism as a problem to be managed to seeing it as a powerful resource for learning, equity, and empowerment.

#### **5. Translanguaging and Other Related Concepts**

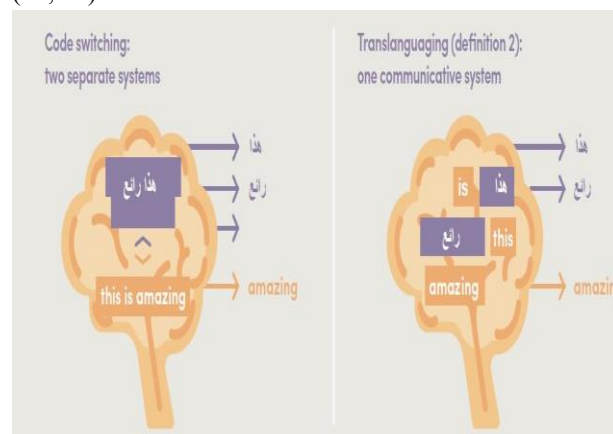
There are other linguistic concepts that also make use of two or more languages in their practices, such as code switching and translation. Understanding these related concepts helps to recognize the unique role of translanguaging in language use.

##### **5.1 Code-Switching vs Translanguaging**

Code-switching, according to Lin & Martin (2005), (18) is the alternation between two or more

languages and has been employed by teachers as a scaffolding tool for teaching and learning as an additional tool. Although it has not been widely legitimized in applied linguistics research, teachers frequently use code-switching to refine concepts and foster social connections, especially when working with students who speak minority languages. However, both translanguaging and code-switching involve using more than one language, challenge language boundaries, have pedagogical value, and have social and cultural dimensions. Yet, they differ significantly in their theoretical underpinnings and applications. While code switching is presented as a 'socio-linguistic' manner, since it is considered cultural, social, ecological, and situated (4), translanguaging is regarded as a 'socio-cognitive' manner, since it refers to how individuals draw on their entire linguistic repertoire (19). Code switching involves alternating between separate linguistic systems; in contrast, translanguaging involves employing the entire linguistic repertoire of bilinguals or multilinguals in interactions (20). Hence, code-switching is based on a monoglossic perspective on bilingualism, unlike translanguaging, which reflects the ongoing, integrated use of language.

The example in Figure (1) below shows that code-switching focuses on alternating between distinct language systems and is considered less connected to bilingualism. While translanguaging is a dynamic use of the two languages as one system. Unlike code switching, which has not always been institutionally supported, translanguaging has gained significant acceptance in multilingual and bilingual education (14, 21).



**Figure (1) Difference between Code-switching and Translanguaging (Adapted from Thomas et al., 2022, p. 23) (22)**

## 5.2 Translation vs. Translanguaging

Translanguaging and translation are two different processes. While both allow individuals to receive meaning in one language and create another meaning in another language, there are differences in their focus and purpose. Translation involves converting content from one language to another, aiming to convey the meaning in the target language. According to Nida and Taber (1974) (23), efficient translation preserves the original content, capturing its heart and spirit, and requires mastery of the target language to ensure that the translation is as authentic and seamless as possible.

Moreover, translation focuses on conveying the meaning precisely, either in full, as in formal documents, or in essence, as in translating quick messages. It serves purposes such as enhancing capacities in the target language and ensuring that all students participate in a conversation (4). On the contrary, translanguaging focuses less on presenting the precise data and more on employing that data to reinforce broader activities, interactions and discussions aligning with its dynamic nature. For example, a student says to her/his friend using translanguaging, "For the past week, I've been reading a book about قصص الانبياء, and it was magnificent!" While speaking in English, the student uses Arabic for 'stories of the Prophets' to express herself clearly. Translating the same sentence from English to Arabic would be "خلال عن قصص الانبياء وكان مذهلا! الاسبوع الماضي, كنت اقرأ كتابا", The same message is fully conveyed from one language to another. Both of translanguaging and translation depend on a clear comprehension of meaning, strong analytical skills, and a solid grasp of grammatical patterns of the used languages. Notwithstanding this, translanguaging goes beyond translation skills, demanding additional cognitive processes such as choosing and selecting information, listening, reading, and integrating information (4, 10).

## 6. Types of Translanguaging

Based on how language is structured, the purpose of its use, and language proficiency, translanguaging can be categorized into two types. Starting with the structure of language, translanguaging can be either strong or weak. Williams' (1996) (10) initial concept of translanguaging aligns with what is called 'the weak version'. In this version of translanguaging, languages are treated as distinct entities, but the boundaries between them are softened. This is on the one hand. On the other hand, García and Wei (2014) (1) have introduced the strong version, rejecting the

separation of languages. They have argued that bilinguals draw on their full linguistic repertoire to communicate and learn, unconfined by socially imposed language distinctions. Nagy (2018) (24) further elaborates on these versions, stating that the weak version of translinguaging maintains the boundaries between existing languages, yet supports softening these boundaries and highlights the similarities and differences between language systems. By contrast, the strong version views all languages as part of a single linguistic system. García and Lin (2017) (21) propose the use of both versions in educational programs. Following this, weak translinguaging is used for softening language boundaries and strong translinguaging is used to promote critical thinking, help students develop their linguistic abilities and comprehend language rules.

Turning to the purpose of translinguaging, a distinction is made between two types: spontaneous and pedagogical. The first type of translinguaging is the natural, effortless, and everyday employment of two or more languages in bilingual or multilingual interactions (25). For example, "Dad, please take me to the zoo, انهييت واجبي المنزلي". A child uses both Arabic and English, alternating between these two languages when he asks his father to take him to the zoo after finishing his homework. Turning to the second type, viz., pedagogical translinguaging, it is the strategic and purposeful use of two or more languages within academic settings, typically in classrooms, to facilitate teaching and learning, promote cognitive development, and bridge gaps between different cultures (1). For example, the teacher explains 'freedom' in English but she notices that one of her students is confused. She calls the student's name to get her attention and explains 'in Arabic, freedom means الحرية'. The student nods, and the teacher adds, 'So, freedom means the right to choose... just like الحرية'. The teacher uses the student's proficiency in Arabic to help her understand English concepts by connecting vocabulary from both languages.

As shown in Figure 2 below, Cenoz & Gorter (2021, 25) argue that rather than viewing pedagogical and spontaneous translinguaging as a strict dichotomy, they can be conceptualized as existing along a continuum, given the prevalence of intermediate scenarios. While pedagogical translinguaging is intentionally structured by the teacher, it can co-exist with the spontaneous use of multilingual resources. Even when spontaneous translinguaging

is unplanned, teachers can connect it to the learning process, giving it significant pedagogical value (26)

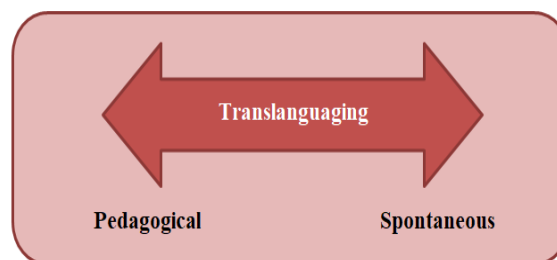


Figure (2) Pedagogical and Spontaneous Translinguaging (Adopted from Cenoz & Gorter, 2021, p. 18) (25)

With regard to language proficiency, there is a difference between one-way and two-way translinguaging, as discussed by García and Li Wei (2014) (1). On the one hand, students who are not proficient in the target language show one-way translinguaging, also known as 'dependent translinguaging,' meaning they rely heavily on their mother tongue to overcome obstacles (25). On the other hand, in two-way translinguaging, also known as 'independent translinguaging,' students are more proficient in the target language, meaning they are able to alternate between the languages with more ease according to the situation (1).

### 7. Translinguaging in EFL Classes

In foreign language classrooms, translinguaging refers to the practice of integrating the foreign language with students' first language to optimize learning. This practice can be varied according to the unique language experiences, abilities, skill level or competence that the students bring to educational settings. Its main purpose is to leverage the 'Entire Linguistic Repertoire' of students to increase their learning and facilitate their development as bilingual or multilingual individuals (1, 13). According to Macaro (2009) (27), students are mostly restricted from using their first language in traditional EFL/ESL classrooms. Using translinguaging strategies in these classrooms challenges restrictions by facilitating a more effective learning process in a more inclusive environment. As such, the classroom is viewed as a 'Community of Practice', allowing both teachers and students to improve their linguistic capacities (28). Yet, it is highly significant to take into consideration the social and psychological factors, such as language status, students' perception, and the number of resources available for the minority languages, before integrating translinguaging in the classroom (25). The

following section explores the specific translanguaging strategies implemented in the classroom.

### 8. Translanguaging Strategies

Translanguaging strategies are intentional, adaptable practices used to support students in drawing on their entire linguistic repertoires across all four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. García and Wei (2014) (1) emphasize the importance of such strategies in making students' bilingual and multilingual resources visible and valued within classroom settings. To this end, Celic and Seltzer (2013) (29), in their CUNY-NYSIEB guide, recommend specific strategies such as bilingual greetings, bilingual visual aids and the inclusion of writing tasks that integrate students' full linguistic repertoires to promote creativity and deeper learning.

García and Wei (2014) (1) propose using tools like multilingual texts, collaborative learning, project-based activities, and translanguaging in writing and speaking tasks. García et al., (2017) (30) suggest strategies that illustrate how translanguaging supports both academic success and personal empowerment. When those strategies are purposefully implemented, they serve not only as tools for language acquisition but also as frameworks for fostering equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive education. By integrating them into teaching, educators can better support bilingual students, validate their linguistic identities, and challenge existing power dynamics in language education.

### 9. Benefits and Challenges of Translanguaging in Education

Using translanguaging in education has sparked considerable debates, some scholars expressing support and others expressing opposition (Vogel and García, 2017) (8). The controversy stems from the various views regarding translanguaging, where a large number of scholars promote its use as a beneficial teaching approach in bilingual and multilingual classrooms to enhance learning, others view it as a threat to the conventional separation of languages that is thought to be significant for language learning (25, 32).

#### 9.1 Benefits of Translanguaging

For Cenoz and Gorter (33), employing translanguaging in pedagogy should not be viewed as a defect or a flaw. Instead, it is a planned, purposeful strategy that can be used by both teachers and students as needed to support teaching and

learning. Based on that, four educational advantages have been identified by Baker (2001, 2006, 2011), (3, 7, 34) cited in Lewis et al. (2012) (4) as discussed below:

- Firstly, translanguaging provides rich and broad comprehension; it can enrich students' understanding for the subject matter. For instance, when reading a specific text in one language then explaining it in another, the information must be processed thoroughly, steering to more comprehensive understanding.
- Secondly, it improves the weaker language, i.e. students can make use of translanguaging to develop their weaker language by fostering communication and literacy skills in the languages being used, and not solely focusing on the stronger one (Baker, 2011) (3) cited in Lewis et al., (2012) (4).
- Thirdly, translanguaging allows people to behave naturally while they are using the language as they normally do at home, and this is considered extremely important in culturally sustaining pedagogy, which values and promotes students' cultural and linguistic practices as integral to their learning and identity (35).
- Fourthly, it promotes integration among different levels of students. In other words, students who are not efficient in the target language are integrated with students who are more efficient in using that language enabling both to enhance their learning of the subject matter while enhancing their language skills

#### 9.2 Challenges of Translanguaging

Although translanguaging offers significant benefits, its successful implementations come with a number of challenges. One of these challenges is that some students have limited knowledge of the target language and do not know how to engage in communication practices due to their lack of experience in that area, creating challenges for themselves and their teachers. Deep-rooted traditional views of language learning that encourage the use of one language in educational settings resist the use of translanguaging, believing that it may cause confusion or negative transfer for the students (31, 36).

Moreover, teachers may struggle to find a balance between the target language and the students' native language due to a lack of training as teachers using translanguaging. As a result, translanguaging may

not be utilized to its full potential, and students will most likely hesitate to use the target language for learning (37). Canagarajah (2011) (12) points out that while there has been extensive research on translanguaging in informal settings such as urban youth interactions, linguistic landscapes, and online environments, its pedagogical application in classrooms is still underdeveloped. This raises critical questions, like: How can students learn to practice translanguaging effectively? Are translanguaging spaces in schools and communities sufficient for students to develop this skill independently? Or should schools go beyond merely recognizing translanguaging to actively foster both academic and everyday language practices? (1)

Another challenge lies in the field of assessment, as assessments are often regarded as pivotal tools for improving education and guiding teachers' instructional decisions. Yet, standardized assessments typically operate in a single language, intertwining language proficiency with subject knowledge. This approach poses significant challenges for bilingual students, particularly those at the early stages of bilingual development (38). The adoption of translanguaging in assessments would require a profound shift in educational norms and epistemologies, challenging entrenched views of monolingualism and social norms. Despite its promise, resistance from policymakers and educators underscores the broader societal reluctance to embrace bilingual practices as valuable and equitable tools for learning and evaluation (1). To sum, regardless of these challenges, translanguaging is still a key pedagogical approach in bilingual and multilingual education, offering numerous benefits for fostering students

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engagement and language development. In what follows, an account is given about the studies that investigated.

## 10. Conclusion

This descriptive study has examined the concept of translanguaging as a dynamic, fluid, and inclusive approach to language use and pedagogy, particularly in EFL classrooms. By tracing its historical origins, clarifying its theoretical foundations, and distinguishing it from related concepts such as code-switching and translation, the study has highlighted the value of translanguaging as both a linguistic practice and a pedagogical strategy. It has also categorized translanguaging into various types based on purpose and proficiency, illustrating its adaptability to different classroom contexts and learner needs.

Translanguaging offers numerous educational benefits, ranging from improved comprehension and engagement to cultural affirmation and equitable learning opportunities. However, its successful implementation requires addressing challenges such as teacher preparedness, assessment reform, and overcoming traditional monolingual ideologies. For translanguaging to reach its full potential in EFL education, it must be strategically and contextually integrated, supported by training, resources and institutional support.

In sum, this study underscores the importance of moving beyond rigid language boundaries in education. By embracing translanguaging, educators can foster more inclusive, empowering and effective learning environments that validate the rich linguistic repertoires of bilingual and multilingual learners.

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