

Translanguaging Theory in EFL Classes: A Theoretical Account

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Abstract

This theoretical study explores translanguaging as a dynamic and inclusive approach to language use and pedagogy in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Translanguaging challenges the monolingual assumptions of traditional language teaching, which typically emphasizes the exclusive use of one language. It views bilinguals or multilinguals as operating from a unified linguistic repertoire rather than simply 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 types of translanguaging by purpose and students' language proficiencies and examines how to apply it 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 كلفة 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 ثنائيي أو متعددي اللغات على أنهم يستخدمون مخزوننا 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 (García & Wei, 2014) (1). Unlike traditional models that treat using different languages as using

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 (Otheguy et al., 2015) (2). However, while many scholars advocate for translanguaging as a means to create more inclusive and responsive classrooms, confusion remains about its distinction from other related concepts like 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 where instruction was given in one language (Welsh) and student responses were in another (English). This approach was designed to maintain both languages in the classroom and enhance a better bilingual proficiency (Baker, 2001 3; García & Wei, 2014 1). The term trawsieithu, was first translated into English as translanguifying, and then Colin Baker (2001) (3) translated it to translanguaging. Originally, translanguaging referred to as a language practice entailing “a deliberate alternation between the language of input and output in the classroom” (Lewis et al. 2012 , 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 of it. She explains the first one as weak translanguaging, where languages are kept separate and used strategically for reinforcement, and the second type as the 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” (García, 2009, p. 140) (6). 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 (García & Wei, 2014; (1) Otheguy et al., 2015). (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 (Baker, 2011, p. 288) (7). It is a phenomenon that allows people to use their full linguistic repertoire to achieve specific goals (Vogel & García, 2017) (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 (Wei, 2018) (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 (García & Otheguy, 2014; 6 Otheguy, et al, 2015 2). 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) (9) 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) 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), 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), translanguaging is “a new approach to understanding long-studied languaging practices of multilinguals” (p. 3). As for Wei (2018), 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 progressively being used, not only to help language-minoritized students engage in meaningful learning but also to support their ongoing language development (Creese & Blackledge, 2010). 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 vastly 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 (García, 2014). 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 (Flores, 2019). 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 caution that even well-intentioned translanguaging practices can be co-opted by dominant ideologies. Pennycook (2019) warns that translanguaging might be used superficially without meaningfully transforming how language and power operate in education. Likewise, Sun and Zhang (2022) observes 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), 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 have the minority language. However, both translanguaging and code switching involve the use of more than one language, challenge language boundaries, have pedagogical values and have social and cultural dimensions. Yet, they differ significantly in their theoretical underpinning and applications. While code switching is presented as a 'socio-linguistic' manner since it is considered to be cultural, social, ecological and situated (Lewis et al. 2012), translanguaging is regarded as a 'socio-cognitive' manner since it refers to how individuals draw on their entire linguistic repertoire (Singleton & Flynn, 2022). Code switching includes alternation between separate linguistic systems, in contrast, translanguaging includes employing the entire linguistic repertoire of bilinguals or multilinguals in interactions (Nagy, 2018). Hence, code switching is based on monoglossic perspective of bilingualism unlike translanguaging which reflects ongoing integrated utilization 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 (Makoni & Pennycook, 2006). 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 (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; García & Lin, 2017).

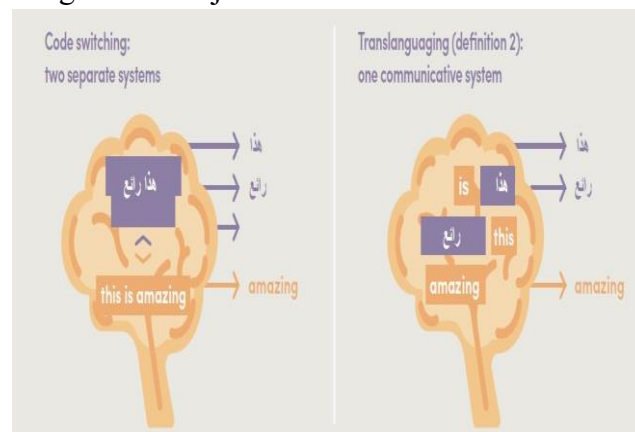


Figure (1) Difference between Code-switching and Translanguaging (Adapted from Thomas et al., 2022, p. 23)

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 at expressing meaning in another language. According to (Nida and Taber (1974), 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 translating quick messages. It serves purposes such as enhancing capacities in target language, ensure all of the students participate in a conversation (Lewis et al., 2013). 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 مذهلاً! الأسبوع الماضي، كنت أقرأ كتاباً", 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, integrating information (Williams, 1996, as cited in Lewis et al., 2012).

6. Types of Translanguaging

According to how language is structured, the purpose of its use and language proficiency, translanguaging can be categorized into two types. Starting with how language is structured, translanguaging can either be strong or weak. Williams' (1996) 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 soft. This is on the one hand. On the other hand, García and Wei (2014) 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) further elaborates on these versions, stating that the weak version of translanguaging maintains the boundaries between existing languages, yet it supports the idea of softening these boundaries and highlights the similarities and differences between language systems. Contrary to that, the strong version views all languages as part of a single linguistic system. García and Lin (2017) propose the use of both versions in educational programs. Following this, weak translanguaging is used for softening language boundaries and strong translanguaging is used to promote critical thinking, help students develop their linguistic abilities and comprehend language rules.

Moving to the purpose of translanguaging use, a distinction is made between two types namely: Spontaneous and pedagogical translanguaging. The first type of translanguaging is the natural, effortless and everyday employment of two or more languages in bilingual or multilingual interactions (Cenoz and Gorter (2021). For example, "Dad please take me to the zoo, انهييت واجبي المنزلي". A child uses both of 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 translanguaging, it is the strategic and purposeful use of two or more languages within academic settings, typically in classrooms to facilitate teaching and learning,

increase cognitive development and to bridge the gaps between different cultures (García & Wei, 2014). 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 concepts in English by connecting vocabulary of both languages.

As portrayed in figure (2) below, Cenoz & Gorter (2021) claim that instead of viewing pedagogical and spontaneous translanguaging as a strict dichotomy, they can be conceptualized as existing along a continuum, as there are often intermediate scenarios. While pedagogical translanguaging is intentionally structured by the teacher, it can co-exist with the spontaneous use of multilingual resources. Even when spontaneous translanguaging is unplanned, teachers can connect it to the learning process, giving it significant pedagogical value (Liu et al., 2020).

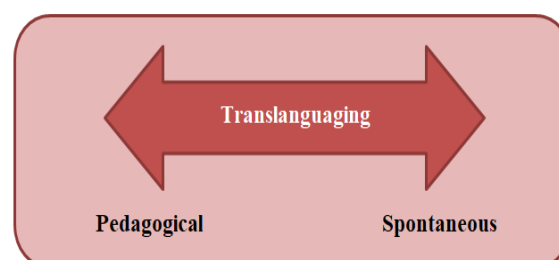


Figure (2) Pedagogical and Spontaneous Translanguaging (Adopted from Cenoz & Gorter, 2021, p. 18)

As regards language proficiency, there is a difference between one way translanguaging and two way translanguaging as discussed by García and Li Wei (2014). On the one hand, students who are not proficient in the target language show a one way translanguaging, also known as 'dependent translanguaging'; meaning, they rely heavily on their mother tongue to scaffold obstacles (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017). On the other hand, in two-way translanguaging also known as 'independent translanguaging', students are more proficient in the target language; meaning they are able to alter between the languages with more ease according to the situation (García and Li Wei 2014).

7. Translanguaging in EFL Classes

In foreign language classrooms, translanguaging 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 (Hornberger & Link; 2012 García & Wei, 2014). According to Macaro (2009), students are mostly restricted from using their first language in traditional EFL/ESL classrooms. Using translanguaging strategies in these classrooms challenges the restrictions by facilitating more effective learning process based on more inclusive environment. As such, the classroom is viewed as a 'Community of Practice', allowing both teachers and students to improve their linguistic capacities (Wenger, 1998). Yet, it is highly significant to put into considerations the social, and psychological factors such as language status, students' perception and the number of resources available for the minority languages before integrating translanguaging in the classroom (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021). The following section explores the specific translanguaging strategies implemented in the classroom.

8. Translanguaging Strategies

Translanguaging strategies are intentional and adaptable practices that are used to support students in drawing upon their entire linguistic repertoires across all four language skills including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. García and Wei (2014) 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), 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) propose using tools like multilingual texts, collaborative learning, project-based activities, and translanguaging in writing and speaking tasks. García, Johnson, and Seltzer (2017) 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). 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 (García and Kleyn, 2016; Cenoz & Gorter, 2017 & Duarte, 2020).

9.1 Benefits of Translanguaging

For Cenoz and Gorter (2025) employing translanguaging in pedagogy is not recommended to be viewed as a defect or a flaw. Instead, it is a planned and purposeful strategy that can be utilized by both teachers and students whenever needed to support both teaching and learning. Based on that, four educational advantages have been identified by Baker (2001, 2006, 2011), cited in Lewis et al. (2012) 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, cited in Lewis et al., 2012).
- 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 (MacSwan, 2020).

- 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 (García & Kleyn, 2016; Cenoz & Gorter, 2017)

Moreover, teachers may struggle to find a balance between the target language and the students' native language due to lack of their training as teachers using translanguaging. As a result, translanguaging may not be utilized to its entire potential and most likely, students will suffer hesitation to use the target language for learning (Kucukali & Koçbaşı, 2021). Canagarajah (2011) points out, 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, actively fostering both academic and everyday language practices? (García & Wei, 2014)

Another challenge lies within the field of assessments, as they are often regarded as pivotal tools for enhancing education and guiding teachers in making 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 (Kieffer, 2008). 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 (García & Wei, 2014). To sum, regardless of these challenges, translanguaging is still a key pedagogical approach in bilingual and multilingual education, offering numerous benefits for fostering students 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 within the context of 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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