

# Practices and Perception of Translanguaging as a Pedagogical Stance: Findings from Chinese Secondary Teachers' Professional Learning Community

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**Abstract.** The current research study examines faculty and students' practices and beliefs around translanguaging as a pedagogical stance at a local innovative high school in Beijing, China. Employing a mixed-method approach, a combination of classroom observation research, semi-structured interviews, and Likert-scale survey questionnaires were employed in the current study. Result indicated that, contrary to the prevalent findings around positive attitudes towards translanguaging by faculty members, participants in the current study revealed ambivalent attitudes towards translanguaging practices. While most observed faculty already employ translanguaging to various extents in their everyday instructional practices, some report hesitation towards translanguaging since they perceive tension between L2 acquisition and conceptual understanding. Recommended future practices include encouraging more student-directed translanguaging processes, since the majority of current translanguaging practices are faculty-directed.

**Keywords:** Translanguaging, professional learning community, participatory action research, conceptual understanding, L2 acquisition.

## 1. Introduction

In the past decade, translanguaging research has been applied in various content-language integrated learning (CLIL) programs, particularly in plurilingual settings. Translanguaging as a theoretical framework challenges the constructed boundaries between named languages. Its application in CLIL programs calls into question the unequal dynamics between content and language teachers and challenges the persisting 'English-only'/target-language-only pedagogies in bilingual educational settings [1]. Recent research studies have also emphasized the role of non-linguistic resources as a means of catalyzing semiotic processes and advocated for its potential benefits in a bilingual/plurilingual educational setting [2]. Much research has also identified the critical role of students' L1 in meaning-making [3], making translanguaging an essential pedagogical stance, particularly under a multilingual context.

However, much resistance still exists in educational spaces where the dominant ideology for privileging English as the only modes of instruction persist [4]. The long-standing monolingual bias (MB) [5] - the belief of monolingualism as the norm and bilingualism and plurilingualism as exceptions - is still implicitly held in numerous educational spaces. Such bias can sometimes even negatively influence bilinguals' perception of themselves [6]. In addition, it is unclear whether teachers' knowledge and beliefs in the effect of translanguaging practices align with their actual use of the pedagogy. It is also unclear how teachers' use of translanguaging practices are perceived by students in an academic setting and how students' reception of such pedagogy interacts with teachers' translanguaging pedagogical stance. Although many learners spontaneously employ translanguaging outside of the classroom, learners have, in some cases, expressed confusion and resistance towards the use of L1 in bilingual programs, making their attitudes towards translanguaging worthy of more systemic investigation. Although existing research on similar school settings found that students generally receive translanguaging pedagogical practices positively [7], we believe it is important to find out whether such an attitude is shared amongst Chinese high school students in a bilingual international school setting, in which the pressure to acquire and perform English as a second

language in order to gain access to higher educational opportunities dominate administrators' decision-making and teachers' instructional practices.

## **2. Tension in Translanguaging as a theoretical and Pedagogical Stance**

Although translanguaging as a pedagogical stance is increasingly adopted by educational practitioners and language teachers, the on-the-ground application of translanguaging in the context of working with Chinese bilingual learners reveals gaps between the above theoretical ideals and the practical needs and expectations of parents and students. Tensions exist in administrators' need to build up English competency across the program, the diverse linguistic background and competency of the teachers, the diverse language learning needs across multiple subject areas, and students' language competency. Such contextualized needs highlight the challenges in adopting a one-size-fit-all framework for applying translanguaging pedagogy across complex learning contexts. In addition, translanguaging privileges the situated cultural and linguistic asset of educational communities, lending itself suitable for a participatory action research framework, which guides the current study. Existing participatory action research studies on translanguaging have portrayed youths as linguistic experts [8], highlighted the need for teacher-researcher collaboration, and underlined the strengths and limitations of translanguaging as a pedagogy [9]. Recent research also revealed tensions in teachers' attitudes towards adopting translanguaging strategies in the classroom. Some educators reported a sense of guilt for using more than one language [10]; others found that teachers adopt ambiguous attitudes towards translanguaging; the practice of the pedagogy is inconsistent with self-reported beliefs [11]. The current research seeks to investigate students and teachers' practices and perceptions of translanguaging pedagogy. By adopting teacher-initiated action research, we aim to investigate the gap between students' and teacher's perception and practice of translanguaging in the CLIL classroom.

## **3. Content-Language Integrated Learning in a Chinese Bilingual School Context**

### **3.1. School Context**

Established in 2017, the school in the current study an innovative school that runs through Grade 1 to Grade 12. Currenting enrolling more than 240 students in the high school division, the school graduate students that mostly pursue higher educational opportunities in English-speaking countries, making English acquisition a key priority in the teaching and learning goal of the school. The high school division employs more than 70 faculty members - 90% of which are Chinese native speakers with various levels of English competency, making the program a unique ecological context for examining students and faculty's translanguaging beliefs and practices both inside and outside of the formal classroom. All courses are taught through performance assessments - a form of assessment that stresses performance of key competencies (i.e., skills, knowledge, and dispositions) in authentic contexts. Over 95% of students have Mandarin Chinese as their first language. Many students, particularly those in 9th grade, are transitioning from public schools where the primary language of instruction is Mandarin. Adapting to a bilingual learning environment and employing translanguaging both in and outside of the classroom posit unique challenges and opportunities for these learners and provides a site for contentious attitudes regarding translanguaging as a pedagogical stance and tool. Students' language levels range from emerging bilinguals to balanced bilinguals. A few students, having grown up outside of China, possess higher proficiency in English than Mandarin Chinese.

Content-language integrated learning (CLIL) as a pedagogical practice that integrates language and learning goals is only emerging at the school in the current research study [12]. Its practicality is hugely influenced by faculty's proficiency and willingness in using the target language, as faculty at the school possess a wide range of English language proficiencies. As a result, translanguaging and trans-semiotic practices, including the use of non-verbal cues and images, are frequently utilized in classroom settings. In addition, it is unclear what attitudes students hold towards translanguaging and how such attitudes might create alignments or gaps between instructional methods and students'

motivation and performance. Further questions remain as to how such attitudes interact with teachers' varied levels of linguistic competency and the school's practices around performance assessments and its goal around increasing the proportion of English in daily instructional language. To understand how faculty perceive and practice the use of translanguaging pedagogy at the school, as well as how students perceive and enact translanguaging, the following research questions have been proposed for the current research project.

- (1) How do teachers at the school currently perceive and practice translanguaging pedagogies in their classrooms?
- (2) What are students' attitudes towards translanguaging and their translanguaging practices?
- (3) Is there a significant correlation between each dimension of students' attitudes towards translanguaging practices at the school and their grade levels?

For RQ 3, the current study raises the following hypotheses:

H1: There is a positive correlation between each of the following dimensions of translanguaging attitude and grade levels: L2 linguistic priority; L1 conceptual priority; Translanguaging behaviors.

H2: There is a negative correlation between each of the following dimensions of translanguaging attitude and grade levels: Translanguaging for of L2 acquisition; L1 usage; Teacher-led language usage.

## **4. Methods**

### **4.1. A Participatory Research Framework**

The current research utilizes a participatory framework in developing, designing, and carrying out the research. Participatory action research prioritizes co-constructing research through partnerships between researchers and stakeholders, community members, or others with insider knowledge and lived expertise [13]. Such participatory research serves as the main method of research in Professional Learning Communities (PLC). PLCs are ongoing learning circles in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research. As researcher-practitioners, teachers in the Translanguaging PLC group raised research questions and designed and adapted research instruments that directly relate to the needs of the community and revised existing research tools to best suit the needs of fellow faculty members and students.

### **4.2. Classroom Observation Tools**

The classroom observation tool was adapted from the observation form titled "Using the Key Principles for MLL/ELL Instruction Classroom Observation Form: Classroom Snapshot" (thereby known as Classroom Snapshot) developed by the New York State Education Department and Classroom Approaches to CLIL and Translanguaging Inventory (CACTI) [14]. Developed by researchers that initially investigated translanguaging across Hong Kong secondary schools and Mainland China, the tool is uniquely suited for observing translanguaging practices at the school in the current research study, where most students use Mandarin Chinese as their home language and acquire English as a second language in a school setting.

In line with participatory methodology, which privileges localized knowledge and the creation of knowledge for change, selection of items from both tools was decided based upon the teachers' professional experience. We prioritized observation and survey items that were the most relevant for everyday instructional practices and comprehensible for teachers as a reflection tool. Mirroring how previous research studies adapted CACTI as both an observation tool for classroom translanguaging and a survey instrument for investigating teachers' beliefs about translanguaging pedagogical practices [14], the current research adopted the same approach by integrating both CACTI and Classroom Snapshot. Classroom observations were conducted for 45 to 90 minutes across both the

Social Science and the Natural Science Departments. Notes were taken using the integrated observation tool as described above. Following each classroom observation, a semi-structured interview was conducted to gauge teacher's attitudes on their self-reported translanguaging pedagogical practices. We adapted CACTI to use it as a guide for semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted in person and recorded and transcribed with the participants' written consent.

#### **4.3. Survey Instruments on Translanguaging and CLIL Beliefs and Practices amongst Faculty and Students**

After the classroom observational phase, a structured survey questionnaire was sent to teachers to investigate their beliefs and current pedagogical practices around translanguaging. In line with the participatory action research framework, the survey also served as a reflection tool for faculty to examine opportunities for translanguaging within their current instructional practices. Translanguaging beliefs were assessed using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree); translanguaging practices were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale (5 = Very Frequently; 1 = Very Infrequently). In addition to understanding faculty's attitudes and practices on translanguaging pedagogy in the CLIL classroom, we wanted to explore students' current practices and perceptions on translanguaging. A survey questionnaire, "Attitudes and Practices of Translanguaging for Students", containing 19 items were sent to grade heads across the four grades and distributed to students during the weekly Student Development Course. Aside from gathering students' demographic information (e.g., grade level), 18 questions were asked around students' beliefs and practices around translanguaging and the monolingual bias and assessed on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). In line with participatory research frameworks, these items were collectively devised by the seven faculty members in the Translanguaging Professional Learning Community based on students' attitudes towards translanguaging that we have encountered in daily learning and teaching practices. Amongst these, 11 questions aimed to investigate beliefs that exemplify 1) *L2 linguistic priority* (e.g., When I use both my first language and English during the lesson, it causes my English to weaken); 2) *L1 conceptual priority* (e.g., When I use both my first language and English during the lessons, it increases my understanding of the subject); 3) *Translanguaging for L2 acquisition* (e.g., When I am using both my first language and English at the same time during the lessons, it helps me improve my English.) The other seven questions aimed to examine translanguaging behaviors both inside and outside of the academic setting. Questions focuses on 1) *L1 usage* (e.g., I use my first language to ask my classmates about new concepts during a lesson); 2) *translanguaging behaviors* (e.g., I find myself switching between languages (e.g., English and Chinese) when I talk to friends and/or family after class hours); and 3) *teacher-led language usage* (e.g., When I take notes, I do so in the language that the instructor uses).

#### **4.4. Semi-Structured Interview Protocol on Examining Students and Faculty's Translanguaging Beliefs and Practices**

To supplement survey findings on translanguaging practices, the current research seeks to explore how faculty and students perceive translanguaging beliefs and practices - both in and outside of the classroom. To this end, semi-structured interviews were conducted on faculty (n = 7) and students (n = 19). Each interview lasted 30 to 45 minutes. Each participating faculty member was rewarded with a 50 RMB gift card. Student participants were given course credits.

### **5. Results**

#### **5.1. Findings from Classroom Observation Research**

Findings from classroom observations in the Social Science departments and the Natural Science Departments were combined to examine patterns of translanguaging practices. Thematic analysis was conducted to analyze observation results collected from based on the following categories of

translanguaging practices from CACTI: *content in CLIL; language in CLIL; student-directed translanguaging*.

### **5.1.1. Content in CLIL**

Observational findings showed that teachers from both the Social Science and Natural Science Departments often verbally switched from English and Mandarin as the language of instruction, particularly when the content of instruction became conceptually difficult. For instance, the concept of inertia in a mid-level physics class was explained using a combination of Mandarin, English, and pictorial stimuli. Switching between Mandarin and English was commonly observed when faculty explained conceptually abstract terminologies (e.g., lupus erythema). Teacher's comprehensive use of English also served as a predictor of students' use of English. In line with findings on teacher's role in leading and facilitating translanguaging practices in the classroom [15], one of the teachers in the Social Science Department used English as the medium of instruction throughout her classes; students were observed to also largely employ English in their conversation with each other. In addition, faculty frequently adopted the use of images and gestures to enhance meaning-making and conceptual understanding - a crucial practice in the trans-semiotic instructional process [16]. In addition, faculty members regularly employ trans-semiotic processes in expressing and explaining complex terms, drawing upon imageries, diagrams, and gestures to convey and depict specific terminologies (e.g., cell structures).

### **5.1.2. Language in CLIL**

The language component in Content-Language Integrated Learning prioritizes the acquisition of the target language as opposed to the acquisition of content knowledge. Observations from both the Social Science and Natural Science departments found that language learning was relatively deprioritized compared to the content. Few assessments and instructions that solely target language acquisition were observed from classes in either department. Subject-specific terminologies, class hand-outs, and course slides were usually introduced and presented in English while the teacher explained terminologies in Chinese. One chemistry teacher, J, wrote the English terminology for each concept for the observed lesson on the board and asked the students to adopt these terminologies in making posters for the class, reflecting a focus on language-related learning goals in addition to helping students acquire understanding of chemical concepts.

### **5.1.3. Student-directed translanguaging**

Students were observed to initiate translanguaging on several occasions. Students regularly conducted group discussions by combining academic terms in English and colloquial language in Mandarin for meaning making. The target language, although not explicitly instructed, was learned through acquiring academic content knowledge. Some students chose to switch to Mandarin when they struggled to express academic terminologies clearly in English. When some of the students were put into group discussions, their mother tongue slipped with filler words in a hurried denial. Students also frequently employed images and photos to express ideas that were too complex to be captured by hand-written notes.

## **5.2. Findings from Faculty Survey on Translanguaging Beliefs and Practices**

A total of 13 responses were collected from faculty who participated in the classroom observation phase of the study. Contrary to the findings from experimental literature on students' positive attitudes on translanguaging [17], teachers in the current sample expressed mixed views when evaluating the effect of translanguaging on acquiring a second language. Over half of the participants expressed concerns that the use of L1 in EMI would slow down the acquisition of L2 ( $M = 3.46$ ;  $SD = 2.03$ ). Despite their concerns about the use of L1 in hindering the development and acquisition of L2, faculty mostly acknowledged translanguaging as a means of enhancing content knowledge understanding ( $M = 5.77$ ;  $SD = 1.59$ ). Most faculty saw themselves as contributors to the linguistic competency of students ( $M = 5.46$ ;  $SD = 1.76$ ), although some of them acknowledged that their lack of fluency in L2

prevents them from using English as the sole language of instruction in the classroom. Amongst self-reported translanguaging practices, the most commonly adopted strategy was “[drawing] on multiple modalities (e.g., images, gestures) simultaneously in a given lesson” ( $M = 4.45$ ;  $SD = 1.03$ ). This finding is consistent with findings from classroom observations, where the use of images and gestures are frequently adopted as means of meaning-making.

### 5.3. Findings from Student Survey on Translanguaging Beliefs and Practices

A total of 119 responses were collected from students across four grade levels ( $n_{G9} = 63$ ;  $n_{G10} = 39$ ;  $n_{G11} = 7$ ;  $n_{G12} = 10$ ). Composite scores were calculated for each of the six categories of items: *L2 linguistic priority* ( $M = 3.78$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ); *L1 conceptual priority* ( $M = 5.44$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ); *Translanguaging for L2 acquisition* ( $M = 5$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ); *L1 usage* ( $M = 4.78$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ); *Translanguaging behaviors* ( $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ); *Teacher-led language usage* ( $M = 5.59$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ). Pearson’s correlational analysis was conducted between each of the above six dimensions of students’ translanguaging attitudes and practices and their grade levels. No significant correlations were found between grade levels and any of the six dimensions on students’ translanguaging attitudes and practices,  $r_{L2 \text{ linguistic priority}(117)} = .03$ ,  $p = .722$ ;  $r_{L1 \text{ conceptual priority}(117)} = .10$ ,  $p = .291$ ;  $r_{\text{Translanguaging for of L2 acquisition}(117)} = .10$ ,  $p = .299$ ;  $r_{L1 \text{ usage}(117)} = -0.12$ ,  $p = .210$ ;  $r_{\text{Translanguaging behaviors}(117)} = .09$ ,  $p = .31$ ;  $r_{\text{Teacher-led language usage}(117)} = .012$ ,  $p = .896$ .

### 5.4. Findings from Semi-Structured Interviews on Students’ Translanguaging Beliefs and Practices

A total of 19 students were interviewed for their current beliefs and practices around translanguaging both in and outside of a classroom context. Interview recordings were transcribed and analyzed using content analysis via ATLAS.ti. Consistent with previous findings [7, 17], students perceived that insistence on verbal English output interfere with conceptual understanding, particularly for younger students who are transitioning from a Chinese public school to a bilingual international school context. All student participants unanimously preferred that a teacher instruct in fluent Mandarin rather than struggling to use English as the medium of instruction, citing fluency and conceptual understanding as their priorities in academic classes. Contrary to previous findings in which students find translanguaging pedagogy confusing [18], student responses to the use of pedagogical translanguaging were largely positive, although there were variations that depended on students’ L2 competency level. A number of students who identified as balanced bilinguals suggested that translanguaging felt like a natural means of communication. Consistent with previous findings [19], teacher-led language usage was a predominant theme amongst multiple participants: students’ use of single languages or translanguaging were largely determined by teacher’s use of instructional language and translanguaging behavior.

### 5.5. Findings from Semi-Structured Interviews on Faculty’ Translanguaging Beliefs and Practices

A total of seven faculty members were interviewed for their current beliefs and practices around translanguaging. Results revealed that faculty experience multiple lines of tension between the need to help students acquire English as an academic language and translanguaging as a pedagogical stance. While faculty perceived and practiced translanguaging as a means of prioritizing conceptual understanding and enhancing communicative fluency, some of them also believed that such benefits take place at the expense of L2 immersion and improvement. Both Chinese and expat faculty spoke of a (shared) responsibility to increase L2 immersion for students. A couple of Chinese faculty mentioned the need to “push through” one’s own discomfort with using L2 as the language of instruction; an expat faculty prompted the student to consider the Chinese meaning of specific terminologies in her class. Tension also existed between using English for academic vocabularies - a demand that exists in most academic classes - and producing authentic student projects that address a real need in a local community, which asks that students produce their final products in Mandarin.

Such challenges make translanguaging potentially useful for helping students utilize multilingual repertoires in communicating their learning to an outside audience.

Finally, tensions and individual differences exist between teachers' attitudes towards the lack of a clear (trans)language policy at the school. Some expressed the desire for enforcement of language usage; they expressed confusion over the current contradictions between the need for L2 acquisition and the goal of the translanguaging PLC group. Others, by contrast, desire and appreciate the flexibility and the egalitarian view towards the relationship between languages offered by translanguaging as a theoretical stance. Further action research and policy/practical recommendations should keep in mind these contradictory stances in faculty's current attitudes regarding translanguaging.

## **6. Tentative Conclusions**

The current study highlights how translanguaging is currently perceived and practiced at a Chinese bilingual high school in China. Although quantitative analysis fails to obtain any statistically significant results, the findings from classroom observations highlight the importance of teacher-directed translanguaging and English-medium instructions. Triangulation from semi-structured interviews both re-affirms and adds nuances to such findings, as both students and teachers navigate the tension between the need to acquire a second language and the conceptual clarity of gravitating back to their L1 for understanding. The faculty interviews, in particular, highlighted the need to examine and employ translanguaging as a promotive factor of authentic learning in a performance assessment learning context.

While observations with content-area teachers revealed the need to more clearly adopt language goals in their instructional processes, the observation results also highlighted the need for faculty to elicit student-led translanguaging practices (e.g., asking students to explain what the concept is in Mandarin), even when the faculty member does not understand the students' home language. Such practices highlight the need to build trust between teachers and learners, who, under translanguaging pedagogical stance, brings in language that they are each unfamiliar with or insecure about in a co-constructed meaning-making process.

The challenges (e.g., cognitive load, extra planning time) that Chinese local teachers encounter in incorporating L2 in their instructional language highlights the tension between translanguaging as a theoretical stance and its actual implementation in day-to-day instructional practices. In their instructional planning process, teachers still experience the boundaries between different name languages as distinct and in need of "crossing". In their effortful practices to acquire the fluency necessary to fluidly transcend linguistic boundaries, faculty are reminded of experiences of shame and insecurity as they had to navigate the discomfort with getting meaning across in a second language - an experience that led some of them to offer more understanding as students gravitate back to their L1 in the (trans)language acquisition process. In terms of the perspective of developing a school-wide language policy, the practical flexibility of translanguaging as a theoretical stance is met with the inertia of expecting a top-down policy for regulating language usage in the classroom - a residual of the monolingual bias and monolingualistic ideology. These tentative conclusions highlight the need to examine affective experiences in adopting translanguaging as a pedagogical stance and the practical feasibility of translanguaging as a theoretical framework in an educational landscape that still privileges and necessitates the acquisition of English as a second language - particularly when faculties themselves experience boundaries between named languages as sharp and distinct. Such findings also highlight the need to creating a culture of practice where linguistic expertise flows dynamically between teachers and students; both local and expat teachers may choose to perceive students as co-experts in one or more languages, since the dynamic flow between languages in the translanguaging process positions teachers and students as experts respectively in the language that they are most familiar with. Further research may also explore how teachers' own experience in acquiring L2 implicates their attitudes and practices around translanguaging.

Furthermore, the ambivalent attitude that faculty reported around translanguaging beliefs and practices highlight the need to examine translanguaging as a highly context-dependent pedagogical practice. In a school with a numeric majority of Mandarin-speaking faculty, translanguaging as a pedagogical practice raises faculty and administrators' concerns regarding the lack of exposure to sufficient L2 input and adequate preparation for an English-immersion experience as students go abroad for high education opportunities. While translanguaging offers an ideal framework for fluidly traversing across linguistic boundaries, its practical application highlights the tension and trade-offs between conceptual understanding and L2 acquisition goals.

### **6.1. Limitations**

Several limitations in the current research may be further explored and addressed in future studies. The uneven number of participants in the student survey may have contributed to the lack of statistically significant findings in the correlational analysis between learners' grade levels and each category of translanguaging attitudes and practices. Future studies may also test for the conceptual validity of the student survey and increase its validity and reliability. While tools high in conceptual validity were adopted during the observation phase of the research [14], the class sessions were never videotaped and thus important translanguaging interactions could have been missed in the analysis.

### **6.2. Directions for Future Research and Practice**

Future research could examine how students and faculty are situationally positioned as experts of either languages may help establish a culture of shared linguistic expertise and reduce the stigma and psychological toll associated with the lack of fluency with either language. As both teachers and students find themselves in the process of language acquisition while adopting translanguaging as classroom practices, it is worth acknowledging the shared linguistic expertise amongst both expat and Chinese local faculty, as well as between faculty and students. Future research might also examine the cognitive cost of instructing in one's second language, and how such processes might hinder students' conceptual understanding. Such findings may point to the need to further distinguish between content goals and language goals in the instructional design process. Separating the cognitive demand for unpacking conceptually challenging terms with acquiring the term in students' L2 may reduce the cognitive load for both faculty and students. For future practical directions, the observation phase of the study highlighted the need to encourage more student-directed translanguaging processes and allow students' to fully take advantage of their linguistic repertoire, as most translanguaging instructions currently observed were teacher-initiated and teacher-directed.

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