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Translanguaging as a form of culturally mediated writing instruction for bilingual adolescents

Many bilingual education researchers are now considering how students' multiple languages interact with one another in the academic setting. Terms such as code-meshing (Canagarajah, 2006), code-switching (Weinrich, 1953; Guerra, 2012), code-mixing (Muysken, 2000) and more recently, translanguaging (García, 2009; García & Li Wei, 2014), are being discussed in relation to pedagogy (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Palmer, Martínez, Mateus, & Henderson, 2014; Sayer, 2013). Translanguaging, or drawing across all one's languages in order to make meaning, is considered a transformative practice teachers should understand and utilize with transnational bilingual students in order to effectively teach (García & Menken, 2015).

Even when educators fail to notice them, transnational youth with transcultural identities are engaging in translanguaging practices in the classroom, sanctioned or not (Bruna, 2007; García & Li Wei, 2014; Martínez, 2010). As these "cosmopolitan intellectual" (Campano & Ghiso, 2011, p. 165) students with diverse lived experiences (as a result of the act of immigration), enter our classes, educators must be prepared to "see" them (Wickstrom, Araujo, Patterson, Hoki & Roberts, 2011) and leverage their multiple literacies for academic success (Skerrett & Bomer, 2013).

Literature review

Translanguaging

Transnational bilingual students engage in the practice of translanguaging on a daily basis as it is "the discursive norm in bilingual families and communities" (García & Li Wei, 2014, p. 23). García (2009) posits that a translanguaging lens views bilinguals as having not two disparate systems, but rather one fluid and complex linguistic repertoire from which they draw and make meaning of their transnational worlds.

Two key features of translanguaging are the creativity and criticality it affords students who are often negated in test preparation and a standards-based curriculum (Li Wei, 2011). Through translanguaging, bilingual students must evaluate the available evidence to make political decisions on their use of language.

Culturally Mediated Writing Instruction (CMWI)

Culturally Mediated Writing Instruction (Patterson, Wickstrom, Roberts, Araujo, & Hoki, 2010) is a professional development approach funded by the National Writing Project (2007-2010; 2010-2013) which focuses on immersing teachers in "research based ideas and guidance" to support the writing needs of adolescent English language learners, then follow teachers into the classroom to document "what worked" with their students. In the initial institute, teachers inquired about communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1998), funds of knowledge (Moll, 1996), mediation (Vygotsky, 1978), and inquiry-based writing instruction (Wilhelm, 2007).

Findings (Patterson, Wickstrom, & Araujo, 2011) from the first cohort of participants suggests that teachers made a difference to their students' writings when their focus was on supporting the needs of English learners through mediation of four types of language and literacy resources: 1) Social and cultural (e.g., Edelsky, 2006; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), 2) Linguistic knowledge (e.g., Collier, 1995; Fu, 2009; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007), 3) Thinking strategies (e.g., Goodman & Marek, 1996; Olson & Land, 2007), and 4) Academic content knowledge (e.g., Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2000; Freeman & Freeman, 2008).

Specifically, as it relates to translanguaging, teachers during the study often acknowledged and built on students' social and cultural capital in one of two ways, by building interpersonal relationships or by encouraging students to use their cultural knowledge (Patterson et al., 2011, p. 21). Accordingly, teachers worked hard to get to know the students and their lives outside of school. One secondary teacher in particular invited students to engage in critical conversations of social issues including migrant workers, the border fence, discrimination and immigration.

Moreover, program teachers encouraged the use of first language as they were thinking or talking about what students wanted to write or as they were discussing unfamiliar vocabulary or the meaning of a challenging literacy passage. In this way, the linguistic dimension of learning intersected with the social/interpersonal dimension and supported the development of English proficiency (Patterson et al., 2011, P. 22). Over time, the professional development component of CMWI included explicit linguistic components to help participants take into consideration the students' primarily language.

Method

Research Questions

This study examines the translanguaged writing for sanctioned academic purposes of high school students in the U.S. who are learning English as their second language. The research questions are:

1. How do students use their multiple languages to write in the high school English language arts classroom when provided the opportunity?
2. How does translanguaging in the mode of writing support culturally mediated writing instruction?

Research Design

The researchers developed an instructional unit for the participants' English language arts classrooms using translanguaging as a form of culturally mediated writing instruction. A formative experiment (Reinking & Bradley, 2008) was used in order to allow the researchers to continually modify the instructional approach considering the complexity of classrooms and learning (Brown, 1992), as well as the theoretical foci, transnationalism and translanguaging. The data collected included observations and student writing artifacts from students who wrote in English, Spanish, Arabic, Laotian, and Japanese.

Data Analysis

As suggested by Charmaz (2013) for constructivist grounded theory analysis, the researchers first coded the data (interviews, observational notes, and writing artifacts) with a specific term that denoted how it represented translanguaging. Then, each incident or artifact was compared against others to identify similarities and differences, determine its code, and redefine the properties of each individual code (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Results

Research question one states: How do students use their multiple languages to write in the high school English language arts classroom when provided the opportunity? Guided by examples of bilingual poetry using English and other languages, students wrote poems using primarily English with specific L1 words for emphasis (Figure 1), writing in their L1s (Figure 1), and/or making purposeful changes between the two languages every few words (Figure 2).

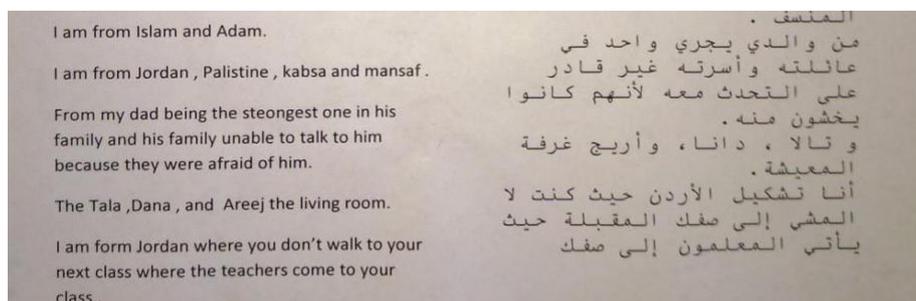


Figure 1
Excerpt from poem in English and Arabic

I'm from the felicidad y meetings,
From Ana* and Gerardo, de el pescado
Y la empresa Kujimoto and the learning.
I'm from el "pita tren" y "mami y papi"
And the "Te quiero you y tu a mi" from Barney.
Soy de every month of Abril and la mitad de July.

*Names of people and places have been changed to psuedonyms.

Figure 2
Excerpt from a translanguaged poem

Research question two states: How does translanguaging in the mode of writing support culturally mediated writing instruction? Sanctioning a space for translanguaging (Stewart & Hansen-Thomas, 2016) addresses crucial elements of culturally mediated writing instruction especially including the principles of strategic choices and the influence of identity (Wickstrom et al., 2011).

Figure 1 and 2 are the writing products of an intermediate and an emerging adolescent English learner who were using the *Where I am from* (Lyon, 1999) poetry construct as a mentor text to introduce themselves to their teacher and other students. In this exercise, students were invited to share their personal histories in and out of school. They were instructed to use the language of their choice but also make an effort to stay within the original poetic

structure. In general, one purpose for using this assignment was to get to know the students and become more familiar with their social/cultural capital.

In Figure 1, the excerpt provides a discussion of their parental lineage, immigration path, father's place within the extended family, and finally the differences in curriculum delivery between the United States and Jordan. The figure displays the Arabic response alongside its English translation.

In Figure 2, the student uses the construct to compose a translanguaged poem. Here, the writer purposefully includes English phrases/words "I am from," "and," and "from," to skillfully link the sections of his poem. She is attempting to present an organizational structure that imitates that of the mentor text. Furthermore, the writer attempts to weave Spanish words into the poem to convey a feeling of nostalgia or a thought that would be difficult to communicate in English--in short, the writer puts into action her linguistic knowledge to either get her meaning across or to fill in the gaps in the sentences with familiar vocabulary.

Fu (2009) reminds us that English learners often find it difficult to learn the same content knowledge as their mainstream peers in part due to their limited English ability (and the pacing of the curriculum). Thankfully, these excerpts suggest that translanguaging can be a tool teachers use in classrooms to provide immediate access to the students' native language capital and understanding. Moreover, learning new content in the first language allows students to obtain new knowledge more readily (Baker, 2008) and also gives an opportunity to further develop their writing skills (Fu, 2009).

As students grow in English expertise, classroom teachers can continue to leverage translanguaging by modeling how precise vocabulary can make a difference in their writing, how native language conventions add meaning, and how native language use is sometimes necessary to demonstrate individuality, identity, power, and stance.

Significance

Translanguaging allowed the students a platform to express their identities as transnational bilinguals. The academic tasks they engaged in during the instructional intervention provided them a space to tap into those ways of being and knowing within the official school curricula in the English language arts classroom.

Translanguaging also acted as scaffolding that allowed students to participate more fully in the instruction by using a translation app on their phones, consulting with other bilinguals for clarification, and using all of their languages in writing. When linguistic restraints were removed in this classroom, students were able to more fully participate and take responsibility for their own learning.

Unlike a monolithic pedagogy, translanguaging does not limit transnational students. It is a "sin fronteras" [no borders] pedagogy (García & Li Wei, 2014, p. 43) that leverages transnational students' lived experiences, their culturally embedded knowledge and skills, and dares to "see" them as we teach them (Wickstrom et al., 2011). Especially now as schools confront standards-based reforms, educators must make brave decisions and take necessary risks that might deviate from the standardized curriculum that doesn't recognize non-English language skills. The practice of instructing students whose full participation can only occur with English mastery not only disenfranchises our students, it squanders learning opportunities to develop content skills and the bilingual student.

This study offers the promises of an alternative pedagogy which has been called a 'multilingual awareness pedagogy' (García, 2008) and values multilingualism at the core of the curriculum. Teachers and researchers alike need to better understand transnational youth, creatively and critically envisioning a pedagogy that draws upon students' full identities.

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