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Translanguaging as Transformative Practice: Implications for Contemporary Language Classrooms

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Abstract

Translanguaging has emerged as a significant concept in the field of applied linguistics, and a wide range of publications and presentations has examined its implications for educational systems and classroom instruction. Translanguaging signifies a potentially transformative practice for additional language (L2) classrooms because it enables the strategic deployment of linguistic and non-linguistic resources, both within and beyond the L2, to facilitate effective communication. However, translanguaging challenges established practices and paradigms in both language pedagogy and language research because it contradicts the traditional 'monolingual principle' that maximum use of the target language is necessary to enhance second language acquisition. This Perspectives paper, derived from a keynote at a recent conference at the University of Macau, sets out to address the implications for translanguaging as transformative practice by exploring arguments for and against translanguaging. In light of these arguments, it draws some conclusions for how translanguaging may be implemented in L2 classrooms.

Keywords: translanguaging; L2 classrooms; transformative practice; effective communication; the monolingual principle

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Introduction

The phenomenon of translanguaging is described by Brooks (2022) as "one of the most influential concepts in the field of applied and sociolinguistics" (pp. 129-130). Its strong influence, according to Brooks, is evidenced by the wide range of publications and presentations examining its implications for educational systems and classroom instruction, to the point that almost everyone working in language teaching is likely to have encountered the term.

Pedagogically, translanguaging signifies a potentially transformative practice for additional language (L2) classrooms. It empowers learners to draw on their first language (L1) when necessary to convey meaning and may also involve the strategic use of extra-linguistic resources, such as body language, gestures, and visual aids, as learners exploit whatever resources are available to them to negotiate meaning successfully and facilitate effective communication. However, translanguaging challenges established practices and paradigms in both language pedagogy and language research. This is because it contradicts the traditional 'monolingual principle' (Howatt, 1984) that, since the main goal of learning an L2 is to become proficient in that language – the target language or TL – maximum use of the TL is necessary to enhance second language acquisition (SLA).

The antithesis between multimodal translanguaging and monolingual language use leads to a tension in practice: whether translanguaging is offering a panacea to the challenges of learning an L2 in contemporary classrooms or whether it is a questionable practice that should be avoided in L2 classrooms. In light of this tension, it is perhaps "unsurprising that translanguaging as pedagogic innovation has both captured the academic imagination and [led to] a few raised eyebrows in equal measure, not least for the associated claims of 'transformation'" (Brooks, 2022, p. 131).

What, then, are the implications for translanguaging as transformative practice in contemporary L2 classrooms? This Perspectives paper, derived from a keynote I presented at a conference hosted and organised recently by the University of Macau Faculty of Education (East, 2026), sets out to address this question.

Arguments for Translanguaging

Forces of globalisation and increases in human mobility mean that classroom dynamics are rapidly changing all over the world and homogeneous classes are no longer normative. Translanguaging has been proposed as one means of effectively handling the emerging multilingual and multicultural realities of this super-diversity (see, e.g., Hofer & Jessner, 2026). Table 1 presents several contemporary definitions of the concept.

The definitions presented in Table 1 highlight several core features of translanguaging. In L2 classrooms, it allows for the use of students' L1 alongside the TL so that students' understanding and achievement can be maximised. However, translanguaging is more than just admitting L1 use. It reflects an ideological and paradigmatic shift away from viewing languages as discrete, bounded systems towards a more holistic conception of language as an integrated repertoire available to each individual. Moreover, translanguaging acknowledges that effective multilingual interactions encompass various modes of communication (García & Li, 2014).

Table 1. *Definitions of Translanguaging*

Reference	Definition
East and D. Wang (2025)	"the phenomenon whereby users of language draw on linguistic and non-linguistic resources both in and beyond the TL to sustain or enhance the communicative effectiveness of what they are trying to communicate" (p. 703).
Dovchin and M. Wang (2024)	Using "all available linguistic resources freely and flexibly to transition and shuttle between, among, and beyond languages through multiple semiotic modes, codes, genres, and other (non)linguistic resources for advertent [intentional] or sometimes inadvertent (non)academic engagement and communication in formal and informal settings" (p. 429).
Tai (2024)	"the strategic and spontaneous use of a participant's linguistic and semiotic repertoire in a unified manner during the meaning-making process, without distinguishing between different languages as separate codes" (p. 553).

According to Dovchin and Wang (2024), the considerable benefits of translanguaging have been not only "theoretically argued and empirically proven" but have also demonstrated "transformative and constructive potential." They suggested that this potential is seen in dimensions such as fostering learner agency and inclusion, promoting equity and linguistic justice, and transforming power relations and dynamics due to access to "rich and equal educational and linguistic resources" (p. 430).

Importantly, translanguaging is authentic. As a means of responding to the realities of multilingual and superdiverse contexts, it mirrors the ways in which teachers and learners may often use language in genuine interactions both in and beyond the L2 classroom. This kind of *spontaneous* translanguaging is exemplified in the natural and unprompted use of a range of communicative resources that interlocutors might draw on in everyday life and incorporates strategies that individuals from diverse linguistic backgrounds have long employed, to varying degrees, to sustain interaction when communication difficulties arise.

Emphasising the authentic nature of translanguaging, Bui and Tai (2022) argued that the goal of L2 learning is not to become monolingual in the L2 but, rather, to become bilingual or multilingual. From this perspective, translanguaging is operating as a transformative practice due to its challenge to TL-only policies and the monolingual assumptions and ideologies that underpin them, and *pedagogical* translanguaging becomes one means through which L2 teachers can exploit the range of communicative resources available to L2 learners in deliberate and strategic ways (e.g., Cenoz & Gorter, 2021).

Arguments against Translanguaging

Despite arguments in favour of translanguaging in L2 classrooms, translanguaging challenges current practices and paradigms in both language pedagogy and language research precisely because it brings into question the established principle that the ultimate objective of learning an additional language is, above all else, to develop proficiency in that language. For this reason, translanguaging as transformative practice may be resisted or avoided by both teachers and learners.

In the introduction to an edited volume whose published purpose was to explore transparently

the use of language learners' L1 in L2 classrooms, Turnbull and Dailey-O'Cain (2009) argued that, despite the benefits that L1 use might have, it should be taken as self-evident that "the ultimate goal of a second or foreign language classroom remains the learning of the target language" such that "practices that undermine this ultimate goal must be avoided" (p. 2). Littlewood and Yu (2011) maintained that the monolingual principle "has permeated every language teaching method that has found widespread official support" due to its focus on using the TL as "the normal means of classroom communication" (p. 64). Although arguing in favour of the positive place that translanguaging may have in L2 classrooms, both Li (2018) and Bui and Tai (2022) drew attention to TL-only or 'one-language-at-a-time' as ideologies that still continue to dominate language teaching and learning practices in many domains.

Despite the positive benefits of translanguaging identified by Dovchin and Wang (2024), they maintained that, from the students' perspective, translanguaging might be strongly *resisted* in some situations by those who, in other circumstances, might draw on it in their everyday lives. This resistance might be particularly evident in educational contexts such as language classrooms, being "deeply provoked by the impact of pervasive language ideology" (p. 430) – what Dovchin and Wang described as 'native speaker saviorism' (Jenks & Lee, 2020). In their specific context (the Australian context where Standard Australian English is considered the norm and the goal of English as L2 classrooms), a monolingual ideology served to elevate the status of English to the extent that otherwise spontaneous translanguagers would valorise its use so as to fit into the dominant Anglophone society. Dovchin and Wang concluded:

> while we stand in solidarity with fellow applied linguists who advocate for translanguaging, we also remind our colleagues that many actual translanguagers in certain social scenarios still carry enduring skepticism about the benefits of translanguaging. (p. 430)

When it comes to *measuring* learners' L2 proficiency, language assessment remains effectively focused on learners' compliance with TL norms, rather than their ability to draw creatively and flexibly on their multilingual repertoires to communicate effectively in real-world settings (Bui & Tai, 2022). Translanguaging in assessment is therefore not part of the mainstream dialogue, and language assessments are "often explicitly anti-translanguaging" (Schissel et al., 2021, p. 342). Shohamy (2011) maintained that such assessments are based on "a monolingual, homogenous, and often still native-like construct" (p. 419) that "forbid[s] any other languages to 'smuggle in'" (p. 421). Where monolingual practices persist, particularly in relation to high-stakes examinations such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the aspirations of language learners to pass these examinations and the consequent washback into language classes will continue to have a constraining effect on adopting translanguaging practices in L2 classrooms.

Mediating the Tension

The above exploration of the essential tension between embracing translanguaging in L2 classrooms as a "new linguistic reality" (García & Li, 2014, p. 29) and limiting or excluding translanguaging in L2 classrooms to uphold the principle of TL use leads to the conclusion that translanguaging is not "a simple pedagogical choice open to anyone that wants to use it" (Nagashima & Lawrence, 2022, p. 751). One means of reconciling the tension is to recognise that translanguaging is not an absolute, which means that pedagogical practice is not a simple dichotomy of either admitting translanguaging (wholesale adoption) or excluding translanguaging (wholesale rejection).

One recent study illustrates both the tension and a means of addressing it. It explored the benefits and implications of translanguaging in a context that, although not specifically an L2 classroom, was informed by the core premise of using English as the TL to maximise acquisition (i.e., the monolingual principle) – an English Medium Instruction (EMI) Year 7 History classroom in Hong Kong (Tai, 2024; Tai & Li, 2025). The teacher, although proficient in English, was an L1 Cantonese speaker. The students (n = 30) had below-average English proficiency in comparison with their peers.

In the study, translanguaging was conceptualised as "an inclusive pedagogy for engaging students in classroom learning" (Tai & Li, 2025, p. 195). Classroom observations revealed that, on the one hand, the teacher aimed to use English as the language of instruction in accordance with the school's language policy expectations. On the other hand, he utilised translanguaging as "a multimodal form of pedagogical practice *without* involving students' L1" (Tai, 2024, p. 576, my emphasis) by drawing on gestures, pictures, and body language. In this way, Tai argued that the teacher augmented the students' learning by successfully creating room for translanguaging in a classroom informed by a rigid TL-only language policy.

Reflecting on the evidence available from the EMI study in Hong Kong, Tai and Li (2025) concluded that a classroom can be conceptualised as an *integrated translanguaging space* – that is, a space in which translanguaging practices can occur. This conceptualisation provides the room to move practice beyond deliberate strategies to support learners (pedagogical translanguaging) to what Li (e.g., 2024) described as *translanguaging pedagogy* which focuses more broadly on translanguaging principles such as recognising and respecting students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds and creating safe and inclusive classrooms that encourage all students to participate. Within this overarching integrated space, distinct *translanguaging sub-spaces* can be created to provide opportunities for translanguaging to occur (or not occur) at different times and in different ways, prompted by different communicative needs.

As for putting translanguaging into practice in the sub-spaces suggested by Tai and Li (2025), Bonacina-Pugh et al. (2021) suggested that translanguaging in practice can be viewed as operating in two forms: weak (or fixed) translanguaging which is manifested "when speakers are inclined to soften the barriers between languages whilst still acknowledging the existence of these languages as separate entities;" and strong (or fluid) translanguaging which is manifested "when speakers acknowledge that they use one single repertoire made up of a variety of semiotic resources" (p. 442).

However, Bonacina-Pugh et al.'s (2021) binary perspective does not acknowledge the dominant influence of the monolingual principle. The weak/strong distinction characterises translanguaging in terms of speakers' orientations towards language boundaries – whether they relax those boundaries or dissolve them altogether. It does not address the institutional conditions under which such orientations may be enacted. In L2 classrooms, the abiding reality is that choices about language use are shaped by language policies, curriculum expectations, and the washback effect of high-stakes assessments, all of which may continue to privilege the TL. In these conditions, a teacher who holds a fluid view of language would still be required to maintain TL-only practices for particular purposes or at particular times. What is needed, therefore, is a model that can accommodate not only different orientations to translanguaging but also the movement between more and less monolingual practices that institutional constraints may make necessary.

Broadening out the concept of a binary form of translanguaging (weak or strong), Anderson (e.g., 2018) spoke of a continuum of practice that accounts for classroom environments that

range from "wholly monolingual" at one end to "highly translingual" at the other, alongside "the ability to move flexibly along the translingual continuum depending on context and interlocutor(s)" (p. 32). This understanding of translanguaging in practice would enable L2 teachers to maintain sub-spaces that are wholly dedicated to using the TL alongside sub-spaces that admit all communicative repertoires. This provides considerable room for teacher and learner experimentation.

Theorising a Continuum

Viewing translanguaging as a continuum is more than a practical attempt to bridge opposing positions. It shifts attention to a deeper theoretical issue: two different accounts of what language learning is for and how it happens. The monolingual principle rests on a cognitive-interactionist view in which acquisition is driven by exposure to, and pushed production in, the TL. From this perspective, every turn in another language is a lost opportunity for input or output. Translanguaging rests on a sociocultural and semiotic view in which learning is mediated by all the resources a learner brings. From this perspective, learning is not understood solely in terms of TL performance measured against monolingual L1 speaker norms but, importantly, in terms of learners' capacity to deploy their full semiotic repertoire to communicate and participate effectively across contexts. These theoretical standpoints need not be treated as antithetical. Each captures a different function of classroom language use: the TL as the object of learning, and the full repertoire as the means of mediating it.

Taking different functions of classroom language use into account, the continuum becomes a principle for allocating resources for specific purposes. Sub-spaces at the monolingual end support an acquisition-oriented pedagogical aim that maximises opportunities for input, output, and interaction in the TL; sub-spaces towards the translingual end support a mediational aim that maximises the support available from a broader communicative repertoire. The Hong Kong EMI study is instructive precisely because the teacher's translanguaging did not involve the students' L1 (Tai, 2024). It demonstrates that the opposition between monolingual and translingual practice is less absolute than the debate often assumes: TL use and the strategic use of the wider semiotic repertoire can occur together.

Task-based language teaching offers one concrete illustration of how a continuum view of translanguaging informed by sub-spaces might work (East & Wang, 2025). In a task cycle, the pre-task phase may admit the full repertoire as learners plan and make sense of the task; the main task phase may exploit TL use but it may also allow learners to draw on other resources if necessary when communication breaks down, in keeping with a view of task success as functional adequacy (Bui & Tai, 2022); a post-task focus on form may be executed according to the needs of the students. The decision is no longer *whether* to translanguage, but *when, why*, and *to what extent* – a decision that teachers can make explicit and can justify to learners. This principled view responds directly to the arguments against translanguaging. It accepts that TL development remains a central goal, as Turnbull and Dailey-O'Cain (2009) insisted, while questioning the assumption that this goal is best served by excluding everything else.

A Call to Action

This Perspectives paper has presented several arguments both for and against translanguaging in the context of educational practice. It has identified genuine tensions that led Brooks (2022) to assert that translanguaging provokes both considerable interest and sincere questioning and led Dovchin and Wang (2024) to identify both substantial benefits of and significant

constraints to translanguaging in practice. These tensions remain. If translanguaging is to become more readily embraced in practice as a transformative means of countering monolingually oriented L2 classrooms, the persistent tensions call for further theoretical, empirical, and practical work to evaluate and critique the role of translanguaging in contemporary L2 classrooms and to further determine what benefits (and limitations) ensue. This ongoing work will continue to have implications for contemporary practice. In the meantime, a continuum understanding of translanguaging provides not only a theoretically defensible and practical way forward but also a potential foundation for further research.

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Conceptualisation, writing, review, and editing.

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