

Chapter 7

What Teachers Need to Know About English Language Learners' Translanguaging in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study focuses on English language learners who are continuing their education in the U.S. high schools and examines their translanguaging in the classroom. When students are learning a second language, they use their linguistic repertoire and their knowledge in English and their native language for negotiation of meaning. In order to gain a better understanding of the students' translanguaging, one ESL teacher and 10 ESL students were interviewed and observed in a classroom. The ESL students spoke Arabic as their native language and had beginning to intermediate proficiency levels. The findings of the study showed that English language learners use various strategies to make the content comprehensible by making connections between their knowledge in their L1 and L2.

INTRODUCTION

In teacher education programs offered by the universities across the United States, pre-service teachers are taught to be sensitive to their students' culture and home language. Most of the students who are enrolled in teacher education programs in the U.S are European-American and monolingual. Although teacher education programs attempt to train culturally competent teachers, pre-service teachers are not prepared to teach a diverse student population, which consists of immigrants and refugees who are English Language Learners (ELLs) and speak a language other than English at home. Many factors contribute to their unpreparedness as new educators:

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1. Teachers' lack of knowledge in second language acquisition and the process of learning a new language, which leads to the misconception that ELL who are at the entering or beginning proficiency levels are lazy and do not want to participate in the classroom activities.
2. Schools placing ELLs with different proficiency levels in one class, which becomes challenging and overwhelming for the teacher. Teachers have reported that they have one to twelve ELLs in their classes depending on the state and district in which they work.
3. The belief that modifying lessons and including ELLs in their lesson plan is the English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers' responsibility only.
4. Lack of collaboration and communication between the classroom teachers and the ESL teachers.

While being a new teacher is challenging, it is important to learn about the ELLs' needs and how they can be included in the lessons being taught. ELLs who starts their education in the U.S middle schools and high schools have already mastered their native language, and they rely on their first language to understand the content being taught in English. Several studies provide evidence that students benefit from the use of their first language (L1) in the classroom (Ahmad & Jussof, 2009; Fortune, 2012; Greggio & Gil, 2007; Kim & Petraki, 2009; Mirza, Mahmud, & Jabbar, 2012; Taguchi & Naganuma, 2006).

Drawing on translanguaging theory, this study examines how English Language Learners (ELLs) draw upon their linguistic repertoire for negotiation of meaning and sense making.

(Cummins, 2007, 2009; García, 2009; García & Li Wei, 2014; Moodley & Kamwangamalu, 2004). Language learners use various ways to translanguage in the classroom:

1. To understand the newly taught concepts
2. To construct meaning
3. To help students who share the same native language
4. To collaborate with their classmates to complete a task
5. To clarify the instructions given to them
6. To produce language that is above their proficiency level
7. To demonstrate their knowledge in the L2
8. To make connections between background knowledge and new concepts
9. To make sense of concepts and cultural practices that do not exist in their native language or culture
10. To develop their lexical, semantics, and syntactic knowledge

Translanguaging is defined as “the ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system” (Canagarajah, 2011a, p. 401). In this chapter, I explain how ELLs in high school use various ways to translanguage in the classroom to construct knowledge and negotiate meaning. I provide examples of the ELLs' translanguaging for different purposes and language skills. I also discuss how ELLs justify their own translanguaging in the classroom. The following research questions are addressed in this chapter:

1. How can teachers identify and guide their students' translanguaging when the teacher and students do not share the same native language?
2. When do ELLs benefit from translanguaging in the classroom?

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