

Chapter 11

(Not) Lost in Translation: Multilingual Students, Translation, and Translanguaging in First-Year Writing

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author described classroom activities designed to aid multilingual first-year writing (FYW) students' reading comprehension of assigned course texts. The author referred to these activities as "translation" because students engaged in two types of translation—literal and pedagogical—to rephrase challenging texts into sentence constructions and concepts with which they felt familiar, thus enhancing their ability to comprehend and respond to those texts. The activities were helpful to multilingual writers, who used their home language to access the words, phrases, and concepts of the target language. Further, the activities enabled students' agency over their understandings of and reactions to their course readings, which provided authority and authenticity to their writing. The classroom activities were explained in detail and include teacher/student dialogue to provide detailed context of the activities in real-time. The author provided the scholarly underpinnings of the activities and discussed their pedagogical implications in FYW and across the curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

The ability of multilingual students to shuttle between and among languages in their speaking and writing, while integrating those individual languages that form the students' repertoire, has been labeled translanguaging. Many studies have investigated multilingual communicative strategies inside and outside the classroom (e.g., Canagarajah, 2011; Charamba, 2020; Gazzola et al., 2020; Lee & Handsfield, 2018). Studies in school contexts show translanguaging to be a naturally occurring phenomenon, where translanguaging is not elicited by teachers through deliberate pedagogical strategies. It is produced unbidden. In fact, "in many of these cases, translanguaging occurs surreptitiously behind the backs of the teachers in classes that proscribe language mixing" (Canagarajah, 2011). In some classrooms, teachers

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8985-4.ch011

(Not) Lost in Translation

have provided safe spaces for students to adopt their multilingual repertoire for learning purposes, and teachers themselves have collaborated with students in using the repertoire as a resource, as in the study by Creese and Blackledge (2010). Matsuda (2020) said translanguaging and translangualism are not novel phenomena, but have always existed. They may be perceived in the academy as ideal, or problematic, or simply accepted. In other words, they are not inherently good or bad; they just happen. However, questions persist in developing teaching strategies that encourage the inclusion of translanguaging practices in the multilingual classroom. (The author defines “multilingualism” as use of more than one language in speaking, writing, and other modes of communication, and “translanguaging” as the phenomenon in which people use their whole language repertoires without regard for distinct language boundaries.)

This chapter describes translation activities in a First-Year Writing classroom dedicated to multilingual writers that facilitate those students’ reading comprehension and, by extension, their engagement with and response to challenging texts. (In this chapter, *challenging texts* refers to assigned course readings that contain vocabulary and/or concepts that are unfamiliar to multilingual first-year students and therefore stretch their abilities to comprehend those readings.) In the translation activities described here, readers “translate” a challenging text to aid their reading comprehension by restating the ideas of others in terms the readers can understand. Graff et al. (2018) describe this “translation recipe” as a means of clarifying the ideas of others, particularly when those ideas are stated in “academicspeak” but need to be understood in the students’ “everydayspeak,” as well as clarifying one’s own complex ideas (p. 120). *Academicspeak* refers to the oral, written, auditory, and visual language proficiency required to learn effectively in schools and academic programs; that is, it is the language used in classroom lessons, textbooks, tests, and assignments, and students are expected to learn and achieve fluency in it. On the other hand, *everydayspeak* refers to the typical conversational or social language students use on a daily basis, outside of the academic context.

THE LITERATURE OF TRANSLATION AND TRANSLANGUAGING

Translation is used both literally and pedagogically in this chapter. Literal use of translation refers to the rendering of words from one language to another. The pedagogical use of translation refers to the conversion of unfamiliar or challenging vocabulary or concepts into words that are understandable and accessible to student readers; in some cases, translanguaging was used to access the English words and concepts. Both types of translation occurred in the activities described in this chapter. This literature review addresses relevant scholarship related to literal and pedagogical translation, as well as scholarship on translanguaging in the classroom.

The use of literal translation in what has traditionally been referred to as an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom was traditionally criticized as an ineffective teaching tool. At the turn of the twenty-first century, however, attitudes toward translation began to shift based, in part, on research findings in two areas of study. First, Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009) pointed out that it was not possible to suppress or switch off learners’ own (i.e., home, or L1) languages. For example, word recognition and word judgment experiments showed that in bilingual persons the two semantic systems were shared and that native vocabulary was activated in tasks involving the target (L2) language (Illes et al., 1999; Thierry & Wu, 2007; Weber & Cutler, 2004). Second, research demonstrated that providing learners with explicit contrastive L1–L2 information contributed to L2 performance (Ammar et al., 2010; Kupferberg, 1999). Harmer (2007) advised teachers to use translation to help learners make comparisons between L1 and

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