

Chapter 26

What Can Australian Teachers Learn From Ubuntu Translanguaging? Enhancing Epistemic Access for Multilingual Students

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ABSTRACT

As multilingualism becomes more the norm than the exception in Australian classrooms, naturally occurring instances of translanguaging and situated, fluid language use amongst students sit strikingly at odds with the country's monolingual-centric school curriculum. Teaching and assessment practices that are conducted solely through Standard Australian English not only fail to recognise the linguistic resources that multilingual students bring to their learning, but also privilege specific ways of knowing and epistemic biases. Researchers and educators who recognise the ways in which this contradiction can lead to educational disadvantage for multilingual students have called for the development of pedagogies that capitalise on students' multiple language resources, offering a more inclusive and expansive approach to learning. Such approaches require teachers to become more responsive and empathetic to the varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds and needs of their learners, many of whom have to learn English while simultaneously having to learn substantial classroom content. Accounting comprehensively for these needs requires a deeply humanistic approach to teaching. The African philosophy of ubuntu, which encapsulates the ethos "I am because we are," provides an apt framework for this type of teaching, which foregrounds the accommodation of other cultures and the recognition of a collective humanity. This chapter presents classroom data that illustrates how facilitating multilingual students' translanguaging within an ubuntu philosophical approach can deepen their comprehension through enabling their epistemic access while simultaneously strengthening their identity development as members of a learning community.

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INTRODUCTION

The empirical research reported on in this chapter was carried out in Sydney, the capital of Australia's most populous and multicultural state New South Wales (NSW). Schools in NSW are amongst the most linguistically diverse in the world, with 37 per cent of children coming from language backgrounds other than English (Centre for Educational Statistics and Evaluation, 2021). NSW school children speak a rich array of home languages. These include a growing number of Indian languages, including Hindi, Tamil and Punjabi, followed closely by Mandarin, Cantonese and Arabic. Other Asian languages such as Korean, Tagalog, Vietnamese and Korean are also prevalent in these classrooms. It is not uncommon for teachers to encounter nine or ten different home languages in a classroom of 30 learners.

It is therefore striking that Australia's teachers remain largely underprepared to accommodate this linguistic diversity within their classrooms, largely due to the monolingual English-only ideology that prevails within its education system. This has manifested in the imposition of an English-only, monolingual centric notion of literacy on multilingual learners, whose reading and writing proficiency are measured solely through performance in Standard Australian English (Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2009). There is thus a marked disjuncture between the rhetoric and the reality of what Australian educational policy imagines Australian learners to be. In response, this chapter argues that a plurilingual approach would be better suited to Australia's changing demographic context, one which would account for Australian students' multilingual identities, agency and academic access.

In support of this position, this chapter offers a case study of teaching approaches that emerged through a four-year collaboration between the author and teachers at a highly diverse Australian school, where they worked together to reorient the teachers' work through a multilingual lens. The chapter will illustrate the ways in which their collaboration resulted in an ubuntu translanguaging pedagogy that resulted in positive outcomes for both teachers and learners. As the research project progressed, it became evident that teachers' ability to celebrate, validate and leverage their students' diverse languages for learning was key not only for academic reasons, but also for addressing students' socio-emotional wellbeing. This observation concurs with research by Comber & Kamler (2004) that found that environments that fail to welcome multilingual students' languages and ways of knowing, where students are pressurized to speak 'English only' and where English language learners are characterized as somehow being cognitively deficient or less able, can be deeply dehumanizing (Hornberger, 2002). As Salazar (2013, p. 121) observes, when students are forced to abandon their languages and culture outside the classroom door, this can result in a sense of rejection of two of the most vital aspects of being human.

BACKGROUND

Multilingual Learners in the Australian Schooling Context

Australia is a decidedly multilingual nation, with over 300 different languages spoken and over 20 per cent of its inhabitants speaking a language other than English at home (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Over the past decade, Australian classrooms have become increasingly multilingual, accommodating students from a wide variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In the Australian education system, students who need targeted support with the English language for learning are termed English as an additional language (EAL) students.

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