Chapter 2
Translanguaging in Indigenous Latinx Contexts:
Insights From Mayan Language Perspectives in Diaspora

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ABSTRACT

Translanguaging as both a theoretical framework and an ideology has been taken up across a number of educational contexts. Notwithstanding the transformational capacity translanguaging makes available to educators working with multilingual youth, a pedagogy of translanguaging is not a panacea for the kinds of problems that interlocking systems of colonial oppression activate in classrooms. Translanguaging must be applied judiciously and appropriately with context-specificity in mind. This chapter considers the sociolinguistic particularities of Mayan-language-speaking youth who migrate from Guatemala to the U.S., and who experience multiple forms of (linguistic) coloniality post-migration. Their indigeneity unrecognized and their language skill often misapprehended, these youth make choices about how they use language that reflect multiple language ideologies. Through an analysis of the author's conversations with students and of their own experiences teaching Mayan-language-speaking youth, several considerations for educators using a pedagogy of translanguaging are outlined.

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INTRODUCTION AND POSITIONALITY

Quite unsurprisingly, Domingo, a Q'anjob'al speaker from the western Highlands of Guatemala who migrated to the U.S. in his adolescence, talked about language use as a matter of utility. Domingo, who I interviewed as a part of my research into youth language ideologies, was a student of mine when I was a high school teacher of English as a Second Language at a program for students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE). As is common among many Maya groups, language was not at the heart of his identity – his pueblo (village) (Mejía, 2025) and his family and his religion were. In most situations, Spanish sufficed where Q'anjob'al may have left him feeling Other (Kubota, 2001). Indeed, as the story of Domingo's nephew shows, speaking Q'anjob'al was often questioned or disciplined. But in the times where Domingo was short on solidarity, where he looked for a bit of communal feeling, he spoke Q'anjob'al. He did not do so freely, but according to socio-discursive constraints and a restrictive code that gave him and his interlocutors a modicum of privacy in which they co-inhabited an important part of their cultural selves. This effort of concealment, of compartmentalization of linguistic faculties, is neither a new phenomenon, nor is it done without deliberation. But it tells us something about some of the sociolinguistic stakes at hand when Mayan-language speaking young people enter schools in the U.S. where Spanish and English – *both* languages of hegemonic colonial enterprises – dominate.

As a former high school teacher, I have worked with dozens of young people who speak Mayan languages. As one of the only teachers at my school who spoke Spanish, I was called upon to translate for students frequently. These experiences taught me about the broad diversity of Spanish varieties my students spoke, and that for many, Spanish "les costaba mucho[1]" because it was not the language they were most comfortable speaking. It was there that I learned about the wealth of Mayan languages our students brought to the classroom. As a white teacher born and raised in an English-speaking home, I have always been interested in learning languages as a way of expanding my understanding of the world. As I got older, however, I recognized the political implications and the power-laden processes inherent to learning and speaking different languages. My multilingualism was a creative boon; my students' multilingualism was fraught with racialized tensions and precarious vulnerabilities to discrimination. I have learned and continue to learn from and with my students; they have taught me and humbled me in invaluable ways. I therefore brought an open ethnographic sensibility to my teaching; I was interested in listening to and learning from my students about how they used language (and they did so quite expertly and with sophisticated attunement to the sociolinguistic contingencies that different interactional settings brought about). My goal has been and continues to be uplifting these language practices so that teachers may better understand their