


Chapter 7

Exploring Translanguaging Strategies in Young Migrant Learner Interactions

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores translanguaging strategies among young migrant learners participating in an induction programme in Malta. Drawing on García and Wei's (2014) concept of translanguaging, it examines the extent to which translanguaging empowers learners to become proficient users of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). The chapter describes a teacher-research study which comprised 14 interactive classroom activities analysed using Farrell's (2015) reflective practice framework. The findings revealed how translanguaging strategies supported meaning negotiation, but also how they created power imbalances among learners of different first languages. These impacted classroom dynamics and slowed down the learners' integration process. Based on these insights, the chapter calls for a cautious approach to translanguaging and its pedagogical applications to ensure that these complement, rather than hinder, migrant learners' social and communicative integration.

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INTRODUCTION

More than one in three persons are proficient in more than two languages, but for a long time multilinguals have been perceived as “mentally confused” and their language described as a “verbal salad of barbarous inflections” (Wei, 2007, pp. 16-17). Current multilingual views on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) challenge this monolingual bias by viewing languages holistically rather than distinct linguistic systems (Ortega, 2019). The notion of translanguaging aligns with this view as, rather than focusing on societally constructed languages, it describes how language users have one intertwined semiotic system (García & Wei, 2014).

Migrant learners are often either multilinguals or in the process of becoming one in order to communicate effectively in the host country. In this chapter, the term ‘migrant’ refers to people who are living in a country different from their birthplace, either temporarily or permanently, whether voluntarily or not (International Organisation for Migration [IOM], 2024). There are over 281 million migrants in the world, out of which 169 million are migrant workers and with the United States receiving the largest influx of migrants (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development [OECD], 2022a). In Malta, the context of the study presented in this chapter, 22% of the total population are non-Maltese nationals, with more than two thirds of migrant workers being third country nationals, hailing from non-EU member states (Jobsplus, 2022). School contexts also reflect this multicultural reality, with 12% of the total obligatory school population being composed of migrant students (OECD, 2022b). As a result, despite the country having two official languages, Maltese and English, English has become the lingua franca of the island (National Statistics Office [NSO], 2023). In a highly complex linguistic landscape such as the Maltese one, the English language is more than merely the preferred “language of entertainment, tourism, and economic transactions” (Block & Xerri, 2024, p. 2). It is the language used for effective communication that happens not only within the migrant community, but also between migrants and locals.

Due to the increase in migration, the Migrant Learners’ Unit (MLU) was established in 2014 to ensure that every migrant learner between the age of five and 16 receives the education they are entitled to have (Farrugia Buhagiar & Sammut, 2020). According to its official website, its mission statement is founded on the values of sustainment, inclusion, and success:

The inclusion of newly-arrived learners is actively promoted at the Migrant Learners’ Unit. The well-being of those involved is also valued through the provision of a holistic educational journey which allows for the acquisition of linguistic and sociocultural competences. (MLU, 2024, para. 1)

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