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Evaluating translanguaging in a Chinese senior high school EFL classroom: Insights from an immersed English teaching context

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Abstract

Some Chinese primary and secondary schools are adopting immersed teaching in EFL classrooms, seeking to learn English like native speakers, believing that immersed English environment can promote learners' target language learning. However, they ignore the special role of translanguaging practice, which helps express meaning more clearly, build intercultural identities, and maximize learners' bilingual/multilingual ability. In this paper, the author takes her own former English class as an example, recalls and records five reflective blogs, and analyzes the feasibility of translanguaging in this context. It is found that while translanguaging has certain benefits, it also has some drawbacks, such as inhibiting the formation of authentic L2 context. A few insights are briefly proposed from three angles: Policymakers cannot ignore the benefits of translanguaging and should advocate it, educators should act as multilingual role models and co-learners; learners should use their linguistic repertoire critically to develop their social and intercultural awareness.

Keywords translanguaging practice; EFL; China; immersed English teaching

1. Introduction

As a lingua franca, English is taught in many countries. This essay takes a speaking class in a senior high school in China as a background. It points out the teacher pursues immersed English teaching under the theory of monolingualism and treats bilingualism as a superposition of isolated monolingual competencies instead of realizing the importance of translanguaging practice. Then, this essay critically analyzes the feasibility of translanguaging in this context and proposes directions for future improvements from the perspective of policymakers, teachers and learners.

2. Context

The context is an English-speaking class in a senior high school in Jiangsu province, China. The transdisciplinary framework proposed by the Douglas Fir Group (2016), which distinguishes three interdependent levels by comprehensive characterization of the multilayered complexity of L2 learning, was applied to elaborate on the context across three levels. According to Douglas Fir Group's (2016), the macro level is concerned with the ideological structures concerning language and learning that influence the way individuals and groups see and act in their world, the meso level is related to the communities and institutions in which L2 learners participate, and the micro level consists of action and engagement which foster multilingual repertoires.

At the macro level, Mandarin is designated in "Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language" as the nation's standard language (Pan, 2016). As a result, Mandarin was given the official status despite the many different dialects in China. At the meso level, students are banned from using the local dialect on school premises. A skilled Chinese teacher with a bachelor's degree teaches English in this class. She advocates immersed English instructions to liberate her students from the shackles of "dumb English". At the micro level, the class consists of 45 students, aged around 16-17 years old, who have been learning English since the third grade at primary school and have nine years of English learning experience, with an average overall English level roughly corresponds to the CEFR B1-B2 standard. Since most of the students and their parents are locals, they speak both the Jianghuai dialect and Mandarin at home.

The following part is evaluation, and some definitions need to be clarified. Firstly, the term "monolingualism" refers to the condition of being able to speak or write in only one language. Secondly, scholars have different definitions towards the term "bilingual". According to Bloomfield (1993), a bilingual person must be fluent in both their mother tongue and the second language. According to the proficiency of the two languages, Scaltritti et al. (2015) classified them as proficient bilinguals and unskilled bilinguals. However, Lüdi and Py (2009) argued that "bilingual competence" refers to a totality rather than just the sum of two monolingual abilities. In this context, bilingual refers to learners who can speak both Chinese

and English. Thirdly, translanguaging has its roots in bilingual education. Williams first defined the term "trawsieithu" to describe a pedagogical practice in which learners in Welsh and English courses use the two languages (García et al., 2019). Then, translanguaging is defined by Baker (2011) as the process of producing meaning, shaping experiences, and gaining understanding and knowledge by using two languages. García and Li (2014) further defined translanguaging as it enables bilingual educators and students to utilize their linguistic repertoire and semiotic resources in class. It emphasizes multimodality and multisensory in the interaction between learners and the society and believes that there are no boundaries between languages. In this context, translanguaging can be a pedagogical practice where Chinese (Mandarin and dialect, as L1) and English (L2) are combined for meaning making.

3. Evaluation

In this context, the teacher advocates Direct Method when teaching speaking, believing that if students are placed in an authentic L2 environment, it will significantly maximize the learning effect. In addition, the teacher defines the students' goal of learning English as becoming like native speakers, especially advocating the imitation of native speakers' pronunciation. Therefore, she uses English whether she explains the lesson plan before class, practices sentence type, word-phrase drills during class, or assigns homework at the end of class. When she finds students using Chinese in discussions or answering questions, she will use English to correct them. She thinks that speaking Chinese in English classes is unprofessional for teachers, and for students, it indicates a lack of proficiency in English. However, when students cannot understand the teacher, she will use Chinese to offer some explanations. Generally, the teacher advocates immersed L2 teaching and does little translanguaging practice for learners' understanding in this context. It shows that the principle of monolingualism is pursued. According to the deficiencies of the above issue, the teacher needs to perform more translanguaging practice as it has some potential feasibility.

Firstly, translanguaging conveys the meaning of the intended idea more effectively as Baker (2011) stated that it offers an opportunity to develop deeper understanding of the subject matter. In the above context, students have different basic English proficiency, and some cannot follow the L2 instructions given by the teacher. In this case, translanguaging plays an essential role in utilizing the students' native tongues to improve comprehension (García & Kleyn, 2016). For example, the teacher can use her linguistic repertoire to make detailed interpretations to help students understand better. Likewise, students can also use their linguistic repertoire to interact with the teacher to deepen their understanding.

Secondly, translanguaging offers a new perspective on how people do intercultural identities (Zhu & Li, 2020). It enables learners to forge their identity through the recognition of their native language, giving them a clear indication of what they have learnt and how it fits into their identity. Li (2014) argued that translanguaging is an efficient teaching pedagogy in multilingual educational settings since it significantly affects students' formation of social bonds and identities. In this context, bilingual students can think about their identity and express themselves through different languages, i.e. locals, Chinese, English language learners or others. Blog 4 states that "teachers should pay attention to the integration of multiple languages in classroom teaching and choose appropriate teaching methods to cultivate students' critical thinking, communication and cooperation skills, and guide them not only pay attention to the knowledge from textbooks, but also have global awareness, overall awareness and learning subject awareness". It shows that teachers need to be aware of multilingualism in the classroom and choose appropriate teaching methods such as CLIL, which can be combined with translanguaging to create a multicultural environment and develop students' communication and collaboration skills, critical thinking and help them become Pluriliterate Global Citizens.

Finally, translanguaging can maximize learners' bilingual/multilingual ability by adding in their native language. As written in blog 2, "I know from my experience of learning English that I learn better by combining implicit and explicit learning". It shows the best way to learn a new language is to combine explicit and implicit learning, first using L1 to support L2 learning and then creating authentic L2 environments to facilitate acquisition. In order to foster high levels of L2 competence, native language can serve as a foundation to scaffold more successful performance in the L2 when used as a linguistic and cognitive instrument through bilingual teaching methodologies (Cummins, 2007). According to Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory, learning is best achieved through the fluid interaction between teachers and students as well as among students, which is based on the idea of the "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD) and "scaffolding". It is in line with what translanguaging conveys, as Lüdi and Py (2009) said that teachers need to give scaffolding to learners in a translanguaging classroom. That is to say, with the assistance of teachers and peers, learners can advance their language learning and increase their knowledge so that they will be better equipped to interact with literacy and other academic tasks in both languages (Cummins, 2007).

There is no denying that translanguaging is valuable in EFL classes. However, it has some drawbacks, which may explain why many people pursue immersed L2 teaching. As in blog 3, "I think the lack of authentic context in teaching inhibits the production of my target language in interactions", effective English learning can only be achieved with authentic contexts. This is beneficial for it goes along with the belief that the only way to learn English is to speak it. Influenced by the early monolingual language teaching methods, such as the Direct Method and Audio-lingual Method, in which only the target language can be used, the monolingual principle has been regarded by policymakers and educators as a common sense (Cummins, 2007). For example, immersed L2 teaching improves learners' unconscious, natural language acquisition. As reflected in blog 5, "one of my English teacher in senior high school advocated an all-English

approach to immerse students in an English-only environment, believing that this would maximize English input and output and facilitate students' English learning", the teacher creates authentic contexts that immerse students in an L2 environment and increase authentic language input, which can improve students' listening and speaking skills. Krashen (1985) asserts that both children and adults can only acquire target language proficiency through a natural acquisition process. His "input hypothesis" states that comprehensible input is necessary for language acquisition, which means the input material should be slightly more difficult than the learners' previous language level, i.e., meet the *i+1* condition. On the other hand, conscious learning, like translanguaging, may prevent the production of L2. As a result, the immersed L2 teaching creates the same authentic language environment for learners as for acquiring L1, ensuring the amount of L2 input and output and, to some extent enhancing language proficiency.

In short, the communicative classroom cannot simply reject L1, nor can it rely too heavily on it. As reflected in blog 3, using L1 is a kind of explicit learning while using only L2 is implicit, so the learning outcome can be maximized if both L1 and L2 are combined. As Cook (2001) argued that the possibilities for language teaching are nevertheless limited if the L1 is dismissed out of hand. There is no logical reason why communicative tasks should avoid the L1, regardless of the benefits of using the L2 to demonstrate "actual" classroom communication.

4. Future Directions

Language learning is a complex process. To be bilingual is not the simple addition of two languages because this monolingual mode is termed "the two solitudes" by Cummins (2007), but an interactive and dynamic process. It is translanguaging that challenges the previous framework of monolingualism and emphasizes the use of both teachers' and learners' linguistic repertoire in communication. It gives some insight into English teaching in the above context.

For policymakers at the national or school level, they should consider the rationality of translanguaging practice and can properly advocate and popularize translanguaging officially. It is also essential to include L1 in textbooks to offer visual materials for learners' better understanding. For teachers, it is crucial to promote teacher agency actively. According to blog 1, teacher agency can be affected by three dimensions: the iterational dimension, the projective dimension and the practical-evaluative dimension (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). They need to critically consider what hinders or promotes their agency and then play positive roles in the classroom. For example, blog 5 claims teachers should be co-learners with students, and can be multilingual models to make their linguistic repertoire visible for students (Meier, 2016) to create a collaborative, communicative translanguaging classroom. This is a kind of positive teacher agency because the teacher is no longer authoritative. Students can draw on their linguistic repertoire to teach the teacher, promoting joint learning between teachers and students. Conversely,

if the teacher continues pure L2 teaching, this is negative teacher agency.

For learners, they are part of society, and their behavior is inseparable from social relations. Hence, it is essential for them to strategically utilize linguistic resources in a "translanguaging space" where they can feel a sense of connectedness with others (Li, 2011). Language learning is constructed through social interaction, and "translanguaging space" emphasizes the ability of language learners to go beyond the classroom and use their linguistic repertoire to participate actively in social life. It means that language learning starts in society and is ultimately invested in society, and both teachers and students need to develop this capacity for social engagement. For example, in the above context, some Chinese idioms can be used critically to explain English words and phrases and guide students to relate the meaning to social reality. It deepens students' memories, develops their social and intercultural awareness, and leads to their active participation in society.

5. Conclusion

This essay analyses the feasibility of translanguaging based on the problem of monolingual tendencies presented by a Chinese high school English classroom. It points out that translanguaging can help students better understand ideas, shape their identities and develop bilingual ability. It also gives some implications for the future direction: translanguaging theory should be considered by policymakers to advocate its feasibility, teachers need to play roles of co-learners and multilingual models, and students need to improve social and intercultural awareness through the critical use of their linguistic repertoire.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Appendix

Blog 1: Thoughts about constraints on teacher agency

The factors that promote and hinder teachers' agency are experiential (Gert Biesta, 2015). It was suggested that teacher agency can be understood from three dimensions, that are the iterational, the projective, and the practical-evaluative dimension (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). With the understanding of Biesta et al.'s Model, my opinions of the factors that limit teachers' agency are as follows.

Firstly, in terms of the iterational dimension, teachers' agency is limited by their past experience. This experience is divided into personal experience and professional competence. When I had an internship teaching English to senior high school students, I often felt unsure of my professional ability because I was an undergraduate student. In addition, I was afraid that it is difficult to change China's inherent teaching model, so I followed the rules in the actual teaching and failed to give play to my agency.

Secondly, in terms of the projective dimension, teachers' agency is limited by their imagination of the future classroom. Some teachers are engaged in the education industry with their personal educational ideals, such as becoming famous educators or cultivating excellent students. But these great ideals are not achieved overnight. Usually, their concept of ideals is vague, and they blindly pursue long-term goals while ignoring achievable goals. They do not have a clear understanding of the purpose of education and focus on the individual understanding of educational ideals.

Finally, in terms of the practical-evaluative dimension, teachers' agency is limited by culture, structure, and material resources (Gert Biesta, 2015). In my opinion, the education culture is very complicated in my context. Teachers are faced with high-intensity work and great pressure, such as academic research tasks in addition to classroom teaching. This weakens teachers' passion, and to some extent affects their agency. In addition, I think it is difficult for teachers to position themselves, especially in primary and secondary schools, because teachers usually wear many "hats", such as English teachers, class directors, or school leaders. In other words, multitasking in teachers' roles limits their agency. What's more, I think science and technology have promoted teachers' agency. However, it is difficult for remote areas to use advanced teaching technology, which limits teachers' agency.

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Blog 2: Implicit or explicit learning

According to my experience, it's hard to say whether implicit or explicit learning makes me learn

languages better. I need to discuss it in two cases.

According to Zhang (2015) and combined with my personal understanding, implicit learning plays an important role in the learning process of the mother tongue. Our ability to acquire our mother tongue is a natural process, which can be called "acquisition". As a child, we are exposed to the way our parents and the people around us speak and communicate, so we naturally acquire our mother tongue. This is unconscious learning that requires no subjective intention.

However, in traditional Chinese English education, teachers usually use the grammar-translation method and direct method to guide students to memorize words, grammar, analyze sentences, translate paragraphs, and so on. This process can be called "learning". Acquired language is spoken at will. And the language you learn, you have to check, you have to put together, and it's hard to become fluent. I know from my experience of learning English that I learn better by combining implicit and explicit learning. When I come into contact with a new language, there is no native language context, so I should start from the two cornerstones of vocabulary and grammar, and try to master the word meaning and grammar rules. But at the same time, I will gradually strengthen the opportunity for English immersion, such as reading English newspapers, watching English TV programs, and so on, these are to create an authentic language context for myself. This is also the process of changing learning from explicit to implicit. And in my high school, the teacher advocated immersed English teaching, which improved the authentic learning to some extent.

Therefore, for me, when I learn a new language, I will first adopt explicit learning, and then gradually create authentic context to strengthen implicit learning. Both explicit and implicit learning themselves are isolated, and only by combining them together can I learn languages better.

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Blog 3: Factors inhibit the language production

Based on my previous experience in English learning and teaching, I think the lack of authentic context in teaching inhibits the production of my target language in interactions.

Firstly, as non-native English speakers, people will encounter difficulties in language learning. I clearly remember that when I was assisting as an English teacher intern, the headteacher used to oversimplify the context in order to pursue the direct teaching goals and even avoided some relative knowledge points. As a result, there are full of mechanical sentence-type, word-phrase drills in class. From my perspective, a real English class should stimulate students' interest in learning. And authentic context is one of the most essential parts of language teaching. Taguchi

(2015) mentioned that there is much research going on to combine the teaching environment with real language use. For example, in my previous learning, one teacher tried to create an immersed English teaching environment and Chinese is forbidden to be used in this class. When students could not understand what did the teacher say, she would use Chinese to explain. As a result, this is different from other classes I've experienced. It makes the input and output all in an authentic English learning environment, thus improves students listening and speaking ability.

So, I think teachers should use English as much as possible in English classes. However, teachers should also use more intuitive means, such as objects, and pictures to create context. Use gestures to help students understand and exercise their communication skills, instead of blindly pursuing the accuracy of grammar and merely paying attention to the form. But this is exactly what I lack because I do not have much experience of such class in addition to the one I mentioned above. Therefore, when I interact in English, I feel afraid and worry about whether I speak correctly, whether others can understand me, and even worry about my pronunciation, which inhibits my production of the target language.

In short, English learning is inseparable from the authentic context, teachers should constantly develop students' potential in teaching, enlighten their thinking, and teach English well in the created situation.

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Blog 4: My understanding of a pluriliterate global citizen

With the deepening of globalization, multilingual culture is becoming more and more important in the international community, which also stimulates the need to cultivate pluriliterate global citizens. Jefferess (2012) states that global citizen means a person's identity and moral responsibility are not limited to their "local" community (i.e. family, country). And from my own perspective, global citizenship means that every human being is responsible for global problems, and they are both participants as well as solvers. And they need to accept other cultures and have respect for cultural diversity. So, pluriliterate global citizen means people who are capable to communicate and interact with people from different cultural backgrounds.

However, in some Chinese public schools, teachers blindly pursue immediate teaching objectives and always ignore the development of students' global awareness. Therefore, in my opinion, from the macro point of view, the government needs to create a pluriliterate cultural environment in the whole society and formulate some policies to appeal to the awareness of global citizenship. From a meso-perspective, schools should pay more attention to the cultivation of students' pluriliterate ability rather than monolingual learning, so as to provide

students with more possibilities to help their future development and cultivate global citizens with all-round development of language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality and learning ability. From the micro perspective, teachers should pay attention to the integration of multiple languages in classroom teaching and choose appropriate teaching methods, such as CLIL, to cultivate students' critical thinking, communication and cooperation skills, and guide them not only pay attention to the knowledge from textbooks, but also have global awareness, overall awareness and learning subject awareness.

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Blog 5: Teachers' Role in a Translanguaging Classroom

In my context, English language learning is viewed as a separate subject. For bilingual learners, language proficiency is a simple superimposition of our native Chinese proficiency and English proficiency. When evaluating students' language proficiency, teachers always only evaluate students' native language proficiency and English proficiency in isolation. One of my English teacher in senior high school advocated an all-English approach to immerse students in an English-only environment, believing that it would maximize English input and output and facilitate students' English learning. As a result, translanguaging practices were not reflected in my context.

However, based on Vygotsky's (1978) 'scaffolding' and 'ZPD', it seems that L1 plays a significant role in EFL class as it exposes a gap between L1 and L2. Therefore, in a translanguaging classroom where L1 and L2 are both regarded as learners' linguistic repertoire, the teacher's responsibility is to identify students' needs, give scaffolding, and offer formative feedback or dynamic assessment (Lüdi & Py, 2009). Meanwhile, Li (2014) claimed that teachers that adopt a translanguaging perspective must also take on the role of co-learners. In contrast, in traditional English teaching, there is an unequal status between teachers and students. Teachers are authoritative and dictatorial, and students must listen to them. The co-learning classroom not only empowers learners, but also creates a harmonious and dynamic classroom atmosphere, enabling teachers and learners to freely change their identities. There is an equal status between teachers and students. Different from the traditional classroom where teachers give students knowledge, in this case, students can also use the instructions they know to teach the teacher. To a certain extent, it cultivates teachers' and students' linguistic curiosity and stimulates students' meta-linguistic awareness. What' more, teachers should play roles of multilingual models, "who make visible their linguistic repertoires, including standard and non-standard language varieties" (Meier, 2016). They need to treat students as people in society, not as isolated individuals, and empower students and give them the help they need to become bilingual.

In conclusion, I think that the teacher in a translanguaging classroom serves as a facilitator, a guide, and a role model. The teacher's authority is undermined, and they take on more of a co-learner role in the translanguaging classroom, though.

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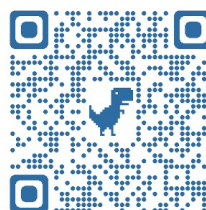
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