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# Understanding Translanguaging in US Literacy Classrooms

Reframing Bi-/Multilingualism as the Norm

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## I. Introduction

This brief aims to contextualize and promote translanguaging as an approach to educating bi-/multilingual students in US literacy classrooms. Broadly, *translanguaging* has been defined as “the deployment of a speaker’s full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages” (Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2015, p. 281) and “an approach to language pedagogy that affirms and leverages students’ diverse and dynamic language practices in teaching and learning” (Vogel & García, 2017, p. 1). To take up a translanguaging perspective, then, means creating opportunities for bi-/multilingual students to “engage in literacy in ways that deepen their understanding of texts, generate more diverse texts, develop students’ confianza in performing literacies, and foster their critical metalinguistic awareness” (García & Kleifgen, 2020, p. 561)—no matter what the language of instruction.

In writing about an approach to pedagogy that takes up translanguaging, García, Ibarra Johnson, and Seltzer (2017) describe a translanguaging stance, or “the philosophical, ideological, or belief system that teachers draw from to develop their pedagogical framework”

(p. 27). Integral to cultivating a translanguaging stance is the understanding that bi-/multilingualism is not a deviation from a monolingual norm. In fact, bi-/multilingualism is *itself* the norm, and classrooms must be organized with students’ dynamic, fluid language

practices at the center of all learning. In centering these practices, educators not only make space for powerful language and literacy

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learning; they “disrupt the hierarchies that have delegitimized the language practices of those who are minoritized” (Vogel & García, p. 1). We begin by foregrounding bi-/multilingualism as the longstanding norm in the United States and describing translanguaging as a lens for understanding and organizing instruction around students’ dynamic language practices. We provide research-based examples from classrooms that have taken up translanguaging and describe the creative and critical literacies (Li Wei, 2011) that came to the surface as a result. Lastly, we explore policies that would enable schools and teachers to recognize bi-/multilingualism as the norm and leverage it for language and literacy learning.

## II. Bi-/Multilingualism as the Longstanding Norm

The United States has always been a polyglot nation containing a diverse array of languages and language practices (Rumbaut & Massey, 2013). In its first century as a settler nation-state, the US rose to power as an aggressive expansionist force that colonized Indigenous and other language-minoritized communities of

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color, in part through the subjugation of their languages (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Wiley & Lukes, 1996). Early research of the twentieth century, which was born out

of and rationalized this colonialism, unjustly deemed the language practices of Indigenous, African American, Mexican American, and Puerto Rican communities as illiteracy, error-filled, deficient, interference, and indicative of lower intellectual abilities (Baugh, 1999; B. Flores, 2005; May, 2013; Rampton, 1987; Zentella, 1997). This research and its resulting policies continue to determine the linguistic, racial, social, and political standing of these communities.

The US Census Bureau records the use of more than 350 languages spoken

throughout the United States. About one in five US residents speaks a language other than English at home, a statistic that has nearly tripled since 1980 (Migration Policy Institute, 2016). A handful of languages, however, account for the largest share of those spoken at home, with speakers of Spanish, Chinese, and Tagalog representing 70 percent of the overall population of people in the US using a language other than English in the household. Most of these people are also fluent in English (Migration Policy Institute, 2016).

Despite these bi-/multilingual realities, the monolingual, monocultural ideologies that undergirded past settler-colonial and racist policies and practices still pervade understandings of literacy and language in US schools. Language and literacy pedagogies anchored in these historical understandings have been responsible for the failure of many racialized bi-/multilingual students across the US, especially Latinx students (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010; García, 2009, 2020; García & Kleifgen, 2018; Valdes, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999). This has led scholars, both in the US and around the world, to destabilize dominant understandings of monolingualism that shape K–12 school culture and foreground students’ fluid bi-/multilingualism as the ubiquitous historical norm (Canagarajah, 1999; García, 2009; May, 2013).

### III. A Translanguaging Lens: Centering the Language and Literacy Practices of Bi-/ Multilinguals in Classrooms

Rather than compare bi-/multilingual students to their “monolingual” English-speaking counterparts, which often results in deficit perceptions of their language and literacy practices, a translanguaging lens enables educators to perceive students differently. Taking up such a lens requires that educators unlearn what García (2014) calls “major misconstructions about English, its speakers, the learning of English, bilingualism, and the teaching of English” (p. 4), including that “English” is simply a series of structures; that “native” English speakers are the norm; that learning English is a linear process; that bi-/multilinguals have an “L1” that is separate from an “L2”; and that the teaching of English can be accomplished in isolation of students’ other language practices. These misconstructions can be “counter-narrated” (p. 4) through a translanguaging lens.

In US literacy classrooms, the need for counternarratives about bi-/multilingual students’ language and literacy practices is especially urgent. Traditional literacy pedagogies that rest on the misconstructions laid out above reify the inequalities faced by language-minoritized students, and particularly those of color (Baker-Bell, 2020; Brooks, 2019; de los Ríos & Seltzer, 2017;

García & Kleifgen, 2020; Valdes, 2001). Literacy pedagogies organized around these misconstructions, particularly those that work to stigmatize and remediate those students whose language and literacy practices do not conform to “native speaker” norms “are simply unjust; they restrict rather than liberate students’ meaning-making potential and often result in failure in school” (García & Kleifgen, 2020, p. 560). Conversely, a translanguaging lens “decolonizes these understandings about language, literacy, and bilingualism and incorporates thinking from, and being/listening with, racialized/minoritized multilingual bodies” (p. 5).

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In their discussion of a translanguaging pedagogy, García, Johnson, and Seltzer (2017, p. 7) lay out four interrelated purposes for bringing translanguaging into the classroom. Their work, as well as the work of literacy researchers whose work explicitly takes up a translanguaging lens, demonstrates the ways that translanguaging can support students as they engage with complex content and texts across content areas (Collins & Cioè-Peña, 2016; David, Pacheco, & Jiménez, 2019; Ebe & Chapman-Santiago, 2016;

España & Herrera, 2020; Espinosa & Herrera, 2016; Suárez, 2020; Velasco & García, 2014); provide opportunities for students to develop linguistic practices for academic contexts (Daniel et al., 2017; Durán & Palmer, 2014; Sánchez et al., 2017; Gort & Sembiante, 2015;

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• los Ríos, 2018;  
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Seltzer, 2017; García & Leiva, 2014; Mendoza, 2020; Seltzer, 2019, 2020; Stewart & Hansen-Thomas, 2016); and support students’ bilingual identities and socioemotional development (de los Ríos, 2020; García-Mateus & Palmer, 2017; Machado & Hartman, 2020; Palmer et al., 2014; Poza, 2019; Seltzer & Collins, 2016; Smith, 2020).

This research demonstrates that taking up a translanguaging lens in classrooms—and particularly language and literacy classrooms—has positive results for both teachers and students. When teachers take up a lens that enables them to view their students for their linguistic gifts and sophisticated ways of knowing, and when students are welcomed as their full selves, with access to all of their linguistic and cultural resources, powerful co-learning can take place (García & Li Wei, 2014).

**IV. Policy Recommendations**

Myriad resources and strategies exist for working with bi-/multilingual students, particularly those labeled English language learners. However, a focus on strategies alone can communicate to school leaders and teachers that these students are problems that can and must be solved. In this brief, we have argued for a shift in stance, one that reframes bi-/multilingualism as the norm and disrupts those commonsense notions that perpetuate inequalities and deficit views of these students. Here we offer recommendations for how schools and teachers can activate that stance through policies that normalize bi-/multilingualism and leverage it in literacy instruction.

*Develop a multilingual ecology in school buildings and classrooms.* In order to normalize and celebrate the bi-/multilingualism of a school community, schools must commit to cultivating a multilingual ecology in which “the entire range of language practices of all children and families are evident in the school’s textual landscape (e.g., in signs throughout the school, in texts in the library and classrooms), as well as in the interactions of all members of the school community” (García & Menken, 2015, p. 100). To do this, schools must first ascertain what language practices actually exist within the school community and then make those practices visible and palpable. The City University of New York–New York

State Initiative on Emergent Bilinguals (CUNY-NYSIEB) project has worked with dozens of schools across New York State; it lists the development of a multilingual ecology as one of its two core principles. The project has created resources to support its partner schools in this effort, and it reports that the schools' resulting work is "significant, as instead of schools standing as an unwelcoming border where English monolingualism is imposed on multilingual communities and only one part of the children's linguistic and cognitive repertoire is acknowledged, such efforts move schools into borderland spaces that embody the complexity of the communities they serve" (García & Menken, 2015, p. 103).

*Design culturally, racially, and linguistically affirming instruction that leverages students' translinguaging practices.* As already stated, schools and teachers must make shifts to existing curricula and instruction that bring students' bi-/multilingualism and ways of knowing to the surface and then frame their language practices and knowledge as integral to their learning (García et al., 2017). As they build their multilingual ecology, schools must also recognize that that ecology is made up of students' and their families'/communities' languaging, which should be "used in all classrooms as resources for deeper thinking, clearer imagining, greater learning, and academic languaging" (<https://www.cuny-nysieb.org/our-vision/>). Schools can afford literacy teachers the

opportunity to work together to take up translinguaging in their instruction, starting small—reading NCTE's Position Paper on the Role of English Teachers in Educating English Language Learners (ELLs) or piloting strategies from one of the CUNY-NYSIEB project's Translinguaging Guides—and gradually working toward linguistically affirming and sustaining instruction that works alongside a push for racially and culturally sustaining instruction (Paris & Alim, 2017).

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Language practices cannot be divorced from racialized bodies and speakers; thus, classroom curricula and pedagogies—rooted in equity, cultural affirmation, and justice—must disrupt those raciolinguistic ideologies that portray bi-/multilinguals of color through a lens of deficiency (Flores & Rosa, 2015). This means that literacy classrooms must engage and center texts by and about bi-/multilingual people of color and carefully design curricula that attend to the role of power, colonialism, race, and racialization processes throughout society (Baker-Bell, 2020; España & Herrera, 2020; N. Flores, 2020; de los Ríos & Seltzer, 2017; Rosa, 2019; Seltzer & de los Ríos, 2018; Seltzer, 2020).

*Make shifts in literacy assessment practices that take students' translanguaging into account.* Though assessments are seen as neutral and inherently valid, they are informed by language ideologies that perpetuate the marginalization of bi-/multilingual students (Ascenzi-Moreno, 2018; Schissel, 2019; Shohamy, 2011). In keeping students from accessing their full linguistic repertoire, educators have only a partial understanding of

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within students' zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978; Moll, 2013; García et al., 2017). For this reason, educators must make shifts in their assessment practices so that bi-/multilingual students can draw on their translanguaging at all times. García et al. (2017) envision assessment through a translanguaging lens, describing how it must be considered from many angles (i.e., families, teachers, and students themselves must have a voice in the process); it must include access to resources that enable students to show what they know and can do, including students' own translanguaging resources and external material resources; it must be based on performance-based tasks;

and it must distinguish between what students can do using *all* of their linguistic resources (their general linguistic performances) and what they can do using *one named language* (their language-specific performances). While educators may feel they have little control over top-down standardized literacy assessments, they can make what Ascenzi-Moreno (2018) calls "responsive adaptations" as they implement these assessments and incorporate the results of these assessments into a larger, multifaceted assessment system that can help teachers "construct an accurate portrait of students' abilities by viewing their language repertoire as a source of strength rather than one of deficit" (p. 356).

*Provide professional development that further develops and engages a translanguaging stance.* As we have said, translanguaging is more than a set of strategies for working with bi-/multilingual students. Incorporating it into pedagogy is, in fact, a political act (N. Flores, 2014), "focused on reinterpreting language as a decolonizing process and liberating the language practices of bilingual minoritized populations" (García & Kleifgen, 2020, p. 556). To understand translanguaging and its connections to social justice-oriented literacy instruction requires meaningful and sustained professional development that fosters teachers' translanguaging stance. Schools can organize book studies, create Professional Learning

Communities, develop leadership teams that can drive the school community's efforts, bring in guest speakers or watch their talks on translanguaging. We also encourage inviting families, community members, and students themselves to talk about how they draw on their dynamic language practices to participate in their lifeworlds, from cultural and spiritual practices to music making and the performative arts to politics and lived civic practices (de los Ríos, 2018; de los Ríos & Molina, 2020). Overall, as literacy teachers and school leaders learn *together* through professional development, they can develop both an individual and a larger, collective stance that centers and builds on translanguaging practices and ways of knowing of bi-/multilingual students.

## V. Conclusion

In this brief, we have worked to address what translanguaging is and why a translanguaging pedagogy is one way to address the challenges and exciting promises found in today's literacy classrooms. As noted by García & Kleifgen (2020), literacy educators and researchers must continue to honor and sanction "the silenced translanguaging"

(p. 568) that takes place on a daily basis across our schools as well as leverage students' linguistic ingenuity to create legitimate translanguaging spaces in our classrooms. This is especially urgent as an increasing number of emergent bilingual students continue to enroll in US schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Now more than ever, we need educators to take up translanguaging approaches that are attuned to the increasingly consequential and complex ways that youths' bi-/multilingual and multiliterate practices intersect with issues of new media technologies, race, power, immigration, and historical and contemporary inequities. Bi-/multilingual young people—especially bi-/multilingual youth of color—are actively making sense of what today's political context means for their language practices, literacies, futures, families, and racialized ethnic/cultural groups. As educators and researchers, we must continue to recognize the power that translanguaging—as the everyday practice of meaning making and reading of one's world—plays in the lives and learning of bi-/multilingual students.



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