

TRANSLANGUAGING:

Teaching at the Intersection of Language and Social Justice



Introduction

What is *translanguaging*? Before we can answer that, we need to start with another term, *linguaging*. Late 20th century scholars coined the term *linguaging* to describe the act of using language to make meaning of the world around us. Making observations, asking questions, wondering—these are all activities that use language to help us understand our world. For multilingual learners, these activities can take place in all their languages at the same time.

You may have also noticed that language changes depending on whom you talk to, what you talk about, and how you communicate. Language can shift depending on the speaker, their status, their life experiences, and their views of the world around them.

This view of language as fluid, or malleable, can lead us to view *language* as an action word; hence the word *linguaging*, used to **describe the activity of using language to make meaning of the world around you and to shape your knowledge and experience** (Swain, 2006).

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Educators of multilingual learners know that these students bring to their classrooms rich experiences with language and *linguaging*. At home, they use language to connect with their families, but as they step out into the world, they may experience language in other ways: printed on signs, heard on the streets, or during online interactions. When these children arrive in our schools, they bring with them all those experiences of language use. Our job, as educators, includes helping them use that knowledge and experience with language in their learning, as well as expand on it so that they are able to enter new spaces and language in ways yet to be discovered.

Translanguaging



Translanguaging is a common practice among multilingual people. Ofelia García (2015) describes it 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.

Translanguaging is in many ways an extension to languaging, because multilingual individuals shape their knowledge and experiences across multiple languages.

The “deployment of a child’s full linguistic repertoire” means that the child uses all of the languages and language varieties available to them to communicate and understand the world around them. While these languages may be recognized as separate, for bilingual children they are all part of their language resources, or linguistic repertoire.

What this means in teaching and learning is that, regardless of the language in which a text is written, multilingual children engage with the text utilizing—or deploying—all of the language resources available to them. Multilingual children do not bound their languages. Instead, they use them in fluid and dynamic ways to interact with the world around them.

Our goal for this Focus Bulletin is to examine translanguaging, while centering the discussion around educators' voices. For this reason, it is organized around the experiences and expertise of four educators across the U.S. Throughout the bulletin, we explore how these educators embrace translanguaging to create spaces for their students' multilingualism and their different ways of knowing. Look for the reflection questions in each section and use them to determine how you may adopt a translanguaging strategy in your practice.

We conclude this bulletin with some information gleaned from a survey of educators about their thoughts on the benefits and consequences of translanguaging in teaching and learning.

Translanguaging as a Superpower: An Exploration of Translanguaging in Kindergarten

"In the beginning, it happens organically... they are absorbing and learning two different languages"

Michelle Reyes, Kindergarten Teacher in Schaumburg, Illinois



Michelle has been teaching for four years and she has come to realize that the bilingual children in her classes use translanguaging naturally. "I envision them like, picking through their brain and finding the word they have to use just because their thoughts and their brains run so much faster than their mouths," she notes. What Michelle describes is what García, Ibarra Johnson, and Seltzer (2017) call the translanguaging *corriente*—the flow of students' dynamic bilingualism. You can envision language moving like the current in a stream—children use language in forms that adapt to the way they experience the world around them. And like the current in a stream, the *corriente* never stops; it is always moving.

At times, bilingual programs attempt to dam the *corriente*. Given that Michelle has taught older students, she is able to compare how this fluidity is often bounded by school models. She

notices the effort of students trying to bound their communication to a single language and juxtaposes that experience to that of the natural way in which bilingual kindergarteners use language, or the ways some bilingual adults use language when having a *concha* and *cafecito* together.

Below are some ways in which Michelle takes advantage of the bilingualism of her students during teaching and learning:

What Michelle does	What this means for her students
Explicitly reflects with her students on their <i>superpoderes</i> —the superpower of being able to speak and understand two languages. Yes, she wears a cape!	Emphasizes the linguistic assets of her students and their value in school.
Bridges learning across languages—reminds them of connections between concepts and topics they may have learned about in a different language.	Breaks down artificial borders between languages, creating spaces for deeper learning and reflection about language use. It also invites students who may feel more comfortable in one language into the conversation happening in the other language.
Recognizes what students <i>can do</i> across languages.	Assesses what students can comprehend and do as demonstrated by any language. In her class, this includes Spanish, English, drawings, scribbles, and other representations.

For Michelle, translanguageing allows students to share and be included in the learning. It is also a reflection of who they are, and most importantly, it is a superpower that can be harnessed throughout life.

Reflection Questions

As you think about the use of language in your class, consider:

- What actions can you take to help your students become aware of their linguistic assets?
- How do you connect learning across the year? What opportunities exist to highlight their linguistic assets to make these connections?
- How can you incorporate a translanguageing view of what your students can do in assessment?

Translanguaging and Students with Special Needs

“My students [with special education needs] still have to meet the standards... so what translanguaging allows is for them to do just that.”

Sonya Bertini, Bilingual Special Education Teacher in Vineland, NJ



One of the most challenging areas in education is identifying effective ways of serving students who are multilingual and are also eligible for special education. Sonya Bertini’s passion is working with these students at a time in high school when the content is more challenging.

“We require a lot of discussion, we require more from the students,” says Sonya about the language demands of the curriculum in which her students engage. She recognizes that students at this stage are very smart in their own language and yet, when speaking a new language, they are not able to show what they know.

The consequence is that they often do not feel comfortable participating in discussions for fear of not being able to express themselves or position themselves socially in a positive light. While this may be true for many adolescents, language presents an additional perceived challenge for multilingual learners. “When they are able to use their language as a support, it adds so much to the class.” Sonya encourages her multilingual students to use all of the resources they possess when reading complex texts—verbal, visual, and gestures; as well as their life experiences and ways of knowing.

García & Kleifgen (2019) describe this connection of translanguaging to literacy as an *unbounded* and an *agentive dynamic* action. The term unbounded signals the ability to move across all these resources; the term agentive refers to the active role the student takes in the process; and the dynamic marks the active and fluid nature of the process. Sonya describes how one of her students, who is reading *The Outsiders* in English, turns and asks to tell her about the book in Spanish because she knows what she wants to say. By engaging all of her student’s language resources, Sonya and her students are doing three things:

1. **Facilitating a deeper understanding of the text:** Sonya reports that, through the use of translanguaging, her students, who are multilingual and have learning disabilities, engage with the same texts as other students in their grade level, and have more to say about them than when they are only allowed to discuss them in English. Translanguaging, according to Sonya, gives students a voice.
2. **Transforming the static monolingual text into a multilingual experience:** Texts may be written in English or Spanish, but when Sonya’s students read them, discuss them, and write about them, the literacy experience becomes multilingual (García, 2020).
3. **Getting to know each other better:** Because Sonya has welcomed translanguaging in her class, she knows much more about her students and their lives. Translanguaging has allowed Sonya to create a relationship with them. Sonya believes this is extremely important, because this way, according to her, they will know “there is at least one person in this planet who cares very much about them.”

Reflection Questions

As you think about the use of language in your class, consider:

- How can translanguaging facilitate deeper understanding of the text?
- What classroom experiences can help transform static monolingual texts into dynamic multilingual experiences?
- How can language become a vehicle for you to learn more about your students and develop a relationship with them?
- How can translanguage enhance teaching and learning for multilingual students who have identified learning disabilities?

Giving Students a Voice Through Translanguaging

“Taking [students’ translanguaging spaces] away...you are taking away their language and their culture.”

*Demetrica May, ESOL District Lead,
Phenix City, AL*



After 17 years of working with multilingual students in Puerto Rico, Virginia, Georgia, and Alabama, Demetrica has become not only an expert educator, but also a leader and advocate on behalf of multilingual students. According to her, translanguaging helps her connect with students and their families. Even in classrooms where the language of instruction is English, her ability to greet students in their home language or use translanguaging to clarify a word, helps her develop relationships with them and keep learning moving forward. Demetrica uses her own experiences to highlight that we are preparing children for an unknown future. She says, “I never thought my first teaching job would be in Puerto Rico [...] or that ESOL would take me to Spain or that it would take me to Guatemala or that it would take me to other countries, because that is not something that I grew thinking about.” Growing up in Columbus, Georgia, it was not until she became an adult that she became aware of a world beyond her hometown.

Being bilingual, Demetrica may be able to call attention to her students through a “Ven aquí, come,” or a “Mira, mira, look, look, what do you think?” However, as her student population has changed, she has found herself learning new phrases in Filipino, Mandarin, Korean, Vietnamese, and other languages. Her willingness to enhance her own language repertoire models this as an asset within her classroom.

She learns these phrases from her students and their families, so that she can write her introduction and other communications using some of their home languages. “It has changed our community,” Demetrica notes, giving as an example how schools in her district have hired bilingual resource staff to support students and families. The ability of these staff members to go back and forth between languages has created a more welcoming environment for everyone.

Demetrica also finds opportunities for translanguaging in the community. From the start of her career, Demetria has always engaged in the communities where her students live. To do this, she has developed relationships across various stakeholders in the community or taken advantage of translation programs to negotiate communication in communities where the language used to communicate is a language she does not speak. In turn, this has resulted in her always having someone whom she can call if she needs a language or cultural broker.

Demetrica does this work to ensure that she can communicate with students and families in their language—because she sees this as a way to give students and their families a voice. And this is the driving force behind her advocacy on behalf of them. She sees translanguaging as a tool in this advocacy work. “I never used the word translanguaging, but if you’ve ever lived in Puerto Rico, you do it all day,” Demetrica explains, “Taking it away...you are taking away their language and their culture.” As a teacher and an advocate, one of Demetrica’s goals is to amplify her students’ voices. In her opinion, multilingual children are resources to our community.

In our current world, global communications and economies benefit from multilingualism. We already have multilingual resources in our classrooms, as Demetrica pointed out—our students are those resources. Our role as educators is to help them maximize their multilingual assets and realize their potential so that they can transform our society and our world.

Reflection Questions

As you think about the use of language in your class, consider:

- How can translanguaging support your instruction and relationships in the classroom?
- How might translanguaging help your school and district be a more welcoming space for students and their families?
- How is translanguaging present in your and your students’ communities? What resources are available?

Translanguaging and Social Justice

“We must become *traslingüistas*, *translenguadas*, *transladores*, and yes, even *transguerreras*.”

Mishelle Jurado, APS Spanish Language Arts and AP Spanish Literature and Culture Teacher and Biliteracy Coach, Albuquerque, NM



Back in 1987, writer and scholar Gloria Anzaldúa argued for shifting the ways in which bilingual people were seen and judged in the U.S. She noted that identity is intertwined with the way we speak and shaming people for the ways in which they use language is equivalent to shaming them for who they are. Anzaldúa challenged the closing of linguistic borders, that is, limiting bilingual people to use a single language when communicating. One powerful way in which she did this was by using language in her writing in ways that asserted her identity. Anzaldúa writes,

Deslenguadas. Somos los del español deficiente. We are your linguistic nightmare. your linguistic aberration, your linguistic mestisaje, the subject of your burla. Because we speak with tongues of fire we are culturally crucified. Racially, culturally, and linguistically somoshuérfanos—we speak an orphan tongue.

Twenty-two years after Anzaldúa, Ofelia García proposed translanguaging as an alternative lens to those monolingual approaches. Educational policy and research continued to be driven by monolingual ideologies that painted a picture of bilingual children from a deficit perspective. By comparing bilingual students to students who only spoke one or the other language, and ignoring their fluid use of language, many researchers like Terry Wiley and Ofelia García (2016), contend that we are setting them up for failure within a system that was not created with them in mind.

In recent years, translanguaging has captured the attention and curiosity of researchers and educators. Some of these educators have leveraged their expertise and creativity to re-imagine and transform teaching and learning in their classrooms. Mishelle, a *transguerrera* in New Mexico, explains how she uses translanguaging:

<i>Receptive Use of Language</i>	Example
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Translanguaging happens in its most organic form. • <i>Students</i> use translanguaging to process what they are learning. • <i>Students</i> newer to the language of instruction can use it to make meaning of the learning. • <i>Students</i> fluent across both languages use translanguaging to process freely and at deeper levels. • <i>Teacher</i> does not need to plan for it intentionally but needs to create a space for it. 	<p>When Mishelle shares a 19th century text from the romantic era and asks students to describe how it portrays nationalism, her students start weaving through their language practices: they read in Spanish, turn and talk to each other in English, annotate the text in Spanish, English, or both.</p> <p>In that space students make meaning and process freely across languages. They use their knowledge of languages (e.g., cognates) and experiences and learning from other classes.</p>

<i>Expressive Use of Language</i>	Example
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language use is more intentional • <i>Teacher</i> has to plan for use of academic language (e.g., Spanish for Mishelle’s AP Spanish Literature and Culture) and use of all of the students’ language resources. • <i>Students</i> read texts using language in a variety of ways 	<p>Living in the borderlands, Mishelle feels it is important that students explore their identity as border-crossers. The fact that she teaches AP Spanish Literature and Culture offers them the opportunity to do it in a critical way. Her students read <i>Anzaldúa’s Borderlands</i> and <i>¿Quién eres?</i> by Sabine Ulibarrí, a teacher, writer, critic, and poet from New Mexico. After a deep comparative analysis of the two, students select words that they like the most from each piece and use the same amount of their own words to create a free poem about their intersectionality. Then, they dive into a medieval piece from a Muslim point of view. By the time they are finished with this exploration of their identity and its connection to local and global literary perspectives, they are ready to work through the challenging literature from the AP course. Mishelle plans for, shows models, and encourages the intentional use of translanguaging in students’ writing.</p>

The excerpt on the right is a sample of a final project of a student in Mishelle's AP Spanish Literature and Culture class, after the contrastive analysis of Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*, and *Bilingüe*, a song by artist Sno Tha Product following a similar lesson as the one shared above.

Advanced Placement (AP) Spanish Literature and Culture is a national curriculum and it requires anyone teaching it to cover certain subjects. In Mishelle's AP Spanish Literature and Culture class, she covers all of the required curriculum and she adds literature that connects with the borderlands, where

she lives, and with the experiences of their students and their communities. She has used hip hop, Chicano literature, Náhuatl poetry, and as many resources as she can to connect the AP content to voices that have traditionally been silenced in mainstream curriculum. In her own words, she is "getting those silent voices to speak."

Excerpt from *Yo sé quien soy* by Alexandra Jacquez, APS Senior Student (2019).

Soy hispana, mexicana, mulata, mestiza pero todo
eso no me identifica
I'm a half breed Mexican-American
A woman who can speak both English and Spanish
Con el nopal en la frente
Me juzgaron varias gentes
Yo quiero vivir sin fronteras
Porque con barreras, no avanzas ni te recuperas
People call me burra trying to steal my voice
Wanting to change my race and I'm trying to avoid
I know I'm amazing, and I know I'm fantastic, I know
who the hell I am so you need to look
right past it
don't judge me for my skin, judge me for my actions

Reflection Questions

As you think about the use of language in your class, consider:

- How might you and your students use translanguaging in processing complex texts?
- What opportunities can you offer your students to use translanguaging in expressing their identities and experiences?
- How might translanguaging transform your students' experiences in your classroom?
- How might translanguaging transform your own teaching experience?

What Do Educators Believe About Translanguaging? A Survey

WIDA, in collaboration with the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), developed a survey among educators of multilingual learners to learn more about their ideas, feelings, and practices around translanguaging.

Ultimately 447 educators participated in the survey in the spring and summer of 2019. While a forthcoming report details the results of the survey, here are a few observations:

- Educators who participated in the survey recognize and approve translanguaging as way to enhance communication and comprehension.
- While many educators noted that they strongly approve of students using translanguaging in school, they were less enthusiastic about teachers using translanguaging. Educators consistently rejected the idea that translanguaging causes confusion about language use or limits the opportunity to learn languages for multilingual students.
- Almost every educator who participated reported using translanguaging in their practice for various purposes.

Visit the [WIDA website](#) for a full report about this survey.

A Few Final Words About Translanguaging

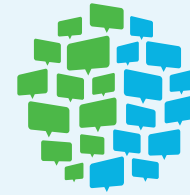
The education of multilingual students has historically been addressed using ideas, approaches, and benchmarks created for monolingual students. This practice has increased existing inequities for multilingual children, from the moment these learning expectations are set, to the moment their performance is evaluated. The purpose of this bulletin was to share specific examples of how some teachers use translanguaging—from kindergarten, to high school, and in the education of students with special needs—to decrease educational inequities and to take advantage of their students' bilingual *superpoderes*.

We want to leave you with some words from a piece that Tatyana Kleyn and Ofelia García wrote in 2019 about translanguaging as an act of transformation:

Competent English speakers will result when the TESOL field sees students not as “second language” learners and speakers, but when they are allowed from the very beginning to use all their language repertoire to make meaning of the new features, and when they are evaluated not on how these new features are used in comparison with monolingual speakers, but on how these new features are used competently to make meaning, do science, become a historian, be a literary author, teach, or do the myriad things that competent human beings can do.

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