

# Critical Evaluation of Translanguaging in College English Courses

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the effectiveness of translanguaging as a teaching method in the context of Chinese university English courses. The researcher introduces the current methods of teaching English in this context and compares them with translanguaging. The researcher finds that code-switching is perhaps more common in Chinese university English classrooms than translanguaging. At the same time, the researcher suggests that the use of translanguaging may help Chinese teachers to move away from being supervisory teachers and thus build a more harmonious teacher-student relationship. Finally, the authors suggest that translanguaging can contribute to a multilingual environment, thereby fostering multiculturalism in Chinese university English programmes and fostering students' growth towards global citizenship.

**Keywords:** translanguaging, language education, multilingualism

The context of this paper is the undergraduate College English (CE) course at Hunan Normal University, where the author completed four years of undergraduate study. The CE course is a compulsory course for all non-English majoring undergraduate students in China. After nearly 20 years of promotion by the Chinese Ministry of Education, the vast majority of primary schools in China offer English courses, usually starting in the third grade. It means that most students are multilingualists, having mastered at least two languages, Mandarin and English, before entering the CE classroom. CE courses can therefore be considered as multilingual classes in which English is the target language. This paper will discuss the effectiveness of using translanguaging as a teaching method in the context.

The undergraduate CE course at Hunan Normal University is offered over four semesters, concentrating on the first and second years of undergraduate study. The course is mainly based on the textbook *Comprehensive College English Course*. The curriculum is varied, with regular classes, practice classes, and presentation classes. In addition to the regular classrooms with multimedia equipment, there are also modern teaching materials such as a listening room. Teachers have good academic backgrounds and even experience studying in native English-speaking countries. The course has been running for many years and is already relatively mature, but it could do with some additional "multilingualism". Even among experts, there is no uniform answer to the question of what characterizes bilingualism or multilingualism (Lüdi, 2009). Everyone is currently practicing two (or more) languages and can switch from one to the other when necessary - this is bilingualism (or multilingualism) (Lüvdi & Py, 2003; following Oksaar, 1980). Similar to some of the traditional language classes, the CE courses are based on the textbook, with lectures on the content of the texts; in the practice sessions, both listening and reading, students write the worksheets first, and the teacher gives and explains the answers; even the final exams are based on a recitation of the texts.

Some of the teaching methods described above are common in language classes in China but are mainly used in junior and senior secondary courses. This is due to the pressure to progress to higher education, which has forced junior and senior secondary schools to adopt exam-oriented teaching methods. At university, however, the pressure to progress to higher education is reduced, giving more options and possibilities in the language

classroom. This is one of the reasons why translanguaging is an option in the CE courses to increase multilingualism. The term translanguaging was first found in the Welsh *Trawsieithu* and was introduced by Cen Williams (1996) to refer to bilingual teaching practice. In a broader sense, translanguaging refers to the flexible language practice of multilingual individuals in interaction (García & Li Wei, 2014). That is, multilingual individuals can use multiple languages flexibly in their language practice. The CE course at Hunan Normal University uses English as the target language and is taught in the course mainly in Mandarin and English. Although at least two languages are used in the classroom, the different languages are independent of each other. For example, when teaching grammar, teachers will use Mandarin more frequently. This may be because explaining difficult learning content in a language that is more familiar to the students will help them learn better. Although teachers use bilingualism, the two languages have entirely separate roles - English as the learning content and Mandarin as the explanation medium. In some traditional classrooms, there is a focus on bilingual (or multilingual) translation. For example, by having students do translation exercises, teachers correct their linguistic errors as they translate. The prefix “trans-” in the term “translanguaging” - itself - contains three layers of meaning: firstly, it is a transcendence of the boundaries of language and other cognitive and symbolic systems; secondly, for language users, translanguaging has the potential to transform their linguistic competence and identity and worldview; thirdly, it is a study of human communication and learning based on a supra-disciplinary perspective, breaking the boundaries of traditional linguistics, psychology, psychology and worldview (Li, 2021). The obvious linguistic boundaries clearly make the multilingual in the classroom superficial and contradict the idea of translanguaging.

Nevertheless, this exercise may be “code-switching” rather than translanguaging. In the CE course at Hunan Normal University, the multilingualism of both students and teachers was closer to “code-switching”. Code-switching emphasizes the structural differences between languages. The analysis of bilingual behavior from the perspective of code-switching involves first determining the number and variety of languages included and then focusing on structural analysis or the functional benefits of code-switching (Li, 2021). This is particularly evident in the grammar teaching and translation exercises mentioned earlier. Grammar teaching is essentially the use of Chinese to break down the structure of English, while translation is the mechanical matching of meaning between Chinese and English. Language is not only an abstract set of codes but also contains and carries with it a specific set of historical and cultural traditions (Genesee, Paradis & Crago, 2010). While these approaches do have some positive effects on language teaching, they do not allow students to gain higher-order gains from the process of learning, such as forming an identity and building a worldview. Translanguaging can give CE classes more space to develop bilingual (multilingual) speakers. Li (2017) suggests that “The actual purpose of learning new languages-to become bilingual and multilingual, rather than to replace the learner’s L1 to become another monolingual-often gets forgotten or neglected, and the bilingual, rather than monolingual, speaker is rarely used as the model for teaching and learning”. In the CE classroom, English as the target language should naturally be the main content of the class. Translanguaging can help to break down barriers between languages, increase the linguistic freedom of the classroom and help students to learn the target language better at the same time.

The use of translanguaging in language teaching also involves the role of the teacher. The teacher sometimes acts as a watchdog and needs to monitor the students’ use of the target language. Teachers may restrict the use of languages other than the target language for fear that excessive use of other languages may negatively affect the learning of the target language. Although teachers are bilingual in CE courses at Hunan Normal University, there are no explicit rules against using languages other than English. However, by default, students are expected to use English in the class when answering questions or discourse with others. However, students still secretly use their mother tongue Chinese with this subtle default, for example, other students will whisper in Chinese to remind their classmate when he is unable to understand a question asked by the teacher. So although teachers and students are bilingual or multilingual, it is not a two-way street. For multilingualists, subconscious language switching is recurrent and inevitable, and current classroom research suggests that translanguaging is a natural occurrence for multilingual students (Canagarajah, 2011). Language use is difficult to limit. This situation will be improved in a two-way bilingual classroom in translanguaging. Students should have the freedom to choose their language. For young bilinguals and other foreign language learners, language mixing and switching can positively impact decision-making and other cognitive skills (Li, 2021). In the process of translanguaging, students not only learn the target language better but also improve other skills. All these newer types of bilingual education have in common precisely the wide range of languages in the classroom and the increased tolerance for multilingual practice in the classroom. In these classrooms, bilingual practice is often accepted as the norm, as both students and teachers take advantage of this opportunity to translanguaging (Garcia, 2009). Therefore, the introduction of translanguaging in this curriculum can improve the problem of students not being able to use the language freely while freeing up the teacher to be the “supervisor”. On the one hand, it promotes a multilingual turn in the class. On the other hand, it creates a more intimate relationship between teacher and

student.

It can be added that multilingualism is often (but not always) accompanied by multiculturalism, that is, the set of knowledge associated with different socio-cultural communities (Lüdi, 2009). In classrooms where translanguaging is the method and the multilingual turn is the goal, here multiculturalism is often accompanied. Multiculturalism can be seen as a method of building such classrooms or resulting from such classrooms. Both Chinese and English courses are compulsory, but Chinese words are internalized in fiction, prose, and poetry. Like a native language course, teachers can use first-hand English language materials as teaching materials. Examples include BBC and VOA broadcasts, English music and film productions, English language programs, and other Internet materials. These materials are a mixture of language and culture and using this mixture as teaching materials allows students to engage more directly with the target language and its underlying logic, allowing multilingualism and multiculturalism to take place simultaneously in the courses. Intrinsic motivation is generally defined as the motivation to engage in an activity because it is enjoyable and satisfying (Noels, 2000). In addition, these materials are more appealing to students than traditional textbooks and are more likely to generate interest and increase motivation. When the process of learning languages becomes enjoyable, students are likely to choose to use the target language more often in the process of translanguaging. Perhaps initially, students will rely more on their mother tongue and use Mandarin frequently in translanguaging. However, as they continue to learn during the course, the weight of English in translanguaging will increase, and eventually, the aim of learning English will be reached. While the traditional language classroom has its advantages, translanguaging can allow students to master the language and, more importantly, develop a multilingual mindset and multicultural connotations. This is how learners can grow towards becoming truly multilingualists and even global citizens.

“Multilingualism” is not a new thing in China, which has a wide variety of languages, including many ethnic languages and dialects. With the internationalization of China, more and more Chinese people are learning foreign languages, and many universities, for instance, offer a wide range of foreign language courses. Monolingualism cannot give language learners advantages in such a complex language environment. If I were to become a language teacher in the future, I would like to teach not only the function of the language but also explain the culture of the language to my students in my classroom. In this way, the language will become their “home” rather than their “house”. Translanguaging as a language model can increase the multilingual turn in the language courses, and the multilingual turn can contribute to the development of multiculturalism. The new generation of language learners in China can use language as a communication tool and as a cultural vehicle, allowing language learners to become truly multilingual on multiple social, cultural, and historical levels.

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