

Translanguaging and Its Impact on Malaysian Preschool Children's Vocabulary and Cultural Identities: A Case Study From Johor Bahru

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Abstract

Malaysia's multilingual and multicultural environment provides both unique prospect and challenges for pre-primary education. Young learners often navigate multiple languages in their daily activities, making translanguaging an increasingly relevant pedagogical practice. This paper presents preliminary findings on the impact of translanguaging in supporting vocabulary development, cultural identity and multicultural engagement among 5- and 6-year-old children in the early childhood classroom. In particular, it focuses on how vocabulary is learned as multiple languages are used between the teacher and the children as well as amongst the children themselves. The study employs the qualitative-method approach, combining classroom observation and interviews to capture both teacher- student and peer interactions. Thematic analysis is used to analyse the transcripts while observations notes provided additional contextual detail on children's linguistic and cultural practices. The findings reveal that translanguaging plays an important role in helping children learn new vocabulary, as they draw upon their diverse linguistic repertoires to construct meaning and learn new words from both teachers or their peers. Furthermore, translanguaging serves as a valuable resource for identity expression, allowing students to validate their cultural heritage while cultivating a sense of belonging in the classroom. It also fosters intercultural engagement by encouraging children to negotiate and exchange meanings across diverse languages and cultural norms.

Keywords: translanguaging, multilingual, multicultural, cultural identity

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Introduction

This study looks at an important gap in early childhood education. It explores how using all languages together—called translinguaging—helps young children learn new words and develop their cultural identity. While many studies have shown the benefits of translinguaging for older students in primary and secondary school, very little research has been done with young children. This is surprising because young children naturally use all the languages they know to understand the world around them. Unlike older learners, who may have learned to keep languages separate, young children mix languages freely without thinking of them as different systems. Translinguaging teaching supports this natural habit, helping teachers build new vocabulary on top of words children already know, while also respecting the culture and identity tied to their home languages. This respect is very important because banning a child's home language does not just limit their vocabulary—it can hurt their sense of self and their ability to think deeply. In Malaysia, a country with many languages including English, Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese, and Indian languages, young children in places like Johor Bahru already move easily between different language varieties. However, most research on Malaysian early childhood education has focused only on learning through play, ignoring how children's many language skills could be used for teaching that respects their culture. This study fills that gap by providing real evidence from Malaysia, adding to global discussions about translinguaging in early years education, and offering helpful ideas for teachers working with young children anywhere.

It addresses four research questions:

1. How do teachers employ translinguaging practices in English classrooms with young multilingual learners?
2. What is the impact of translinguaging on young learners' vocabulary acquisition in the English classroom?
3. In what ways does translinguaging support the development of cultural identity among young multilingual learners in English instruction?
4. What challenges do teachers encounter when implementing translinguaging, and what strategies do they employ to support language development and cultural identity in multilingual English classrooms?

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in a comprehensive theoretical framework that strategically unifies three complementary perspectives: Sociocultural Theory, Translinguaging Theory, and the Ecological Concept of Affordances. This theoretical triad collectively offers a comprehensive and synergistic analytical lens for examining translinguaging not merely as a linguistic strategy confined to language processing, but as a multifaceted social, cognitive, and identity-forming process embedded within the complex ecology of multilingual kindergarten environments. Each constituent theory contributes a unique analytical viewpoint, yet together they coalesce into a unified interpretive instrument capable of capturing the full complexity of the phenomenon under investigation.

Methodology

A comprehensive overview of the research methodologies developed to examine the complex function of translinguaging in multilingual kindergarten environments in Johor Bahru, providing a detailed foundations of the philosophical assumptions, research framework,

participant selection, data collection techniques, analytical strategies, and ethical considerations that govern this study. A qualitative case study methodology is employed, as outlined by Yin (2018), to enable an in-depth, contextual analysis of translanguaging as a dynamic phenomenon situated within the authentic complexities of early childhood classrooms. A comprehensive, multi-method data collection approach employed, integrating non-participant classroom observations to document naturalistic translanguaging practices, semi-structured interviews with educators to explore their beliefs, decision-making processes, and perceived limitations, document analysis of curricular materials and classroom artifacts, and play-based observations with conversational prompts.

Participants

Two distinct participant groups; each selected according to carefully considered criteria designed to maximize the depth and relevance of collected data:

1. Teachers: A selected group of three kindergarten teachers were recruited from the participating institution, with the precise number determined by the size of the kindergarten and the number of classes serving the target age group.
2. Students: A specific cohort of six to eight students was selected from the classrooms of the participating educators, with the final sample size determined by the number of consenting families and the diversity of linguistic backgrounds present in each classroom.

Findings

Teachers use translanguaging by mixing languages to help young children understand lessons, even though the school has a rule that each language should be taught separately by different teachers. Some teachers quietly break this rule because they know it helps children learn better. For vocabulary, translanguaging works in two ways: children learn new words by connecting them to words they already know in other languages (like linking *rambutan* to *hongmaotan*), and teachers also help them tell languages apart by teaching phonics step by step—English first, then Bahasa, then Mandarin. When it comes to cultural identity, children don't really think about being “Chinese” or “Malay”—they just enjoy learning with words and pictures from all three languages as a fun classroom experience. The main challenge teachers face is the school's strict rule about keeping languages separate, which doesn't work well in real teaching. To solve this, teachers use picture cards with three languages, give hints like “you are now in Bahasa class,” teach sounds in a clear order, and let children use all their languages naturally when talking to each other. These strategies help children learn better and feel comfortable with their multilingual background.

Discussion

The findings show that translanguaging with young learners is complicated and needs to be understood from multiple angles. From a sociocultural perspective, teachers used translanguaging as quick, on-the-spot support within the child's “zone of learning,” helping them understand just a little beyond what they could do alone, and teachers learned these strategies from each other through monthly meetings rather than formal training. From a translanguaging theory perspective, the school's rule of keeping languages apart represents the very old-fashioned thinking that the theory rejects—Teacher A used “weak” translanguaging, treating home languages only as a temporary crutch for English, while children naturally used “strong” translanguaging by mixing all their languages freely. However, the data also questions

pure translanguaging theory because teachers' concerns about confusion and their use of strategies to help children tell languages apart suggest that for young learners, clearly showing differences between languages may actually be helpful, meaning teachers need a balanced approach—allowing free mixing for understanding but also teaching each language's unique features. Finally, from an ecological perspective, the classroom environment offered many learning opportunities, but teacher attitudes and school rules acted as barriers; Teacher A's English-only approach limited learning, Teacher B's warm approach opened up more chances for interaction, and children during peer play simply ignored school rules and used all their languages anyway. In short, translanguaging is not just a teaching method but a result of what the environment offers, what teachers and children choose to use, and what rules get in the way—showing that early childhood education needs a flexible, practical approach rather than following any single theory too strictly.

Conclusion

This study shows that translanguaging in this Malaysian young learner is a complex and often messy issue. The school tries to keep all languages separate by having different teachers for English, Bahasa, and Mandarin, but this rule does not match reality. The children naturally mix all their languages together as one complete tool for talking, playing, and learning, while teachers show different approaches—some strictly follow the separation rule, some quietly resist it, and some rely on years of experience to be flexible. Translanguaging helps children learn new words by comparing languages side by side and creates a classroom where using many languages feels normal, not special or strange. The main finding is a big gap: the school's policy is based on the idea that languages should stay separate, but the children are already skilled at using them fluidly together. This questions whether strict language separation policies make sense in a multilingual country like Malaysia. Teachers and schools should stop fighting against children's natural way of using language and instead recognize, value, and strategically use the translanguaging skills that children already bring to the classroom, leading to better recommendations for teaching, school rules, and future research.

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Reference

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods*. (6th ed.). Sage Publications.