Translanguaging: Origins and Development of a Pedagogical Practice

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Abstract – The linguistic complexity of multilingual countries presents many questions in developing a discussion about learning and teaching style and curriculum planning that facilitate the learning process for multilingual learners. This research will examine the complexities of Foreign Language Acquisition (FLA) by questioning the benefits of translanguaging theory developed by Baker, García and Li Wei, in order to facilitate the interplay between different languages in the classroom and allow learners to employ their full linguistic repertoires. The present paper will examine the origins and development of translanguaging in the multilingual classroom as a pedagogical practice, working with the interdependence of two (or more) languages that enables learners' linguistic and cognitive capabilities. The paper will be divided into three parts. The first one will analyse the origins of the term and its development as pedagogical theory. The second part of the paper will focus on the positive effect of using translanguaging in the foreign language classroom. Finally, the third part of the paper will consider the improvements that the foreign language education settings should embrace while adopting translanguaging as a pedagogical practice.

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The term translanguaging was first coined to indicate a pedagogical practice and later on it developed in the area of Applied Linguistics. Nowadays translanguaging refers to a linguistic practice with sociolinguistic implications as well as an innovative approach to teaching.

The word translanguaging comes from the Welsh term *trawsieithu* that was first used by Cen Williams [1] to refer to the pedagogical practices where two languages are used in a bilingual classroom for different purposes and with the goal of developing learners' full competence in both the languages. The term translanguaging has to be understood by looking at the historic separation between Welsh and English. In fact, the context in which translanguaging was first used as a pedagogical practice was characterized by a rigid separation of the two languages, adopting the existence of two "monolingualisms", clearly distinguished by a difference in terms of prestige where English was the language of dominance and Welsh the endangered language [2]. The process of revitalization of Welsh language marks the use of translanguaging in educational settings. To adopt translanguaging as a pedagogical practice in school means to allow the free use of two languages by students and teachers. Williams defined the term translanguaging as a practice when "you receive information through the medium of one language (e.g., English) and use it yourself through the medium of the other language (e.g., Welsh). Before you can use that information successfully, you must have fully understood it" [3]. Later on, the Welsh word *trawsieithu* was translated

into English by Baker (2001) who developed the research further on by focusing on bilingualism in education. The analysis of translanguaging as a pedagogical practice and its consequent development as a current term in Applied Linguistics was carried out by the work of Ofelia García and Li Wei. In their work *Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education* (2014), the necessity of further research the topic is underlined by the authors. Before the development of research on translanguaging, the studies on the negative effects of bilingualism were extended. Saer [4], for example, argued that bilingualism was the source of mental confusion. In addition, bilingualism has been considered by some scholars a practice capable of polluting the purity of the language [5]. The negative attitude towards bilingualism had a consequence in the educational settings where separating languages in the classroom has been the norm. As reported by García and Li Wei [6], language minorities in most countries in the world were, and continue to be educated only in the dominant language. In addition, in the programs that supposedly aim to develop bilingualism, like in the foreign/second language and bilingual education programs, the emphasis is on the separation of languages [7]. The development of translanguaging in education can be associated to the decreasing of negative perspectives on bilingualism. The translanguaging turn, in fact, focuses on the idea of rejecting a separation of the languages in the classroom and therefore sustains the simultaneous use of two or more languages [8],

[9], [10]. This idea is based on the concept of translanguaging as the full range of linguistic performances of multilingual language users deploy for different purposes that transcend the combination of structures and the alternations between systems [11]. The theory of translanguaging analyses complex multilingual interactions occurring naturally in the world. It understands bilinguals' speech as the construction of a single, yet complex repertoire drawing from different linguistic repositories [12]. It does not measure the speaker's performance against a standard, but in terms of the strategies employed in different contexts to achieve different goals. García and Li Wei [13] by reporting Mignolo [14] underline how translanguaging does not refer to two separate languages nor to a synthesis of different language practices or to a hybrid mixture. Rather translanguaging refers to new language practices that make visible the complexity of language exchanges among people with different histories, and releases histories and understandings that had been buried within fixed language identities constrained by nation-states [15].

One of the central practice concerning the use of translanguaging in the classroom is voluntarily changing the language of input and the language of output. As cited in Lewis, Jones and Baker [16], Williams underlines that "translanguaging entails using one language to reinforce the other in order to increase understanding and in order to augment the pupil's ability in both languages" [17]. The author also highlights how translanguaging makes use of the stronger language to develop the weaker one. For example, the student carries out the reading or listening of a lesson in one language and develops the activity assigned by the teacher in the other language. This way the learner can work on a balanced development of the two languages. In fact translanguaging is defined by William as a pedagogical theory where the main focus is learning as a process of deep cognitive bilingual engagement, in fact the process of translanguaging is not simply translating, rather it requires a deeper understanding involving finding parallel words, processing and relying meaning [18]. Many researchers [19], [20] underlined the positive effects of using the translanguaging pedagogic theory in the bilingual or Foreign Language classroom. Baker in his book *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* [21] argues that there are four potential educational advantages to translanguaging, with a specific focus on its use in the bilingual classroom. Firstly translanguaging can promote a deeper and fuller understanding of the subject matter [22]. In fact if the student understands a concept in two languages it can be said that s/he really understood it. Secondly, translanguaging can help students to develop skills in their weaker language. Students tend to use their stronger language, which means the one that gives them more comfort, avoiding more challenging tasks. In this sense, Baker underlines that translanguaging works on the development of academic language skills in both language and full bilingualism [23].

Thirdly, translanguaging can facilitate the cooperation between home and school, giving the possibility to parents speaking a minority language to still support their child with the school work. Finally, translanguaging can promote the development of second language ability together with content learning. In fact, students can even learn their classmates' languages if sensitive and strategic use of translanguaging is made of both languages in class. Another positive effect of using translanguaging in the classroom is the capacity of allowing the dimensions of creativity and criticality in relation to multilingualism to play a fundamental role in the [24]. As Kenner [25] points out, translanguaging highlights the plural combinations of modes and media across social contexts and social identities. Allowing students to 'translanguage' means to let them "express their sense of living in multiple social and cultural worlds" [26]. In addition, translanguaging offers a way to transgress educational practices and structures by destabilising language hierarchies [27].

As it has been discussed, the term translanguaging was coined in the context of bilingual classroom. Later on, as reported by Wang Danping [28], translanguaging became an emergent paradigm in the areas of content and language integrated learning contexts [29] and sociolinguistics. More recently, the translanguaging lens has been adopted in the area of Foreign Language Acquisition (FLA). This can possibly be understood due to the high level of linguistic and cultural diversity that characterises foreign language classrooms where translanguaging can be used as an opportunity for language skills development as well as for integration. As it has been reported, for many years, research has been underlining the negative effects of mixing languages in the classroom since they could pollute the purity of the language and create confusion in the learners' mind and therefore reduce their language learning. Recently, an opposite school of thought started rising. Many researchers underlined the limiting and undesirable situation of an overarching monolingualism in the foreign language classroom, condemning a useless strictness in forbidding the use of the student's mother tongue in the language classroom [30]. At the *Summit on the future of the TESOL profession*, held in Athens in 2017, Li Wei addressed the issue of language choice in the foreign language classroom by drawing the attention on the main goal of teaching and learning a foreign language. According to Li Wei [31], the purpose of teaching and learning a foreign language is not to become another monolingual, rather Foreign Language education should focus on the creation of bilingual or monolingual speakers, able to move from one language to the other and to flexibly adapt their language resources according to the other speakers and to the need of the situation. This concept allow us to question the common practice of strictly using class time to develop skills in the FL while students' L1 is

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avoided since it is believed it might have a negative effect on the learner. On the contrary, as the theory of translanguaging shows us, allowing learners to use their full repertoire means empowering them. This means going beyond labeled languages and use the entire linguistic resources of a speakers, since these can be beneficial for the acquisition of the new language. In order to explain the negative outcomes of dividing languages, Li Wei compared the action of forbidding a learner to use his/her L1 to the action of tying one of his hands or blindfolding one of his/her eyes and asking the person to do and see things as others with two hands or two eyes do. As foreign language educators, we should not be blindly believe old and unproven theories on language purity, rather working for the students' learning which might involve reconsidering our knowledge and open our minds to new pedagogic perspectives.

Translanguaging as a pedagogic theory is reshaping the traditional way of understanding language classrooms and classroom interactions (student-student and teacher-student). Therefore, it can understood that language teachers should reconsider the way of considering languages and dismiss some long-established yet unproven assumptions in second language acquisition [32]. In order for this to happen, researchers underlined the necessity to facilitate structured translanguaging strategies [33]. As pointed out by Canagarajah, the lack of explicit taxonomic structure for translanguaging pedagogies creates confusion for the teachers. What it seems to be missing are the strategies in foreign language teaching that include translanguaging theory. While the theoretical ground of translanguaging is well-developed and has been deeply investigated in the past twenty years, many studies underlined the need for practical models to be followed in a contextualised classroom [34], [35]. In fact, research on translanguaging needs an explicit guidance to practitioners that focuses on three different aspects. Firstly, a reconceptualisation of languages in the classroom where a new linguistic hierarchy could take form by putting an end to the hegemonic power of English. Secondly, a teaching model that could guide teachers in creating a classroom environment where students' voices are legitimate and valued [36]. And thirdly, the practical implementations of translanguaging strategies in the FL classroom with classroom activities that, by drawing on translanguaging theory, can improve students' ability with the new foreign language that they are acquiring.

This paper gave a brief summary of the origin and development of the translanguaging theory. It aimed to highlight its positive implementation in the Foreign Language classroom. By looking at the current translanguaging practices in the classroom, the paper tried to understand which are the teachers' needs to implement translanguaging in FL classrooms and the difficulties that they might encounter. The intention was to observe the development of translanguaging from a pedagogic theory to a pedagogic practice.

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