

Studying foreign languages in higher education: The translanguaging reality

What this research was about and why it is important

Translanguaging, that is (strategically) using multiple languages, is a reality of how we speak and teach languages (in the classroom). It promotes an inclusive language perspective that sees one's first language (L1) playing an important role in learning a second language (L2). For decades, we have believed that immersing our students into a full target language context is the best way to make them speak the language. Little attention has been paid to how this policy is received by students and how much L2 they actually need. The worrying decline of foreign language learning in Anglophone countries has made it imperative for us to examine our teaching practices. New Zealand has witnessed a steady drop of foreign language learners in universities. Focusing on students' experiences, this study investigated a group of students from three Mandarin Chinese programmes through questionnaires and interviews. Findings show that despite a strict monolingual, L2-only, policy, there was a translanguaging reality in L2 classrooms. Students reported half of their class time was actually in the L1. It also showed university students demanded a two-way communication strategy while their L2 was limited. Translanguaging pedagogy enables them to be heard and seen as complex social beings and helps improve student engagement and retention in the higher education setting.

What the researchers did

- Surveyed 237 students from three universities for their preferences of L2 use in learning Chinese. The number of participants represented 62.4% of the total population of university Chinese language learners in New Zealand. The study has, for the first time, provided a profile for Chinese learners in New Zealand higher education.
- Interviewed 16 students for their personal experiences of L2 use. Provided evidence to understand various factors that are affecting their desire of L2 use in class.

What the researchers found

- *Respecting the translanguaging reality*
 - (1) Revealed the discrepancy between the prescribed monolingualism and a perceived translanguaging reality.
 - (2) The average amount of L2 demand was 50%. L2 demand did not increase as their proficiency level increased.
 - (3) Students saw classroom L2 practices as a dynamic process that was influenced by many external factors.
 - (4) A flexible L2 policy is more realistic to address the differences in proficiency levels and personal demands.
- *Creating a translanguaging space*
 - (1) A translanguaging space was viewed as stress-relieving moments within a fast-paced learning style.
 - (2) Teachers were found in need of improving their professional skills in using students' L1 in teaching L2.
- *Breaking away from the translanguaging guilt*
 - (1) Not all students valued their L1 in the process of learning a L2 and felt guilty for using L1 in a L2 class.
 - (2) Some students' prior language learning experiences have shaped their minds with monolingual bias.
- *Enabling a dialogic pedagogy*
 - (1) Intellectual and two-way communication are highly valued in higher education but rarely happen in L2 class.
 - (2) The translanguaging pedagogy allows both teachers and students to make meaningful dialogues in class.

Things to consider

- Future research should continue to re-examine the monolingual myths and monolingualism bias in foreign language teaching because such mindset limits students' ability to exercise their agency and creativity.
- Language teachers should consider encouraging a translanguaging-powered dialogic pedagogy in university foreign language classes. It allows students an opportunity to co-theorise knowledge about the L2 and L2 culture, instead of being a passive learner.
- Translanguaging approach can be used to improve student engagement and retention in higher education. Language policy in the classroom can be dynamic and co-developed by the teacher and students as the course progresses. Pre-course student surveys can be conducted to understand their backgrounds and learning motivation.

Materials, data, open access article: N/A

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