



Unlocking Language Learning through Translanguaging

An Effective Strategy for Acquisition in the Classroom

Project Tokyo Case Study 2

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During the Project Tokyo delegation visit to Japan, the team observed a range of international schools where translanguaging was systematically employed as a pedagogical strategy to empower learners. This practice was not incidental but rather embedded within the schools' instructional frameworks, reflecting a deliberate commitment to recognising and harnessing the linguistic repertoires of children. Translanguaging emerged as a recurring theme, consistently implemented as a means of enabling learners to draw upon their full linguistic resources in order to overcome barriers to understanding and to access curriculum content more effectively.

The concept of translanguaging, though relatively recent in educational discourse, has its origins in the Welsh term *trawsieithu*, introduced by Ceu Williams in 1994 to describe the pedagogical practice of alternating between Welsh and English in the classroom. This innovation was later extended and popularised through the works of Baker (2001, 2006, 2011) and Ofelia García (2009), who reconceptualised translanguaging as more than a classroom technique. García positions translanguaging as a paradigm shift in how language is understood, taught, and experienced, emphasising its role in challenging monolingual ideologies and recognising the dynamic, fluid nature of bilingual and multilingual communication.

By definition, translanguaging refers to the ability to move fluidly between languages, enabling learners to think across multiple linguistic systems simultaneously. It allows children to employ their home language as a vehicle for learning, thereby validating their identities and cultural backgrounds while also facilitating access to new knowledge. This process encourages learners to make connections between languages, to transfer skills across linguistic boundaries, and to mobilise their entire linguistic repertoires in the service of meaning-making. For example, a child may receive information in one language and then process, articulate, or apply that knowledge in another, thereby demonstrating cognitive flexibility and metalinguistic awareness.

The pedagogical implications of translanguaging are significant. It challenges traditional models of bilingual education that often separate languages into rigid compartments, instead promoting an integrated approach that reflects the realities of multilingual communication. In doing so, translanguaging not only enhances comprehension but also fosters critical thinking, creativity, and learner autonomy. It positions language as a resource rather than a barrier, and it requires educators to adopt practices that are responsive to the diverse linguistic backgrounds of their learners. Importantly, successful translanguaging depends upon learners having a secure grasp of the language of instruction, which serves as the foundation upon which cross-linguistic connections can be built.

Translanguaging: Definitions and Classroom Uses

Understanding translanguaging requires situating it alongside related concepts that shape multilingual pedagogy and classroom practice. The following definitions provide a framework for examining how language functions as both a cognitive resource and a social tool in education.

- Translanguaging: Alternating two languages for input and output in the same activity so learners process information across languages.
- Mediation: Helping others communicate by paraphrasing, summarising, translating, or interpreting between or within languages.
- Bilingualism: The ability of individuals or communities to meet everyday communicative needs in two or more languages.
- Code-switching: Shifting from one language to another mid-speech when both speakers share those languages.
- Scaffolding: Temporary support from a teacher or knowledgeable person to help learners solve problems they cannot yet solve independently.

- Metalinguistics: The capacity to think explicitly about language structure and form, separate from meaning.

Translanguaging in Wales

Every child should have opportunities to learn that Wales has two official languages and that many other languages are spoken in our communities. We have a responsibility to ensure that children cultivate positive attitudes towards different languages and the people who speak them. The language skills learned in one language should support the work of fostering knowledge and skills in another language.

(Welsh Government, 2022, p.21)

Previously, the prevailing practice in Welsh-medium education was to keep the two languages separate within a single lesson, a stance frequently emphasised by members of the Estyn, Wales' inspectorate. However, the shift in the Curriculum for Wales toward Language and bilingualism means that the concept of translanguaging is being revisited, with the objective of fostering confident, balanced bilingual pupils through strong, high-level use of both languages.

'Bilingual education for the empowerment of a minority language must protect a space for the minoritized language, while at the same time creating a bilingual space in which the minority language (Welsh) can interact with the majority language (English).'

(Jones 2017, p. 208)

Translanguaging in Japan

At the heart of language-acquisition practice in Tokyo's international schools was the intentional use of translanguaging, supported by an open mindset that treated multiple languages as a pedagogical asset. Teachers and school cultures deliberately created space for learners to move between languages, modelling and normalising that linguistic resources from home and school are useful tools for thinking and learning.

This approach produced several linked outcomes. It nurtured genuine curiosity about languages and how they work, encouraged learners to experiment with vocabulary and structure, and built confidence and enthusiasm for using more than one language. Pupils learned to embrace languages as part of their identity and developed resilience in communication: they felt confident to "have a go," accepted mistakes as part of learning, and persisted when meaning was hard to find. By foregrounding meaning and communication rather than strict language boundaries, pupils developed stronger metalinguistic awareness and greater flexibility when tackling new concepts.

That practice stands in contrast to more rigid single-language instruction approaches in Wales, where languages were often kept separate in the classroom. Tokyo schools share a common conviction that children must be able to express themselves in their mother tongue, and that this freedom to use all known languages strengthens identity, engagement, and overall learning.

The British School in Tokyo

At The British School in Tokyo, teachers routinely shift the language of instruction when explaining task procedures and then require learners to complete the work in the target language. This practice functions as a deliberate instructional scaffold that reduces linguistic complexity during explanation while preserving expectations for target-language production during practice. This sequencing helps learners grasp concepts in a more accessible language first, then transfer that understanding into the target language, improving both comprehension and language use.

Tokyo International School

At Tokyo International School, English serves as the primary medium of instruction, yet learners are permitted and encouraged to use their mother tongue in peer or staff interactions when such use removes barriers to learning and advances task completion. This approach treats home languages as practical tools for making meaning and supporting peer interaction, recognising that briefly using a stronger language can lower anxiety, speed up problem solving, and help learners reflect on their thinking before returning to the instructional language.

New International School in Japan

At the New International School in Japan, they view languages as tools for expression rather than as separate, isolated subjects. Learners are free to respond in languages other than the language of instruction and are encouraged to share ideas across linguistic boundaries. This

approach supports learner agency and prioritises clear communication and conceptual understanding over strict adherence to a single language.

AOBA Japan International School

AOBA's language policy designates English as the language of inclusion, providing a common medium for participation and academic access while concurrently respecting and nurturing learners' mother tongues to preserve cultural identity and linguistic heritage. This dual emphasis seeks to balance equitable access to the curriculum through a shared language while also supporting their home languages, so inclusion does not mean forcing everyone to give up their language or culture.

Sakura Elementary

Sakura Elementary implements a fluid bilingual approach in which children engage with resources presented in both English and Japanese. Rather than providing literal translations, the school deliberately distributes complementary materials across the two languages so that learners must navigate and integrate information from both linguistic sources. This design helps learners connect ideas across languages and understand how language works, supporting deeper learning and stronger bilingual literacy.

Translanguaging and Translation

Whilst considering translanguaging, it is important to recognise that translanguaging extends beyond simply the translation of words between languages. Although both skills involve using more than one language, they differ in purpose, classroom use, and effects on the quality of learning. Translanguaging is about helping learners understand that one language does not necessarily translate word for word from one language to another. Instead, it requires learners to think about language components such as the placement of adjectives and what cognates are in various languages by using their full language repertoire to make meaning and learn. Formal translation seeks to remain as faithful as possible to the original's sense whilst informal translation prioritises conveying the general meaning. In contrast, translanguaging treats the input flexibly, using information from one language as needed to support expression in another.

Translanguaging as a Strategic Skill

Supporting children to develop translanguaging as an empowering skill means valuing their full linguistic repertoire so they can express complex ideas without defaulting to English because it feels easier. Rather than viewing gaps in vocabulary as deficits (for instance, situations where a child lacks a specific word) recognising and teaching translanguaging as a deliberate, creative strategy strengthens thinking, identity, and learning in Welsh and other languages.

Advantages of Translanguaging

- Supports Bilingual Development: Research shows using a child's strongest language helps build the weaker language and improves proficiency in both.
- Builds Language Awareness: Translanguaging can enhance metalinguistic and morphological awareness and expands vocabulary.
- Deepens Understanding: Processing ideas across languages can promote fuller comprehension of subject matter.
- Improves Communication and Literacy: Translanguaging can strengthen oral skills and literacy in the weaker language and help integrate speakers of one language with the target language's speakers.
- Engages families: Translanguaging can enable monolingual parents and family members to support and discuss schoolwork.
- Expands resources: Translanguaging can allow teachers to draw on materials from multiple languages.

Challenges of Translanguaging

- Resource Limits: Scarcity of minority-language materials (e.g. Welsh) can restrict lesson variety and balance.
- Planning Demands: Effective translanguaging tasks require careful preparation which can be time-consuming.
- Risk of Dominance: Heavy reliance on the stronger language (often English) for input can increase its classroom use and undermine the minority language unless target-language goals are explicit.
- Teacher Reluctance: Some teachers worry translanguaging may not safeguard the minority language without clear focus and monitoring.

Adopting a Translanguage Approach in Wales' Classrooms

Switching languages can be a powerful way to support learning. Teachers can plan purposeful points in lessons where a stronger or alternative language is used to explain ideas, before returning to the target language for modelling and independent work. After explanations, quick formative checks help confirm understanding, giving learners confidence before they are asked to produce language in the target language.

Peer support is most effective when it is intentional. Structured think-pair-share activities in learners' stronger languages, guided by staff, ensure that home-language interactions remain productive and supportive of learning rather than a way to avoid the instructional language.

The classroom itself can celebrate multilingualism. Designing tasks with multimodal and multilingual response options, and assessments that value both content and communication, allows learners to choose the language that best showcases their understanding and creativity.

Paired resources can enrich this process. For example, a Welsh language how-to text alongside an English language diagram, combined with scaffolded tasks, encourages learners to draw on both languages, strengthening bilingual skills and critical thinking.

Teachers can model translanguageing themselves, moving naturally between Welsh and English to clarify meaning, highlight vocabulary links, and normalise switching as part of everyday communication.

Word-bridging activities such as bilingual word walls, paired glossaries, or translation maps help learners see connections between Welsh terms and their English equivalents, building confidence and curiosity.

Flexibility is key. Children can be encouraged to draft in the language they think in, with support to translate into Welsh for their final piece of work. This honours their voice while strengthening their target language skills.

Collaborative talk also plays a vital role. Pair and group discussions in any language allow learners to explore ideas freely before shaping them into a Welsh outcome.

Finally, explicit vocabulary teaching remains essential. Introducing Welsh vocabulary alongside cognates, synonyms, and examples from other languages reduces the impulse to default to English and helps learners see Welsh as part of a wider, connected linguistic landscape.

Implications for Schools

Adopting a translanguageing mindset begins with valuing every language a child brings to the classroom. Professional development should help staff see home languages not as barriers but as powerful tools for learning. When teachers approach translanguageing with flexibility, they create spaces where no single language is seen as superior, and every child's linguistic identity is respected.

Within lessons, teachers can plan opportunities for translanguageing skills to flourish. This might mean deliberately varying the language of input: allowing learners to gather ideas in their home language, then guiding them to discuss or write in another. Such practices affirm the richness of bilingual thinking and show children that moving between languages is a strength.

Learning can be built in one language and then transferred to another, helping children see connections and deepen understanding. For example, a concept explored in English discussion might later be expressed in Welsh writing, reinforcing both comprehension and expression. This transfer nurtures confidence and demonstrates that knowledge is not tied to a single language but can travel across them.

Professional development should therefore emphasise the importance of flexible, research-informed mindsets. Teachers who embrace translanguageing not only support language development but also foster creativity, inclusivity, and resilience in their learners.

Schools should use a stage-appropriate translanguageing approach that aligns with the Curriculum for Wales. This will require further research and piloting in order to impact on teacher's planning which in turn will impact on classroom delivery and learner outcomes.

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