

Benefits of Translanguaging Pedagogy and Practice

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Abstract: A new flexible approach to language learning and teaching – translanguaging – has become a popular topic in recent years. This article discusses what translanguaging is (including how it describes theory, practice, and pedagogy) and why it is a paradigm shift in how we understand language. Then, this article turns to the particular case of the Wellington Translanguaging Project in Aotearoa New Zealand, first describing the language context of the country. The Wellington Translanguaging Project’s methods of data collection and analysis are then discussed, along with the findings of the project and how they relate both to new speakers (those encountering the target linguistic varieties for the first time in school) and heritage language speakers (those with a family connection to the target linguistic varieties). The findings are then discussed, including the ability of a translanguaging pedagogy to empower students and to encourage them to actually use more of the target linguistic varieties. The article ends by looking to other recent findings in pedagogical translanguaging research, showing both the qualitative and quantitative benefits of such an approach.

Keywords: translanguaging; Aotearoa New Zealand; language teaching and learning; critical pedagogy; student empowerment

What is Translanguaging?

Translanguaging is a theoretical framework, a description of language practice (i.e. language in use), and a pedagogy. As a theoretical framework, translanguaging is a paradigm shift in how we understand language. Translanguaging is political, revolutionary, and radical because it is critical of established prescriptivist discourses that tell people that there is a right way and a wrong way to speak (e.g. an established “standard”) (Canagarajah, 2013). This theoretical position also acknowledges that there is a monolingual bias in how we talk about languages (including code-switching), assuming that we turn one language “off” to turn another one “on”. Translanguaging rejects this monolingual bias and advocates for a multilingual foundation to the theory, which recognizes that speakers have a complex, intertwined linguistic repertoire that they draw from flexibly as needed (García and Wei, 2014). Therefore, one of the primary goals behind translanguaging is to bring more equity to the way speakers (and their linguistic repertoires) are treated in the classroom and society. No one way of speaking and no one linguistic variety is better than any other.

Translanguaging theory is also based upon normalizing translanguaging practices, which are commonplace every day in societies all over the world. Translanguaging as a practice is “the deployment of a speaker’s full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages” (Otheguy, García and Reid, 2015:p.283). It is the practice

of “shuttling” between language varieties (Canagarajah, 2011). Within these practices are what those coming from a monolingual viewpoint would normally describe as codeswitching. Yet, “a translanguaging lens does not preclude the existence or use of codeswitching and codemeshing. However, naming translanguaging is also naming an activist position,” (Seals, 2020:p.122).

Thirdly, translanguaging also exists as a pedagogy. When translanguaging theory lays the foundation and translanguaging practice is the goal in the teaching and learning space, a translanguaging pedagogy is created. A translanguaging pedagogy embraces and builds upon “the ways in which [multi]lingual students and teachers engage in complex and fluid discursive practices that include, at times, the home language practices of students in order to ‘make sense’ of teaching and learning, to communicate and appropriate subject knowledge, and to develop academic language practices,” (García, 2014:p.112). A translanguaging pedagogy is about empowering students, allowing and encouraging them to make use of all linguistic resources at their disposal to transform the learning space into a pedagogy of possibility.

In the next section, the Aotearoa New Zealand language context is discussed, followed by the introduction of the Wellington Translanguaging Project. The latter is a working research-teaching model of starting with a translanguaging theoretical framework, studying translanguaging practices, and applying both to the creation of a translanguaging pedagogy.

Aotearoa New Zealand Language Context

Aotearoa New Zealand is currently known as a ‘superdiverse’ country, having more than 160 languages actively spoken around the country (Royal Society of New Zealand, 2013). According to the most recently released Census data, the top spoken languages in respective order are English, te reo Māori, and Samoan. There are also very large diaspora communities who are speakers of Mandarin Chinese, Cantonese, Tongan, Hindi, Tagalog, Afrikaans, German, Spanish, and French, to name just a few (Statistics New Zealand, 2019).

Aotearoa New Zealand has three official languages – two are de jure (by law) and one is de facto (by common use). English is New Zealand’s de facto official language, which is not surprising, given that it also holds the spot for the most spoken language in the country. Te reo Māori became Aotearoa’s first de jure official language in 1987, recognizing the Indigeneity of its speakers to Aotearoa New Zealand. In 2006, New Zealand Sign Language joined te reo Māori as a de jure official language, recognizing that New Zealand Sign Language is a language in its own right and one that is only natively spoken in Aotearoa.

While all mainstream schools in Aotearoa are conducted primarily in English, there are bilingual, multilingual, and immersion educational options also available throughout the country. Additionally, mainstream schools themselves are also expected to make active efforts to include Māori reo (language) and tikanga (culture) in their daily classroom activities. However, the frequency with which Māori reo and tikanga can be found

throughout New Zealand schools varies widely, often dependent upon the financial and human resources available to each particular school (Barr and Seals, 2018). As found by Barr and Seals (2018), schools that have the financial resources for upskilling and professional development activities around Māori reo and tikanga often do not have human resources in the form of teachers who have both fluency and confidence in the language. Conversely, schools that have the human resources, often do not have the financial resources for activities such as buy-out of teaching to support cross-faculty and staff training.

In places like Aotearoa where linguistic varieties are plentiful and creativity in maintaining them is needed, translanguaging becomes a very promising opportunity to bridge language abilities between and across teachers and students, building everyone's proficiency. Furthermore, a translanguaging framework recognizes that the main goal is meaningful communication and that in order to accomplish this, people should be able to draw upon and build on their linguistic repertoires as needed. This is the space in which the Wellington Translanguaging Project operates.

Wellington Translanguaging Project Background

At the beginning of 2016, the Wellington Translanguaging Project was established, with the goal of understanding more about how children make use of multilingual systems of communication when in a teaching environment that supports the free and fluid use of multilingualism. As the Principal Investigator, I decided to focus on children in early childhood education centres (i.e. preschools) so that we could investigate what happens during children's first encounters with language use in a structured educational setting. This is important because we wanted to uncover what children are inclined to do and what they are able to do with language before encountering an educational environment that is heavily focused towards one particular language (often the societally dominant language).

Two early childhood education centres partnered with us in the greater Wellington, New Zealand area. One was an a'oga amata (Samoan early childhood education centre), and one was a puna reo (Māori early childhood education centre). These two centres were chosen for their representation of Aotearoa's demographics, as well as their desire to learn more about supporting children's multilingual development, including various home languages. For the a'oga amata research team, two research assistants and I made up the ethnographic data collection team, and an additional two research assistants joined us for data coding, transcription, and analysis. For the puna reo research team, two research assistants, an associate investigator, and I made up the ethnographic data collection team, and an additional four research assistants joined us for data coding, transcription, and analysis. It was very important for us to have multicultural, multilingual research teams in the Wellington Translanguaging Project, representing the communities with which we were working, as well as the greater landscape of superdiverse Aotearoa.

To take an ethnographic approach to our research meant spending time with the communities with whom we were working, including at both school and community

events to which we were invited. We also spent time with the teachers, students, and members of the communities before and after any actual data recording so that they could get to know us and so that we could better know them. When it came time to record data, we set up video and audio recorders around the common areas of the a’oga amata and puna reo so that everyone could get used to their presence, and we made sure they were as noninvasive as possible. Then we began recording. At first, the cameras were a major talking point at each centre, which is absolutely fine when it comes to contemporary understandings of qualitative research. Researchers must always be aware of their influence on the research setting, so this is something that we embraced as an opportunity to help the students further understand what we were doing. After a few days, interest in the cameras waned, and everything was “back to normal”.

We recorded, while helping with anything with which the centres asked for assistance. We spent three months recording at the a’oga amata and two months recording at the puna reo (the agreed upon time with each community). After recording finished, we had a total of over 600 hours of usable data, which has been hugely important in helping us to understand the norms of language and interaction in these multicultural, multilingual early childhood education centres in Aotearoa.

To better understand these practices, we analysed the data through multiple approaches collaboratively as a team, including grounded theory (using emergent categories from the data and applying these through a cyclical analytical process), interactional sociolinguistics (an approach to discourse analysis taking into account full knowledge of the context), linguistic landscapes (analysing language presence and use in place and space), syntactic analysis, language socialization, and Indigenous approaches including the application of tikanga Māori (traditional values) and Samoan va (relationships between people and spaces). Some of our project findings to date are explored in the sections that follow.

Turning Practice into Pedagogy

After extensively analysing the Wellington Translanguaging Project data, we crucially found that translanguaging practices were already being regularly used by some of the teaching staff at each location, as well as by some of the students. The translanguaging practices they were using were allowing them to build natural bridges across semantic and conceptual meaning in their linguistic repertoires as well as cultural norms and expectations (see Seals et al, 2019 and Seals et al, 2020b for specific examples).

However, in talking with the teaching staff, many were not sure what the effect of their translanguaging practices was on the students’ learning, and many were unsure of how to proceed in a structured pedagogical way. Noting these concerns, we worked with the teachers and with multiple speakers of the languages to create resources that built on translanguaging practices already in use while also incorporating a structural element that ensured the children were receiving exposure to content and meaning across the linguistic varieties of use in each centre (cf. Seals et al, 2020b).

We also learned more about how translanguaging functions in practice and as a pedagogy by asking the teachers and speakers of all of the linguistic varieties we were using to review drafts of the resources and provide acceptability judgments (i.e. what ‘sounds right’ and what does not). We then took this information and adjusted the materials until they were acceptable, while also taking note of the syntactic features that were identified as needing adjustment (see Seals et al, 2020b, and Seals and Olsen-Reeder, 2020 for examples of these resources and information on their systematic creation). Through this process, we remained in partnership with the communities, putting their needs first, while also reaching a deeper understanding of translanguaging.

Benefits of Translanguaging for Heritage Speakers and New Speakers

After creating our translanguaging pedagogy based on the schools’ natural translanguaging practices, we trialed it with the schools. The teachers reported that, despite the teachers’ initial worries regarding the “mixing of languages”, the students responded very positively. Importantly, the benefits of translanguaging applied to both new speakers and heritage speakers of Samoan and te reo Māori.

New speakers are “individuals with little or no home or community exposure to a minority language but who instead acquire it through immersion or bilingual educational programs, revitalization projects or as adult language learners... not of course specific to minority language contexts per se” (O’Rourke, Pujolar and Ramallo, 2015:p.1). Heritage language speakers are “people who have a recent or ancestral connection to a language that is not the dominant societal language in their current region of residence... may still identify with (a) particular heritage language(s) based on their personal background, without having to actually have proficiency in the language(s)... include immigrant, Indigenous, and ancestral languages of either kind” (Seals and Shah, 2017:p.4).

In trialing the translanguaging pedagogy, teachers reported that new speakers were more likely to “give it a go” with the target linguistic variety, incorporating it into their speech where previously they used little to none of it. Also, heritage language speakers were more likely to continue speaking to their peers in the target linguistic variety without switching out of it to English. Overall, the students displayed more confidence in using the target linguistic variety when they were encouraged to translanguage, and they increased rather than decreased their use of the target linguistic variety (see Amosa Burgess and Fiti, 2019 for more on these results).

These positive results join those of other recent research into the outcomes of using a translanguaging pedagogy. For example, in research in Basque Country (Euskadi), Cenoz and Gorter (2017) found that students in a translanguaging setting performed equal to or better than their single language immersion peers on standardised assessments. Morales, Schissel and López-Gopar (2020) found an overall trend amongst students learning through a translanguaging pedagogy of increasing scores on language assessment after a year. Out of 20 students, three students performed equally on

translingual and English-only tasks, four students performed better on English-only tasks, and the majority 13 students performed better on translingual tasks. Tamati (2016) found that when allowed to translanguage, the Māori secondary school students she worked with in Aotearoa performed equal to English-dominant speakers, in the top socioeconomic locations in the country, on standardised English language tests. In research with secondary school students learning English in Vietnam, Seals et al (2020a) found that students felt more empowered in their learning and that they were able to create more meaningful dialogue in the eventual target language performance.

Finally, Galante (2020) conducted research with 127 international students in a Canadian English for Academic Purposes programme. She found statistically significant differences in the end of course academic English vocabulary test scores, with those in the translanguaging group scoring higher ($M = 6.15$, $SD = 1.5$; $p < .01$) than those in the English-only group ($M = 5.36$, $SD = 1.57$; $p < .01$). Students' diary entries showed that students in the translanguaging group felt normalized and included in the classroom community instead of othered, they were able to access more linguistic meaning making with their full repertoire, they built more metacognitive awareness of similarities and differences in vocabulary items across languages (especially with idioms and discourse markers), translanguaging increased students' awareness and noticing during vocabulary learning, and students felt more agentive in their learning.

The above are only a few of the many results being reported currently about the benefits of a translanguaging pedagogy and of normalising translanguaging practices in teaching and learning contexts, for both heritage speakers and new speakers of the linguistic variety(ies). Hopefully, more research (both qualitative and quantitative) will continue to be conducted, enabling us to better understand the short-term and long-term effects of a translanguaging pedagogy in different settings.

As a final note, it is important to stress that any and all research done with communities (such as that done by the Wellington Translanguaging Project) needs to be conducted in partnership with the communities and must be guided by the needs and goals of the communities involved.

Nā tō rourou, nā taku rourou, ^[17]SEP ka ora ai te iwi – Māori Whakataukī

Acknowledgments

Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini

My deepest thanks to the communities who have given us their trust and their time. Thank you also to the many amazing research assistants with the Wellington Translanguaging Project and to my associate investigators (Dr. Vincent Olsen-Reeder and Dr. Honiara Salanoa). Thank you also to the time and guidance from Professor Rawinia Higgins, Dr. Tauwehe Tamati, and Tipene Merritt. Finally, thank you to the Te

Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington University Research Fund, the Mātauranga Māori Research Fund, and the Royal Society Te Apārangi Marsden Fund.

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