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Bridging Languages: Role of Translanguaging as a Strategy in English Language Teaching

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Abstract

Translanguaging, has evolved as a vital concept in the field of English Language Teaching in the recent years especially amongst learners whose native language is different from their language of learning. It is a lively and engaging practice wherein multilingual speakers draw from their entire linguistic inventory while acquiring a new language. This paper investigates the role of translanguaging in language learning, focusing on its implications in English Language Teaching (ELT). The study provides a birds' eye view of how translanguaging supports language acquisition by improving cognitive, social, and cultural interactions. It discusses how multilingual learners employ translanguaging in classrooms, the potential benefits of translanguaging and the challenges faced by educators while languages intervene. The article also examines how translanguaging, when integrated into ELT practices, challenges traditional language separation and encourages a more inclusive and context-responsive approach.

Keywords: Translanguaging, Language Acquisition, English Language Teaching (ELT), Pedagogical Practices, Multilingualism, Bilingualism, Cognitive Development.

Introduction

Language acquisition, particularly in multilingual contexts, has long been the subject of study in the field of applied linguistics. Traditionally, language learning and teaching have been deeply rooted in the ideology of keeping languages disconnected, an approach that mirrors the "one language-one context" paradigm. However, recent developments in language acquisition theory have proposed that students use their whole linguistic repertoire to understand the world around them. This practice, known as translanguaging, refers to the energetic and changing process in which bilingual or multilingual speakers utilize elements of more than one language within a communicative context.

The transition towards embracing translanguaging in language acquisition poses challenges to traditional monolingual frameworks which have long been in practice in English Language Teaching (ELT). ELT has long since focused on teaching English as a foreign or second language, often keeping

apart languages in pedagogical practices. On the other hand, translanguaging offers a more holistic perspective, motivating learners to connect with multiple languages as part of a unified linguistic system.

In a multilingual country like India, the practice of Translanguaging is nothing short of a boon for learners who are able to easily relate with the concepts and vocabulary system in the English language by interpreting them through their own regional languages or the mother tongue. This helps them to comprehend the ways in which languages have certain commonality in their grammatical structures or etymology. It not only helps them to relate easily with a foreign or second language like English, but also motivates them for a livelier and engaging learning process. This paper delves into the function of translanguaging in the process of language acquisition, its impact on ELT, and the pedagogical shifts required in accommodating this practice in contemporary classrooms.

Defining Translanguaging:

The term “Translanguaging” as defined by Garcia is a fluid movement between languages by bilingual or multilingual persons, allowing for free flow of communication across different linguistic systems. According to James Anderson, “translanguaging typically refers to our use of any or all of the resources (words, bits of grammar, paralinguistic features, etc.) in our full linguistic repertoire – including all the languages we speak – to maximise communicative potential” (Translanguaging, 46). He also states, “Translanguaging is typically defined as the fluid, dynamic use of multiple resources from different named languages and dialects within a single integrated system” (Translanguaging Practices, 2)

The concept of Translanguaging has now evolved not only as a social practice but also pedagogy in itself in the field of ELT. Unlike code-switching, which typically involves switching between two distinct languages, translanguaging implies a more integrated approach, where linguistic resources from multiple languages are used interchangeably in order to support meaning-making. This phenomenon has increasingly been recognized as a necessary tool in language acquisition, as it enables learners to have access to more than one language at a given time.

Cognitive Benefits:

Research shows that translanguaging encourages cognitive development by enhancing learners' metalinguistic awareness and problem-solving abilities. When learners are given the opportunity to represent and make use of their full linguistic abilities with ease and comfort, they can interpret the connections between languages, leading to deeper understanding and retention. Mehran Memari quotes from Baker saying, “It is possible to achieve positive effects through translanguaging and alternating languages both in the receptive as well as the productive modes of learning” (Memari, 383).

Studies have shown that bilinguals, in particular, display advanced cognitive flexibility, attention control, and memory skills (Bialystok, 2001), which are critical for language acquisition. In ELT contexts, translanguaging serves as a supporting tool, helping learners understand complex linguistic structures in English by relating them to their first languages. It is evidential that the learner can acquire a new language based on one's knowledge in the first language/mother tongue.

Social and Cultural Dimensions:

It is an undeniable fact that Language acquisition is impacted by the social and cultural environments in which learners interact. Translanguaging facilitates language proficiency along with promoting social and cultural integration. In multilingual classrooms, learners use translanguaging to discuss meaning, express cultural identity, and connect actively with peers. By combining home languages into the learning process, translanguaging authenticates students' varied linguistic backgrounds and promotes a more inclusive environment (Garcia & Wei, 2014).

By embracing translanguaging, teachers can create an all-encompassing learning atmosphere that values linguistic diversity and encourages students to connect with the English language in meaningful ways. This approach is especially important in multicultural settings where learners bring varied linguistic resources to the classroom. It is observed, “Educators and researchers alike benefit from the adoption of flexible translanguaging strategies not only in developing learners' varied needs but also enabling them to harness their multilingual resources effectively” (Bouزيد & Javier, 143).

Translanguaging in the ELT Classroom

Pedagogical Implications

Integrating translanguaging into ELT necessitates important pedagogical shifts. Traditional ELT models often focus on “fixed language teaching” method keeping English in isolation, with negligible reference to students' home languages. However, incorporating translanguaging means rethinking language teaching methods to accommodate the fluid use of multiple languages at the time of learning. Teachers need to facilitate and motivate students to make use of their complete linguistic inventory, rather than restricting language use to English alone.

Research indicates that translanguaging can support a variety of classroom practices, such as vocabulary attainment, reading comprehension, and writing skills. For example, when learning new English vocabulary, students may benefit from translating new terms into their first languages, allowing for a comfortable understanding of the word. Corinne A. Seals opines, “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” (Corinne, 02). Similarly, in group discussions, students can use translanguaging to ensure full participation and involvement, regardless of their proficiency level in English.

Challenges for Educators

Despite its possible benefits, the implementation of translanguaging in ELT poses several challenges. One of the primary concerns is the traditional mindset that segregates languages within educational contexts. Teachers may worry that translanguaging will lead to ambiguity or obstruct students' ability to acquire English in its pure form. Moreover, there is shortage of clear guiding principles on how to incorporate translanguaging effectively within the program of study. Teachers require support, training, and resources to pilot this shift and employ translanguaging practices that align with teaching goals.

Moreover, institutional policies and standardized testing systems habitually prioritize monolingual practices, which may hinder the use of translanguaging. Overcoming these structural barriers needs a broader change in educational methods, where multilingualism is seen as a benefit rather than a challenge.

Translanguaging and Assessment

Integrating translanguaging into assessment practices becomes another challenge. Traditional language assessments often focus on measuring proficiency in a single language, with limited acknowledgment of students' multilingual capabilities. Moving towards a more holistic approach to assessment, where students' abilities to navigate multiple languages are recognized, may require momentous shifts in testing models.

However, this approach has the possibility to provide a more accurate representation of a student's linguistic abilities, particularly in multilingual environments. Danping Wang and Martin East believe, “Integrating translanguaging into language assessment requires a creative design that can engage learners in participating in meaningful tasks and can allow them to freely express their minds and identities in the process of demonstrating their evidence of language learning” (Wang & East, 1917).

Conclusion

Translanguaging represents a transformative approach to language acquisition, especially in multilingual contexts as in India. In English Language Teaching, it offers an inclusive, lively, and learner-centered approach that goes beyond traditional monolingual teaching practices. By letting learners to utilize their entire linguistic range, translanguaging improves cognitive development, promotes cultural and social integration, and advances deeper engagement with the English language. Teachers and educators face great challenges in assessing the true linguistic proficiency of the learners in this fluid language approach. Ultimately, they demand fundamental changes in the educational policies that align with the changing teaching-learning practices within classrooms.

Nonetheless, the amalgamation of translanguaging into ELT necessitates crucial changes in both teaching practices and institutional policies. Educators must be prepared to embrace this shift and provide learners with the tools to steer their linguistic resources effectively. Although translanguaging practice has evident benefits, its implementation demands a paradigm shift in how languages are taught, assessed, and valued within educational systems.

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