

**WHY INCORPORATING TRANSLANGUAGING  
PRACTICES INTO ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE  
PROGRAMS WILL HELP BOOST ENGLISH  
PROFICIENCY AND BUILD CONFIDENT ENGLISH  
LEARNERS**

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**Abstract**

English as a second language programs often implement other ways of teaching that do not allow for students to use their native language, requiring the use of English only using various instructional strategies to teach language and content. Translanguaging is a practice allows for students to be able to learn English as well as keeping their identity and culture through using their native language (L1) alongside English. This approach helps students to still learn English and be able to communicate with both their teachers and families at home about their schoolwork. Therefore, this thesis explores educational research done on translanguaging and the benefits that can come from using this way of teaching. To complete this thesis, I performed a literature review in the form of a pedagogical article to show the benefits of translanguaging.

**Table of Contents**

Acknowledgements.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Difference Between Bilingual & ESL .....	3
Translanguaging Explained .....	5
Students Have a Right to L1 .....	6
Benefits to L1 Language Use.....	7
In-School Benefits of Translanguaging .....	8
At-Home Benefits of Translanguaging.....	9
Is there Proof that it Works.....	10
Why is it Not Widely Used Today?.....	12
Practice What You Preach .....	13
Future Research/What is Next .....	14
In Conclusion .....	14
References.....	16

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America. We live in the country metaphorically known as a salad bowl and a melting pot. We are known for so many different cultures and people of different backgrounds. Whether families immigrated 400 years ago, or immigrated four months ago, America has always had an influx of families seeking work or refuge from war, persecution, climate change, or natural disasters. Many of these immigrants bring their languages to the United States as well as aim to learn American English to participate in their new community. The most common way for child and adolescent immigrants to learn English is for them to enroll into a public school that has the tools and techniques to teach them English.

Even though many immigrants to this country going to school are first generation, many of them are often 2nd and 3rd generation immigrants. Between the years of 1980 and 2010, 34.72% of immigrants were between the ages of 0 and 18 (Landgrave, 2019). In California, it has been reported that 29% of immigrants do not speak English above the age of 13, as they are not learning it in school (Hill 2011). According to Face the Facts USA, 10% of students in public school systems are English learners ([ELs] ESL Teacher, 2020).

When these students are enrolled in school, they are usually provided access to English as a second language (ESL) programs. An ESL program is a specialized language curriculum designed to help multilingual students acquire English skills needed to participate in school and in the community. These programs hire specialized teachers trained to help the student develop speaking, reading, writing, and listening skills in English (ESL Directory 2020).

ESL teachers will use different approaches when it comes to trying to help EL grow proficiency in English. Some of the approaches they use are finding ways to communicate with the student without using words. They will use comprehensible input strategies such as using picture cards, gestures, or role playing to help the both the student and the teacher understand each other. After learning some basic phrases this allows the student to communicate with the teacher the basic needs that they need, such as bathroom, water or snack and later begin to develop academic English. The teacher might also translate if necessary (e.g., using Google Translate), but the majority of classroom instructions, tasks, and activities are in English only.

While looking into other ways to teach ELs, one professor, Ofelia Garcia investigated a different approach, not only using English, but using students' native languages, to encourage faster and more culturally responsive language and content learning. The term used to describe this approach is called translanguaging. Translanguaging is "the act performed by bilinguals of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, to maximize communicative potential" (Wordpress, 2016). In other words, translanguaging is an approach to language teaching and learning that allows ELs to code-switch, or use multiple languages, in order to maximize their ability to demonstrate understanding and communicate more fully. There are different ways that translanguaging can be incorporated into the everyday ESL curriculum such as allowing students to read a summary or brainstorm ideas for writing in their native language. Allowing for translanguaging to be a practice in a classroom, will allow ELs to be able to use both old knowledge and new knowledge with language to help grow their English proficiency.

Before I get into why translanguaging should be widely used in classrooms across the United States, I will provide some background on the different ways students learn from ESL programs.

### **What's the Difference Between Bilingual Education and ESL Programs?**

There are various types of models schools may use when it comes to teaching students who are trying to learn English. Two of the more popular types are bilingual education or ESL programs.

Bilingual programs allow for language development of both English and a student's different native language (e.g., Spanish). The students in these classrooms learn the standards and content mandated by local curriculum, but their academic subjects are fully immersed into their native language with the English language gradually introduced. In some bilingual education programs, the students could have math, social studies, and science in their native language, but have their reading and writing classes in both their native language and in English. In a different program called a two-way bilingual class, half of the class is in the native language of the students, and the other half of the class would be in English (ESL Directory 2020). This type of program does not call for the teacher having to use as many comprehensible input strategies because the students will understand the teacher whether in English or in their native language.

Other schools provide ESL services and classes for ELs to grow their English language skills. Students in ESL programs are taught by a licensed ESL teacher or aide to learn English in order to access the school curriculum, which is provided solely in English. In full immersion ESL, the students are not permitted to speak their native language and must report to the teacher in English only (E vs. B 2015). Other types of

ESL programs include the pull-out ESL program. This is when an aide or ESL teacher takes the students or a few students out of a mainstream classroom to learn English for a portion of the day. The students may be learning the same content as their mainstream peers, or they might be working on a different curriculum based on their level of English and understanding of the language (ESL Teacher, 2020). In most states, ESL teachers use a framework called WIDA, which outlines what language characteristics to expect from their students at various stages of language acquisition as well as what language and content standards they should use to form their lesson plans. WIDA calls this the “Can Do Descriptors” (WIDA, 2019). There are multiple, gradual steps to WIDA’s instructional framework as student’s progress in their English language journey. There are also some expectations from the student that show where they stand in their acquisition of English. These language indicators include: silence from the students in the beginning of their learning, giving students extra time to process and answer questions, develop non-verbal ways to communicate with the students, such as games or pictures, assign students a buddy to help them with their work, valuing the culture and native language of the student, and to focus on the bigger picture when teaching, rather than correcting their grammatical form (ESL Directory, 2020). With ESL, there is sometimes a hard time with being able to communicate with students who are early on in their language development.

Even though ESL programs allow for students to learn English in the classroom, sometimes they fall short when trying to teach the student academic material as well as them being able to make connections between the content they are learning to their native language. ESL programs allows for the dominance of English in classrooms, while

excluding students' home language (Snell, 2018). If teachers embrace students' potential by using their native language, they have the opportunity to engage in a much broader part of their student's abilities and interests (Snell 2018). Translanguaging is a practice that allows for this type of teaching to take place.

Translanguaging would allow for students in ESL programs to use vocabulary and experiences from their native language to form ideas or sentences. Translanguaging is a practice that not many classrooms across America are using because it incorporates both the students first language as well as teachings from English. Most of the ESL programs only want students to maximize their use of English, with little of their first language incorporated into the lesson plan. Most bilingual programs allow for students to speak their native language as well as the new language they are learning which in most cases happens to be English (E vs B 2015). Some studies and research have been done at different age levels to show that translanguaging may be a great way to bridge the worlds of bilingual education and ESL programs in order to help students enrich vocabulary not just in English but in their native language as well.

### **Translanguaging Explained**

Translanguaging is not yet widely known or used across the educational field. This is a relatively new approach designed to help students who are learning English as a second language. Ofelia Garcia, who helped bring the term translanguaging to life describes this approach as ta theoretical lens that offers a different view of bilingualism and multilingualism. The theory posits that rather than possessing two or more autonomous language systems, as has been traditionally thought, bilinguals,

multilinguals, and indeed, all users of language, select and deploy particular features from a unitary linguistic repertoire to make meaning and to negotiate particular communicative contexts” (2017). In other words, “translanguaging is when a person who knows more than one language freely uses all [their] languages to ask questions, understand, learn, explain and communicate in a social (often educational) setting” (Rosenbeck, 2016). It is a relatively new and developing practice that incorporates ELs’ native languages into the ESL classroom. Translanguaging practices allow for ELs to draw on all of their linguistics resources to express themselves. For example, ELs might code-switch - using words both from their native language and English to be able to express meaning and communicate their learning. Translanguaging is not commonly used because many current language policies do not permit the use of languages other than English to be used during instruction.

### **Students Have a Right to Their Native Language**

Translanguaging is not without controversy and has often been a heated topic for discussion in the field of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). In 1974, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC 1975), the governing association for U.S. college writing settings, centered their annual conference around affirming that multilingual students should in fact have a right to their native language and be able to use it in a public institute setting. After the conference they published a position statement called “Students’ Rights to Their Own Language,” In this statement, the association asserted that no one language, especially the English dialect spoken in American schools, has any validity over any other spoken dialect or language.

The authors state, “the claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects” (CCCC 1975). This document also states that to become an ESL teacher, the teacher must have the experiences or training that allows them to respect the diversity of their students as well as be able to make sure the student has the right to their own language. This is usually a test for their license after their undergraduate degree, or some outside experience they can bring to the classroom that will allow them to teach these students.

### **What Are Some Benefits to L1 Language Use?**

There have been a lot of debates between classroom teachers about whether ELs should use their native language, often referred to as an “L1”, in school during learning time. However more recent research has been showing that using students’ L1s can in fact help with learning English. Whether through a translation by a teacher, the student or another aide in the school using their native language can help with their learning, including grammar and task instructions. It can also help start and solidify relationships in school (Ferlazzo, 2019). Using their L1s can allow for students to feel more connected between their heritage at home and the new language they are learning at school. For example, ELs’ L1 can be helpful when providing instructions in the classroom. If a student does not fully understand instructions, they are not going to be set up to succeed academically if they cannot get past the first step. When connecting vocabulary sometimes using their L1s can help with the understanding of the word in English.

Allowing them to use both languages to connect the word will make them have a deeper and more instantaneous understanding of new words. When a new EL is introduced into a program, they need to be introduced to the rules of the classroom as well as have a tour of their new space. Without the use of their native language, it can possibly become challenging to communicate with the student to make sure they knew where everything is. Additionally, using students' L1s in school can allow the teachers to support the families of the children to maintain their native language use at home. Using their native language can also be beneficial when understanding English text. When reading a text in their L1 first and then again in English it allows them to understand the vocabulary words in English more. Lastly, incorporating ELs' L1s is a culturally responsive practice that validates that all languages as important to schooling and recognizes that language is a key part of human identity. Therefore, it can be academically advantageous to move beyond English-only policies in ESL programs.

### **What are the In-School Benefits of Translanguaging?**

Although translanguaging is a rather new approach in the ESL classroom, there have been some studies done in classrooms showing that there are multiple benefits to translanguaging. Many people believe that to be able to implement translanguaging as a way of teaching, that the teacher would have to speak another language, or the L1s of the students in the classroom. However, teachers do not have to speak the same L1 as their students. Translanguaging instead allows students to be able to process and use all the languages they know in order to process and learn new content. Even though translanguaging allows for students to be able to code switch as needed to keep up with

academic content, the goal still remains for the students to develop advanced proficiency in English. As mentioned before, if students are able to use translinguaging in the classroom, they are keeping the right to their native language. This gives the students the right to their own identity and culture, just as the English language is accepted. Allowing students to use their native language in class not only enhances ELs' learning, but it also encouraged ELs to participate more in class, built up their confidence, and validated the importance of their L1 (Rosenbeck, 2016).

### **What are the at Home Benefits of Translinguaging?**

When a student comes home to do their homework and they do not understand their assignments, they usually ask a parent, guardian, or family member for help. The homework the student is provided often arrives in English. They will use English or their L1 to discuss the homework with their parent, depending on the English proficiency of the parent. If the parent speaks in their L1 to help with the homework, the techniques of translinguaging are occurring outside of the classroom. After discussing and working through an assignment, the student would then have to turn in the homework in the English language. Discussing the material with their parents in the L1 and then filling out the assignment in English, allows for a deeper understanding of both vocabulary and content in both languages. Processing the material is now being done in both languages thus expanding their knowledge and demonstrating that translinguaging occurs not just at school, but home as well (Rosenbeck, 2016). Therefore, planning for such home translinguaging practices hold promise to more meaningfully and purposefully engage families in their child's schooling.

### **Is there Proof Translanguaging Works?**

Despite translanguaging's promise, very little in classroom research has been done on its impact on student learning. Most of the research being done on translanguaging is by teachers and professors in their own classrooms and learning spaces. However, there was a study done by the University of Iowa that aimed to "Teachers' attitudes towards and uses of translanguaging in English language classrooms in Iowa". In this study, Kavitha Nambisan at the University of Iowa, aimed to determine how different teachers feel about the idea of translanguaging and whether it helps or hinders the classroom learning. The classroom teachers they are surveying are either ESL teachers or teachers in content-area classrooms with ELs. Most of the population of the ELs speak Spanish. The researchers contacted 19 different schools to participate. At the start of the survey, teachers were asked if using the student's native language could be beneficial to their classroom. Of the 19 participants, only one replied in the negative thus showing that the majority of teachers supported L1 use in the classroom. The first two questions pertaining to their class were, do they encourage speaking in the student's native language for small activities and do they encourage the native language for brainstorming. Results were mixed: five said never; six said not often; four said somewhat often; and two said often or very often. The next two questions pertained to aiding the student as well as if the student has low participation, would they allow the student to use their native language. For both questions, one person answered never, five answered not often, six said someone often, four said often, and three said very often. When it comes to understanding the material and directions as well as participation

teachers are more willing to let their student use their native language in class (Nambisan, 2014).

At the end of the survey the teachers were asked what their perceived benefits of using the student's native language in the classroom. One of the benefits they described was it allowed students to be able to use class material that they knew from their native language to be able to discuss content. One teacher, Reyes, said that using their native language allows for students to be able to keep up with the subject matter material even if they have a low proficiency level in the language, they are being taught in. Most teachers agreed with Reyes. Other teachers believe using their native language is helpful when clarifying directions and a concept. This shows that their L1 can be beneficial to their comprehension. At the end of the survey all teachers agreed that they found that using the L1 is beneficial if it does not take time away from practicing the target language (Nambisan, 2014).

A study by Makalela (2014) that was done on translanguaging focused on teaching African languages to speakers of other African languages. This study implemented the use of translanguaging in the variable group of 30 participants and had a control group of 30 students using the techniques normally used in ESL classes. The results of the study show that the students using translanguaging had a deeper understanding of the context being taught as well as a higher social advantage with these teachings. This study goes to show that the teachings of translanguaging doesn't only work for students trying to learn English, but for other learners with different languages. This study has proved that translanguaging could well be a great way to teach future generations of language learners (2014).

A third study I looked at was about students whose were both learning English and other students who were learning Spanish. To teach the students in this study, Martin (2014) used teachings to promote reciprocal learning. They collected data over 40 sessions with students reading, writing, and using audio and video of peer interactions. The findings of their data showed that students will draw upon translanguaging practices with their peers when learning another language. By implementing these teachings in the classroom, we are allowing students to be able to support themselves both culturally and linguistically (2014). With these research studies done on the idea of translanguaging it is able show the benefits of students using their own language and culture to learn the new language they are learning.

### **Why Is it Not Widely Used?**

Although studies have shown the use of translanguaging can be highly beneficial for English learners, several roadblocks stand in the way of its wider implementation. Many schools and teachers do not incorporate translanguaging practices because administrators and educational law sometimes have English-only policies in place (Nambisan, 2014). But most commonly, some teachers believe that for them to use translanguaging practices, they would have to understand and speak the language of all the students, or have an ESL classroom full of students with the same native language. Teachers with these beliefs often wonder whether the student is on task when they are using a language other than English, or if they are using an appropriate language to demonstrate their understanding. At the CCCC conference mentioned above, another researcher added some insight on the topic. If students could use their native language to

discuss content with their peers, they were not any more off topic than their peers who are monolingual, or who only speak English. When the student can use their home language, they become more engaged in the learning process as well and can sometimes more accurately represent their learning (Rosenbeck, 2016).

### **Practice What You Preach**

I have personally seen the effects of translanguaging in my own life and in the life of my family. I have three nieces and a nephew from Puerto Rico. They moved to Massachusetts from the island after the devastating hurricane in 2017. Their native language is Spanish and when two of them moved here, they spoke zero English. To assist in their transition to schooling in English, the school placed them into an ESL program. Their parents spoke only Spanish as well. When they brought homework home, their parents would not know how to help them with it because it was not translated and they would often not turn their work in, so they were getting lower grades. In school, they were told that in their ESL programs they were not allowed to use Spanish to help, so when they did not understand anything, they just decided to keep the questions blank. I helped with their homework one day and read it to myself in English and then translated it back into Spanish. Once they understood what the question was asking, they were able to answer the homework questions with no problem. It was not that they did not know what was going on in their class, it was that they did not know how to answer it in English. Since then I have helped them with their homework. I allow them to use Spanish when they have questions and I usually will answer them in English unless they are having a tough time with it. They speak Spanish at home with their parents, so they can keep their native language alive. When they need help, I will use both languages to make

sure that they are understanding the concept in both languages and learning new vocabulary in English. I think using both languages are a great way to help students learn. It builds confidence in the students to know they can answer subject matter correctly and that they are not behind in school, just taking a new approach to learning.

### **Future Research/What is Next**

The promise of translanguaging needs further exploration in order to demonstrate that this technique is just as helpful as traditional ESL and bilingual education methods for ELs to learn English. If it is proven repeatedly that translanguaging is an effective way of learning, then why not use it in the classroom? If teachers can understand the idea of translanguaging and can implement it in their daily classroom lives there will be substantial benefits. More participation, students can learn more, and their subject matter scores will start to improve. The next big step the educational field needs to work on is supplying teachers and administrators with the green light to be able to try this new way of learning.

### **In Conclusion**

Based on my research and my own experiences with translanguaging practices in my family, I can confidently say that I believe this language teaching approach is the way to go for students to learn a new language. In the three studies done (Makalela 2014; Martin 2014); & Nambisan 2014) have shown that there is positive evidence that translanguaging is an effective way to help the students learn and understand the material in class. This small but powerful body of research can also point teachers to start using

translanguaging in their classroom without having to change the way they normally teach (which was a limitation of bilingual education where teachers had to speak students' L1s). Translanguaging additionally builds ELs' confidence to participate more and become more engaged in their learning when they are able to utilize all the languages they know. As a result, they understand subject matter more deeply. Moreover, as translanguaging helps students grasp onto material, it can also help them connect back to their culture and have it been appreciated and validated within a public-school setting. ELs deserve to have their L1s kept alive in the classroom just as we use English. These students work hard to keep up with the rigorous curriculum of school, so keeping their native language alive can help keep them on track and eager to learn more.

Translanguaging is a new way of teaching students how to speak another language but to not implement it in the classroom could make an impact on the students and how they feel about their culture in the future.

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