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Translanguaging as Theory and Practice for Teaching Emergent Bilingual Students: Centering the Voices of Prospective Teachers

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Abstract: In this paper, we focus on the outcomes of introducing translanguaging as a theory and pedagogical tool in an undergraduate teacher education program at a predominantly White small liberal arts college. Engaging in participatory narrative inquiry, three prospective secondary teachers wrote narratives examining their understanding of language from a translanguaging perspective and the potential impact of translanguaging as a pedagogy in their content area classrooms. The three narratives provide rich insight into the thinking of prospective teachers about translanguaging and show prospective teachers' understanding of (a) the transformative possibilities of translanguaging, (b) the implications for identity development, and (c) the emergent understanding and application of translanguaging theory. We conclude that translanguaging has potential to challenge the reproduction of restrictive language ideologies among prospective teachers in monolingual English contexts. However, we also acknowledge that ongoing work is still needed to fully dismantle hegemonic discourses and common-sense ideologies in teacher education.

Keywords: translanguaging, teacher education, language ideologies, participatory narrative inquiry, secondary education

INTRODUCTION

Translanguaging, a term referring to a poststructuralist reconceptualization of language and a transformative pedagogy, has become influential in the education of emergent bilinguals (EBs) in the United States. As a theory of language, translanguaging foregrounds the idiolect and challenges dominant language ideologies that socially construct named languages around connections to nationalism and European imperialism and coloniality (e.g., Flores & García, 2013; García & Leiva, 2014; Otheguy et al., 2015). While the epistemology of this conceptualization has been critiqued (e.g., MacSwan, 2017, 2020b, 2022), there is consensus that translanguaging has potential to challenge linguistic hegemony and has powerful pedagogical applications. Studies of translanguaging pedagogy have demonstrated its potential for affirming the identities of EBs (e.g., García-Mateus & Palmer, 2017; Ostorga, 2021), challenging restrictive

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language policies and practices (Emerick et al., 2020; Langman, 2014), and bolstering engagement and content learning (Licona & Kelly, 2020).

While much of the work on translanguaging has shown promise, some research (Andrei et al., 2020; Salerno et al., 2019) indicates that prospective and in-service teachers maintain misconceptions about language and EBs' language abilities even after learning about translanguaging. Seltzer (2022) argued that prospective teachers need to develop a critical translingual stance, which focuses on examining positionality (personal), systems of power (political), and teaching practice (pedagogical). That said, more research is needed to understand how introducing translanguaging theory and pedagogy can help prospective teachers reconceptualize their understanding of language and develop a critical translanguaging approach to teaching EBs in U.S. schools. To pursue these goals, we draw on participatory narrative inquiry (Hooley, 2009; Zucchini et al., 2022) as a means of exploring prospective teachers' meaning making and identity construction within the context of teacher education (Benson, 2018). Drawing on a *participatory* narrative framework includes participants in the interpretation of their own stories (Zucchini et al., 2022). As such, the focus was to center the voices and interpretations of three prospective secondary teachers as they examined their responsibility for teaching EBs in U.S. secondary schools. In this paper, we address the following research questions:

1. How did learning about translanguaging theory and practice influence prospective teachers' understanding of language and language learning in secondary classrooms?
2. How did a translanguaging framework inform prospective teachers' perspectives on their future teaching practice?

The Context and Study

The study took place at a small liberal arts college in Allentown, Pennsylvania, where, at the time of the study, the first author was a faculty member and the student authors were enrolled in the teacher education program. Muhlenberg College is committed to preparing teachers in the tradition of liberal education, requiring students to explore the interconnectivity between disciplines and emerge with a holistic appreciation for human knowledge and experience. The College is a predominantly White institution, and the teacher education program is about 95% White and majority female, with programs in pre-K-4 general education; 4-8 with a concentration in English, mathematics, or social studies; or 7-12 biology, chemistry, English, French, mathematics, social studies, or Spanish. There is no program for licensure in ESL or bilingual–bicultural education.

During the program, prospective teachers take one course on teaching EBs. The course is part of an integrative learning experience (IL), requiring the co-registration of World Geography. Both courses are grounded in transformational epistemologies and critical race theory to challenge prospective teachers to explore how their identities inform their perceptions of the physical world and educational spaces. Throughout the IL, students learn about racism, linguicism, and other structural inequities that affect EBs as well as pedagogical approaches and strategies to reorganize schools and classrooms to be more equitable spaces. One part of the EB course focuses on translanguaging.

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Students are introduced to translanguaging as a reconceptualization of language understood in terms of linguistic repertoires and as a challenge to named languages utilizing Mena's (2019, 2020) explanations of translanguaging theory, short lectures, and extended discussions. The bulk of the instruction, however, focuses on translanguaging pedagogy and the transformative potential of engaging students' full linguistic repertoires to teach standards-based academic content and skills (Flores & García, 2013; Seltzer et al., 2020). Students are encouraged to embrace translanguaging as they collaboratively analyze and design lesson plans and materials and teach EBs in fieldwork. In addition, students develop an inquiry project in which they explore a topic related to EB education. The project requires students to first write a review of literature on their topic, pose inquiry questions, and complete a small-scale empirical investigation during their required fieldwork experience. (During COVID-19, students conducted interviews with practicing teachers as an alternative.) The purpose of the project is to help students explore the intersections of and tensions between theory and practice.

At the conclusion of the Fall 2020 semester, the first author invited the students who focused on translanguaging for their inquiry project over the past 2 semesters to participate in this study, which involved constructing and analyzing narratives about how their experiences learning about translanguaging influenced their understanding of bilingualism and how to teach EBs. Participation in the study was entirely separate from students' course work. Three students expressed interest in participating and are coauthors of this paper: Edwin, a Latino, first-generation, sophomore biology major; Catherine, a White sophomore English major; Eva, a Latina sophomore history major.

DATA AND ANALYSIS

To begin, the first author prompted the students to write a narrative describing how their study of translanguaging influenced their understanding of language and their perspectives on teaching in translingual and transcultural spaces. The focus of the narrative was on how the students made meaning from the concept of translanguaging. The student authors took several weeks to write narratives and, throughout the process, read each other's narratives, included inline comments, met and discussed emergent patterns and ideas, and rewrote and revised. After the students finalized their narratives, the first author conducted content analysis of the narratives (Benson, 2018), inductively coding them and writing analytic memos that formed the basis for our discussions during research meetings. Initial codes included family experiences, school experiences, transformative pedagogy, challenging language norms, challenging disciplinary norms, and language and geography. After the first round of coding, all four authors discussed, revised, and refined the codes (such as language and geography becoming linguistic imaginaries, based on the student researchers' learning in World Geography) and developed themes through analytic memo writing (Saldaña, 2021): translanguaging as transformative theory and pedagogy, translanguaging as reshaping prospective teacher identities, and emerging understanding and application of translanguaging.

FINDINGS

Translanguaging as Transformative Theory and Pedagogy

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Across all three narratives, Edwin, Catherine, and Eva articulated a view of translanguaging as liberatory theory and a pedagogy of possibilities for students and teachers that challenged power relations, in line with Seltzer's (2022) focus on the political. For example, Eva wrote about the policy implications of translanguaging:

> The United States does not have an official language, yet the school system has forced EBs to learn English while placing less value on their native tongue. The use of translanguaging erases boundaries like these and gives students and teachers a richer understanding of the classroom. The environment is welcoming to all and enforces a teacher's role as an educator to future members of society. The presence of different languages in the classroom showcases diversity to students, mirroring society's multilingualism.

For Eva, translanguaging fundamentally shifts the boundaries of what counts and what is valued as the geographic and linguistic imaginary of the United States—a key learning goal for the IL. Drawing on a translanguaging perspective is more than simply using multiple languages in the classroom, but is tied to a larger culture of inclusivity and a broader view of society and multilingualism—the reality of U.S. society, not the ideological reconstruction of the United States as a monolingual English state. Similarly, Catherine defines translanguaging early in her narrative as follows:

> The concept that there does not need to be boxes around languages that have been formed due to social constructs and historical colonization. Translanguaging breaks down the barriers that have been formed, and introduces new material to EBs the way that the brain naturally processes information—together, instead of separately.

In her definition, Catherine drew directly on Mena's (2019) explanation of García and Li's (2014) book on translanguaging as undoing the boxes that have been constructed around languages via naming and linked the social construction of named languages to colonialism, engaging her political translingual stance. She then linked this conceptualization of language to the work of teachers—the pedagogical—as introducing information in ways that allow for natural processing and harkened back to García et al.'s (2017) notion of juntos.

For Edwin, engaging the pedagogical translanguaging stance would enable students to experience greater community and teachers to further the goals of ensuring that students learn academic content and broaden their linguistic competence:

> By providing students the freedom to express their ideas in their L1, the student can pull from more past knowledge to become more involved within the class community. There should be more flexibility with the kinds of linguistic resources that a student can pull from. Translanguaging is a way to make education more accessible to a population of EL students in a way that utilizes their already existing understanding of their L1 language to facilitate their understanding of English as a second language.

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Further, Edwin identified two key policy initiatives for EBs in Pennsylvania—learning academic content and acquiring English proficiency—and he linked translanguaging pedagogy as a means to attain these two ends in a way that builds community.

Translanguaging as Reshaping Prospective Teachers' Identities

In addition to their engagement with the political translanguaging stance, Edwin, Catherine, and Eva began to understand themselves and their identities differently, demonstrating their engagement with the personal translingual stance (Seltzer, 2022). First, we identified the ways in which Edwin and Eva began to rethink language as a cultural practice, and all three students reconsidered how their understanding of translanguaging shifted their identities as prospective teachers. Edwin and Eva described their understanding of language as culture and identity, rather than as a disembodied skill, and contrasted their linguistic and cultural identities with their school experiences. Their experience in the IL reinforced their critical lens and affirmed their lived expertise as Latina/o students in a predominantly White teacher education program. For example, Eva described her experience in a transitional bilingual education program in elementary school that aimed for the students to master "academic English" in service of preparing for standardized assessments. Eva explained the impact this had on her identity:

> Throughout the years, I began to feel uncomfortable when speaking Spanish, especially in a formal setting. I blamed myself for my inability to maintain and progress further in Spanish while mastering English, that is until I took two courses for the Education Program: Theory and Practice for Teaching English Language Learners and World Geography. . . . It astonished me that translanguaging could work in practice, given that my previous teachers would not allow students to speak Spanish or other languages in the classroom. The reason being that students must master English, and the only possible way to do so was through only speaking, writing, reading, and thinking in English.

In this case, learning about translanguaging had a profound impact on Eva's understanding of the miseducation she received in an assimilatory language program and encouraged her to divest herself of the assimilationist perspective of her own school experiences.

After studying translanguaging, Catherine, a White prospective teacher, felt conflicted by her decision to become an English teacher—something she worried could be a hegemonic act. But through her continued exploration of translanguaging and reflection on her disciplinary training in the humanities, Catherine found a pathway to broaden her concept of what it means to be an English teacher:

> I do not love English because of the language itself, but rather because of the modes of expression. Therefore, to become an English teacher while still providing an inclusive environment and not ranking English higher than any other language involves including materials from different cultures and authors as well as encouraging the opportunity for EBs to teach other students about their cultures.

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In writing this narrative, Catherine was able to see beyond a narrow conceptualization of her field and reconceptualize her identity as a prospective English teacher as one focused on "modes of expression" and cultural and linguistic inclusion. This realization had major implications for Catherine as she explored the tension between her own investment in Anglophone literature and her obligation to honor the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the students she would teach in the future, showing the connection between the personal and pedagogical translingual stances.

Emerging Understanding and Application of Translanguaging

Despite the value of translanguaging on the prospective teachers' pedagogical and identity development, considerable aspects of the narratives reflected the language of restrictive language ideologies, implying that their development of a pedagogical translanguaging stance—and the language to express such a stance—was still in development. In her narrative, Catherine drew on language that implied language separation when discussing teaching methods that some teachers described in interviews that she conducted for the final class project:

> From these teachers' perspectives, the main goal was to teach their students English and get their work done. Methods such as these are harmful for students because automatically it shows that English is more important than their native language, whether intentionally or not. On the other hand, if translanguaging is used then students see the two languages working together in harmony.

While Catherine clearly sees the importance of translanguaging as a strategy that can be "used" to move away from harmful methods of language education, she also continues to reproduce separate language ideology through her reliance on terms such as "native language" as distinct from English and "two languages." So, while the students are certainly invested in undoing the colonial logic of national language identities, they are still in the process of grappling with deeply engrained language ideologies and developing the language necessary to describe translanguaging realities.

Similarly, despite extoling the virtue of using EBs' "linguistic resources that can be used in a classroom to facilitate learning," Edwin regularly reverted to using "L1" to discuss EBs' language skills, a choice that brightens the boundaries between languages and reproduces separate language ideology:

> There should not be a limit in the linguistic resources that can be used in a classroom to facilitate learning. Just the topic of cells can be spatially complex to teach, so utilizing the L1 language can help eliminate barriers to understanding the content. I can use words such as la célula (the cell), el átomo (the atom), or prepositions such as debajo (under) or encima de (on top of). The entire structure of biology could be taught with translanguaging where students can use Spanish biology words as a scaffolding to help them learn the words in English.

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These excerpts demonstrate the complexity of moving away from separate language ideologies in two important ways. First, Catherine and Edwin reproduced separate language ideologies by designating students' languages as L1, native language, and English and maintaining the hierarchy of using Spanish in service of English learning. Secondly, Edwin separated English and Spanish in the narrative text itself—creating textual barriers through the use of parentheses. Despite the ongoing encouragement, throughout the course and the collaborative research project, this excerpt is the only example of using any language other than what is typically named "standard academic English," demonstrating the ingrained language ideologies around English, academic writing, and language separation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, we examined the ways in which prospective teachers interpreted translanguaging as a theory and pedagogical strategy for teaching EBs and answered the questions of how learning about translanguaging (a) influenced prospective teachers' understanding of language and language learning in secondary classrooms and (b) informed their perspectives on their future teaching practice. In answering the first research question, we showed that incorporating translanguaging into undergraduate teacher education can have a substantial impact on prospective teachers' views of language and language learning. This was apparent in the first theme, in which Eva and Catherine explored their political translingual stances, articulating a critique of the social construction of named languages, core to the poststructuralist philosophy of language (e.g., García & Leiva, 2014) that reflects the move away from named languages toward a fluid understanding of languaging (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007). With that said, we struggled to discuss language from a translanguaging perspective without using common terms, such as English, Spanish, home language, L1, and native language (Seltzer, 2019). Throughout the narratives these terms show up because they are ingrained as part of our common-sense understanding of language. Furthermore, we did not, for the most part, engage our full linguistic repertoires in the narratives or this article, indicating perhaps some hesitancy to shift away from the socialization that links academic writing to "standard" English (MacSwan, 2020a) and demonstrates the power of nationalist monoglossic ideologies (Flores & García, 2013). Clearly more work is needed to fully undo our reliance on these limiting linguistic imaginaries. We also wonder about the role of context; does learning about translanguaging at a predominantly White institution where most students identify as monolingual English speakers affect our ability to fully realize the potential of translanguaging?

In answering the second research question, we see that the translanguaging framework did inform prospective teachers' views on their future teaching practice. Like Andrei et al. (2020) recommended, introducing translanguaging in undergraduate teacher education provided a framework for thinking about the transformative role teachers play in the education of EBs. Edwin, Catherine, and Eva, articulated this attention to pedagogy in nearly every excerpt, showing the potential of teacher education programs to prepare future teachers to challenge restrictive language policies and create heteroglossic spaces (e.g., Langman, 2014; Flores & Schissel, 2014). Third, we saw that translanguaging influenced teacher identity development and students' visions of their future selves as

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equitable teachers for EBs, reflecting the personal translingual stance. While this happened differently for Catherine, who examined her disciplinary training, and Eva and Edwin who examined their histories in school and with family, translanguaging clearly shifted their thinking away from linguistic hierarchies and toward language practices and policies for more equitable teaching.

This leaves us with two concrete recommendations for teacher educators. First, we support the literature calling for teacher preparation programs to engage prospective teachers in examining their language ideologies and perceptions of language-minoritized youth before entering the classroom (Salerno et al., 2019; Seltzer, 2022). We see this work as foundational to ensuring prospective teachers become equitable and just educators. Second, we call for this engagement to go beyond a superficial introduction to translanguaging. The student authors' narratives are based on their experience with extended inquiry and multiple opportunities to think about EBs, themselves, and their future teaching practices from a translanguaging perspective, design translanguaging lessons, and implement translanguaging shifts.

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