

# **Bridging the Divide: Collaborative Learning and Translanguaging in Multilingual Classrooms**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Collaborative learning is an educational approach which involves groups of learners who work together to solve various problems, perform a task and arrive at a certain conclusion together (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012). It also involves the students to actively participate in the classroom, which encourages them to socialize with one another. However, it promotes a single language formula in the classroom. This becomes a problem for multilingual students as they come from various linguistic backgrounds. Also, their language resources remain unutilized in the classroom and most of the time they lose interest in their studies as they cannot comprehend the language of their teachers, which forces them to leave the school (MacKenzie, 2009). In such a scenario, the strategy of translanguaging can be used as it gives multilingual learners an opportunity to hover “freely within, between, and among languages” (Shohamy, 2013). In this paper, we will present the results of a study, that was conducted in a school in Paschim Medinipur district, West Bengal. As part of the study, a qualitative discourse analysis was done to study how translanguaging promotes collaboration among students.

**Keywords:** Multilingualism, collaborative learning, strategy, translanguaging

## **INTRODUCTION**

India is globally acknowledged for its diversity, be it in its religion, culture or language. In fact, there are very few classrooms in India where students do not come from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Hence, they bring with them various linguistic resources and cultures to the classroom. However, most of the time this valuable resource remains unutilized because the Indian education system, by and large follows a monolingual model of education. Mohanty (2009) rightly opines

that the education system in India is superficially multilingual, but it remains monolingual at an underlying level. The three language formula suggested by the Kothari Commission (1964-1966) is more abused and less used.

Students who come from a minority language background face difficulties during classroom transactions as they cannot comprehend the language of their teachers, which results in utter frustration. As a result, they leave school even before completing Class Eight (Mohanty, 2009). According to MacKenzie (2009), dropout rates are significantly higher among linguistic minority students, than among students from a dominant language background in India. As their culture and languages are ignored in the educational spaces, such students no longer find the education system helpful. They withdraw from the education system, which in turn has a long term influence on human resource development. According to Sahu (2014), the dropout rates are the highest among the Adivasi community.

In such a scenario, the linguistic and cultural resources of the minority students should be addressed in the classroom as language plays a vital role in constructing identity in the classroom (Panda & Mohanty, 2009). Previous studies (MacKenzie, 2009, Sahu, 2014) have proved that the exclusion of the mother tongue from the curriculum has a negative impact on the education of tribal students. According to MacKenzie (2009), the inclusion of the mother tongue has a positive influence on the education of such students, as they can relate their personal experiences with the environment of the schools, thereby making the learning environment more interactive. NCF (2005) also suggested imparting education in the mother tongue, observing that, “the multilingual character of Indian society should be seen as a resource to promote multilingual proficiency in a child”.

However, the challenge that lies before us is how a multilingual education can be promoted as including diverse languages in the education system, and how minority languages can be promoted without harming the other languages in the classroom. Certainly, we should adopt a teaching and learning strategy which gives equal respect and position to all the languages in a classroom by considering language as a fluid system rather than restricting the learners within strict linguistic boundaries. Translanguaging is one such strategy, which can address the issues of multilingualism in the classroom.

Translanguaging can be defined as “the ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages that form their repertoires as an integrated system” (Canagarajah, 2011). Garcia (2009) describes translanguaging as “an important educational practice—to construct understandings, to make sense of the world and of the academic material, to mediate with others, to acquire other ways of languaging”. Shohamy (2013) perceives translanguaging as the process of shaping connotation, gaining experience and understanding from the use of more than two

languages in a single linguistic repertoire. She describes translanguaging as being necessary as it gives the learners a chance to move freely within, between and among languages.

### **Why Translanguaging to Promote Collaborative Learning?**

Most of the earlier researches on translanguaging have dealt with issues of bilingualism. There are only a few studies which have been conducted from the perspective of multilingual students in India. Pattanayak (1984) argues “in multilingual countries many languages are the facts of life; any restriction in the choice of language use is a nuisance, and one language is not only uneconomic, it is absurd”. Srivastava (1990) adds that Indian society should preserve and develop multilingualism through its formal education system in various educational institutions. Krishnamurti (1990) expresses concern with regard to imparting education through the mother tongue and suggests that teachers and students use various languages in the classroom. Through my study, I will attempt to explore the relationship between translanguaging and collaborative learning and also look at how translanguaging can promote collaborative learning in a multilingual classroom.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Translanguaging**

The term translanguaging was proposed by Cen Williams (1994) to describe bilingual language practices among students in secondary schools, and was later popularized by scholars such as Baker (2001) and Garcia (2009). It is specific language practice, rather than a theoretical concept. It celebrates the fuzziness of language boundaries (Bagwasi, 2016). It emerges from social practices where languages are neither static nor linked to the other languages (Creese and Blackledge, 2015). The practice of translanguaging considers that boundaries between languages are fluid, dynamic and constantly shifting (Cenoz and Gorter, 2011). Hence, a speaker can easily shuttle between and among various languages in everyday classroom interaction (Canagarajah, 2011; Bisai & Singh, 2018). Gradually, it creates an environment of dynamic and flexible ways of languaging, where multilingual speakers access their linguistic repertoires to enlarge their communicative potential (Duarte, 2016). Lewis, Jones and Baker (2012) opine that in translanguaging, languages are used in a dynamic and functionally integrated manner for the purpose of learning or communication. It can also be described as the systematic use of various languages in a single lesson.

Translanguaging can also be used as a tool of learning from a sociocultural perspective. It plays a vital role in facilitating language learning among students. Martin-Beltron (2014) argues that translanguaging can be used as a vehicle to

promote collaboration among students. Further, it actively engages students in peer interactions, which improves their literacy as well as their communicative competencies. While interacting with their peers, learners bring their background knowledge into the classroom, negotiate meaning with each other, and create and manage a social space among themselves (Duarte, 2016). Reyes (2018) opines that translanguaging ignites interest as well as creativity in education, develops knowledge and proficiency in the subject matter and offers the students a space to construct their knowledge. Palmer, Martinez, Mateus and Henderson (2014) argue that it validates the students' ideas by bringing their resources into the classroom. Gradually they start developing various linguistic skills and become more competent in the target language.

Translanguaging has cognitive benefits too. Carstens (2016) remarks that it challenges students cognitively and improves their academic skills. Palmer et al. (2014) opine that it ignites the metalinguistic awareness of the students. Reyes (2018) says translanguaging encourages students to explore various aspects of a social topic critically, which allows them to get a deeper insight into the subject.

With regard to the role of the teacher, Palmer et. al. (2014) argue that teachers play a vital role in a translanguaging classroom. They engage the students in collaborative tasks, create opportunities for discourse where the students can learn and relearn various concepts and validate the resources which the students bring into the classroom. Creese and Blackledge (2010) opine that teachers use translanguaging for various purposes, such as for annotating a text to provide greater access to the curriculum. Duran and Palmer (2014) argue that both teacher and student reinforce pluralist discourse in the classroom. Teacher creates new possibilities of languaging in the classroom. According to Palmer et. al. (2014), teachers use translanguaging to develop the linguistic skills of their students by teaching the structure and usage of various languages. They also switch from one language to another purposefully and intentionally to validate or monitor students' language practices.

### **Collaborative learning**

Collaborative learning is an educational approach which is based on a social constructivist philosophy. It makes a shift, away from a traditional teacher-centric classroom (Laal & Laal, 2012), and introduces the students to a wider world of target language and culture (Oxford, 1997). Laal and Ghodsi (2012) opine that collaborative learning is an educational approach in which a group of learners work together to solve various problems, perform a task and reach certain conclusions together.

Collaborative learning has numerous benefits for students. Bruffee (1984) remarks that it provides the students with a social platform where students respect the

opinions of each other, create a social space for each other and engage in a mutually interactive process. It also teaches them how to think collaboratively in the classroom. Laal and Ghodsi (2012) argue that collaborative learning gives students the opportunity to converse with their peers, represent and defend their ideas, and exchange diverse opinions and beliefs within the classroom. Elbers and Streefland (2000) observe that collaborative learning allows learners to explore and evaluate new ideas. It allows learners to create a familiar learning content for each other. Gradually, the students start learning how to regulate the process of acquiring knowledge. Staarmane, Krol and Meijden (2005) write that collaborative learning provides students with rich opportunities to reflect on the reactions and perspectives of their peers. While talking about collaborative learning, Laal and Ghodsi (2012) categorize the benefits derived from collaborative learning under three sections—psychological, social and academic. Psychological benefits include enhanced problem solving skills, positive attitude towards teachers and classroom and increased self-esteem in students. With regard to social benefits, collaborative learning helps to develop social interaction skills, enhance conflict resolution skills, and encourage diversity understanding among students. It also creates an environment of caring, supportive and committed relationships. Academic benefits includes increased motivation and better learning outcomes in the classroom.

Collaborative learning can help students discuss cultural problems and difficulties (Flammia, 2012; Oxford, 1997; Wang, Freeman & Zhu, 2013). Flammia (2012) describes collaborative learning as the process of acculturation as students learn various components of culture from their interaction with each other. Oxford (1997) opines that collaborative learning shapes the cultural and linguistic ideas of the students as they engage in reflective enquiry in the classroom. Bruner (1996) states that collaborative learning is necessary for cultural development. Economides (2008) opines that culture and collaborative learning have a positive relationship with each other, and collaborative learning makes the students culturally sensitive. It also has a significant impact on learning and knowledge transfer. Wang et. al. (2013) discuss how engaging students in cross-cultural collaboration helps to develop their intercultural competencies. They add that cross cultural activities are necessary to satisfy the linguistic needs of the students.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper has been developed based on the following theoretical ideas:

#### **Social Development Theory**

Vygotsky (1978) asserts the importance of social interaction in human development. He opines that cultural development of a child makes an appearance twice: first, on the social level, and then on the individual level; first between persons (inter-psychological), and then inside or within the child (intra-psychological).

Vygotsky states that social interaction leads to the thinking that discourse between people is internalized by individuals as their perception. This internalized talk can in turn lead to the development of thinking in different ways. First, language is a cognitive resource; hence practicing and using a language helps one to become a “fluent speaker” of that language. It enables a child to use and understand the concept, functions and expression of the language. Second, through talk participants are exposed to alternative voices and perspectives that challenge or elaborate on their worldview. Third, habitual interaction patterns—providing all participants with an opportunity to voice their views, demanding and providing justification for an argument, questioning, making assumptions, clarifying concepts—help in the development of language skills.

### **SALAD BOWL CONCEPT**

The salad bowl or the cultural mosaic concept/theory (Paulston, 1997; Deyoe, 1977) calls for the integration of diverse languages or cultures in a single context, or combining them like the different ingredients of a salad, where the ingredients do not lose their identity but provide a distinct and unique flavor. The salad bowl concept of language strictly rejects the traditional concept of melting pot theory and embraces the notion of multilingualism, where every language maintains its separate entity as well as its identity in a society (Tamasi & Antieau, 2015).

### **Methods**

The research for this paper was conducted in a school in the Paschim Medinipur district of West Bengal, India. The consent of the school authorities and the class teacher was obtained before the study was conducted. For the purpose of qualitative discourse analysis, the researchers drew on observational and interview data of Class eight students of a state run school. The classroom comprised of sixty students from diverse linguistic backgrounds—Santali, Bengali, Lodha, Kurmi, etc. To draw data for the purpose of research, English language classes were observed for 30 hours at different times of the day. Audio and video recordings were taken and semi-formal interviews were conducted both with the teachers and students. The demographic information of the students was noted down by the researchers for the purpose of research only.

While analyzing the demographic factors, we realized that 23 percent of the students were from linguistically diverse backgrounds and most of them were competent in three languages. The rest of the students were competent in two languages.

While analyzing the video recordings, we discovered that students were moving

between, across and among languages to express their understanding of the subject matter. To prove our point, the researchers planned a few activities in the class. The purpose of these activities was to show how students break language barriers and use translanguaging as a learning tool. One classroom discussion is cited as follows:

**Activity-I:**

Teacher: What is the meaning of grandfather?

Student 1: *Nana* (Hindi)

Student 2: *Dadu* (Bengali)

Student 3: Is it mother's father or father's father?

All students: Ha, ha, ha...

Here, the students are breaking the traditional boundaries of languages and using various linguistic repertoires in a single classroom discourse. They are using repertoires from three languages (Bengali, Hindi and English) with ease. At the same time, they are also raising critical questions and mocking at the limitations of English.

**Activity-II:**

The teacher divided the students into seven groups of seven students each. Each group was given a placard with a story in which the sentences were in a jumbled order. Each placard had a different story. The students were instructed to think aloud and discuss with their group members while arranging the sentences in the right order to narrate the story. The researchers recorded these conversations, which have been documented as follows:

Student 1: *Ata first hoba karon singho ta prothama ghumocchilo. Tarpur jaglo* (This will be the first sentence because the lion was sleeping at first [*sic*]. Then, it woke up.

Student 2: Right.

Student 3: See, the fat lion here like Ankit.

Student 4: But you are like the rat, *patla and daat gulo boro boro* (thin and you have big teeth).

Student 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7: Ha, ha, ha.

Student 5: Let's come to the topic. Don't make fun always [*sic*].

Student 2: This will be the third one.

This discussion shows how students translanguage while collaborating with each other in the classroom. While arranging the story, they are actively engaged in the learning process and consequentially, learning becomes fun for them. They are engaged in a discussion in which they share their thoughts, feelings and emotions freely and creatively in the classroom. They are also enhancing their speaking skills through this discussion. Gradually, they become managers of their learning environment; when certain disruptions hamper the classroom discourse, learners take the initiative and create a learning environment for themselves.

### **TEACHERS' RESPONSE**

While interviewing the ESL teachers of the school the researchers asked them if they used only English language in the ESL classroom, to which all of them said that they do not always use English. Instead, they mix various languages as students comprehend better and faster if teachers communicate with them by mixing various languages. One teacher replied that teachers should use English language exclusively in an ESL classroom, but this would make the lesson monotonous as the students would not be able to understand anything. Hence, teachers deliberately use various languages to make the lesson more interesting and comprehensible to the students.

While interviewing the students, I found that they also alternate between different languages in the classroom. They specifically move between, across and among various languages when they explain the lesson to a peer who was unable to understand it in the class. For instance, when a minority language student did not understand the instructions given by the teacher in the classroom, he asked his best friend to translate them for him in Santali. The students acknowledged that by using various languages in the classroom, it helped them to understand the lesson better, and express their feelings and emotions more easily in the classroom.

### **FINDINGS**

Translanguaging has manifold benefits in a multilingual classroom. Though the students are constantly mixing various languages at any given time, they come out with coherent, creative and unique ideas. Such interactions help them to improve their speaking skills as they engage them in various collaborative tasks. They also learn to organize their ideas. Even when they mock at the limitations of a language, they use translanguaging. Similarly, when the students perform collaborative tasks, they use translanguaging.

While delivering instructions, teachers deliberately use translanguaging to bridge the gap between the mother tongue and English, to make the lesson interesting



and comprehensible, and to yield better outcomes in the classroom. They also use translanguaging to make the students perform certain tasks smoothly, to promote collaboration among students, to promote discussions, to bring various linguistic repertoires of the students into the classroom, to bring flexibility in the classroom and to discuss some complex ideas with the students. Last but not the least, the teachers work as facilitators or the more knowledgeable other (MKO) to facilitate the learning process in the classroom.

### CONCLUSION

In a multilingual classroom, translanguaging promotes specific ways of languaging which go beyond the artificial divide between languages. This proves that language is not a fixed entity; rather it is fluid and derives meaning from the social, historical and political context. When students translanguage in a multilingual classroom, they create an environment of collaboration and cooperation among their peers. This collaboration and cooperation make the learning environment joyful, helpful and productive to the students. It also helps the linguistic minority students to bring their linguistic repertoire into the classroom, validate their identity and enable them to make sense of their world. It enlarges the thinking capacity of the students, resolves conflicts among languages in the classroom, does justice to students from minority linguistic background and provides an equitable space for all languages.

It is clear that promoting translanguaging is necessary in a linguistic and culturally diverse country such as India in order to make the education system more effective. Translanguaging creates a space for broader thinking and knowledge-building among the students by making the learners autonomous. It has also the potential to resolve dynamic tensions among languages and to create a space for various languages within the classroom. Hence, our multilingual education should include translanguaging as a strategy to strengthen the education system in India.

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