

Translanguaging Usage and Perceptions in Higher Education: Towards Inclusionary Pedagogy and Transformative Learning

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Abstract

This paper discusses how translanguaging has often historically been thought of as a form of linguistic processing in language acquisition programs (Mazak & Carroll, 2017), and the more recent move to use it as a teaching strategy that increases equity and levels the power of voice and participation in the classroom (Creese & Blackledge, 2010 & 2015). This paper describes a qualitative research project that surveyed teaching faculty and students at a local university about their translanguaging strategies and usage. This research is meant to increase understandings of translanguaging usage and perceptions to advance excellence in pedagogical approaches to adult education, concentrating on strategies to increase equity in education, as well as how it can lead to transformative learning.

Keywords: translanguaging, transformative learning, equity in education, adult education pedagogy

Introduction: Moving from Bilingual Education to a Pedagogy of Inclusion

Historically, translanguaging has often been thought of as a form of linguistic processing in language acquisition programs (Mazak & Carroll, 2017). Recently the concept has been viewed as a valuable teaching strategy, moving classrooms from places where “one story” hegemonic discourse dominates to places of pluralistic and more inclusive adult educational praxis. This move has been related to the recognition of language as a social construct and identity as something we “perform” (Creese & Blackledge, 2015, p. 21).

There have been decades of discussion on the pedagogy of bilingual language learning, and more recently on translanguaging in bilingual education (Baker, 2003; Cummins, 2005; Gravelle, 1996; Heller, 1999; Lindholm-Leary, 2006; Swain, 1983). Others have moved this dialogue out of bilingual teaching and into pluralistic/multilinguistic classrooms as a strategy of inclusive learning (Lewis, Jones and Baker, 2012) that questions the hegemonic norms of monolingual classrooms (Garcia and Leiva, 2014; Mazak and Carroll, 2017). This questioning of hegemonic norms and use of translanguaging as a pedagogy of inclusion is where this paper aligns, and as such, similar to Lewis, Jones and Baker (2012), discusses pedagogically planned translanguaging usage across contexts and cultures for cognition (p.650), in a university campus teaching and learning setting. Specifically, I look at how:

Translanguaging as a concept shifts focus from the structural analysis of language itself to what people *do* with language in their everyday lives [...] rethink bilingualism as the norm [...] put monolingual ideologies of language aside and adopt beliefs about language that put bi- and multilingual practices at the center of our investigation, teaching, and policymaking. (Mazak, 2017, p. 9; as cited in Mazak and Carroll, 2017)

Further to this idea of what we ‘do’ with language, is the idea of what multiple language learning contexts do to us in terms of our learning. Hodge (2019) notes that through interactions with others, transformative learning experiences can happen which can cause the learners perspectives to become more inclusive, more differentiated, more permeable and more integrated (p. 145). This echoes Gobbo, Galeotti, and Esposito’s (2017) idea that we develop a ‘deeper knowledge’ as we move from subjective to intersubjective understandings (p. 165-66).

Background

Prior to this study, the author had been using translanguaging in an English as an Additional Language environment while working for a local school board’s adult non-credit programs. At this time, a workshop had been implemented focusing on parental understandings of cultural differences in expectations at primary schools for their children. This workshop specifically tackled the messages that the parents’ children would hear in the schools centering on foods for lunches, showering, washing hair, brushing teeth, and laundry. The creation of this workshop was due to complaints that had been received at the adult education centre from teaching staff at the elementary level, as the elementary teachers were aware that the children’s parents were attending classes at the adult education centre. The elementary teachers had reached out to us in the hopes that we could do some “educating on North American norms.” As an adult educator of Freirian pedagogies (Freire, 1971), with a critical view of hegemonic discourses, this workshop was *instead* developed to help parents understand the messages and pressures their children would be facing *due to* “North American norms” to help families navigate their choices and responses when these pressures became obvious. The choice to change the narrative of the workshop from “teaching North American norms” to “dealing with pressures related to North American norms” was also meant as an opportunity for students to provide their counter-narratives to challenge the dominant supremacy discourse within ideology that centers on hidden embedded assumptions of “teaching North American norms for acculturation and assimilation.” As such, the workshop was also framed in this alternate way as a strategic form of anti-racist, anti-oppression advocacy, and ally work (Adams, et al., 2010; Bishop, 2015; Boyd, 2016; Carruthers, 2018; Hoefer, 2016; Mullaly, 2010; O’Neal, 2019; Satzewich, & Liodakis, 2013; Sen, 2003; Smucker, 2017).

The workshop was structured using translanguaging across what would be a multilinguistic environment as students came from over 19 countries of origin and nearly as many language backgrounds. I had the instructors help group students in language groups for the workshop, some groups having as many as ten participants, and others being only pairs. Each group had learners whose English levels spanned being emergent to nearly bilingual as well. During the workshop, as the facilitator, I used approximately grade three level English, many graphics, encouraged translating, first language usage for group discussions, and chart paper brainstorming/writing in first languages. Time was built into this workshop to allow for the back-and-forth between first and second (or third, fourth, and fifth) languages and the higher-level English speakers were the spokespeople for their groups when the discussion was

brought back to the larger group in English for everyone (as the common emergent language in the room). Group discussions were heated, engaged, and lively. At times, before discussions moved back to the larger group, pairs, and small groups would spill into English or other shared languages (like French for example) as learners asked other ethnic/cultural/language groups in the room what their practices were, what foods were called in their languages, and at one point even shared where to find specific foods and how they cooked them.

These types of spontaneous conversations and cross-cultural sharing situations had been rarely seen in other workshop settings (although they happened often in the regular classroom spaces). At the end of the workshop one of the instructors even came up to me and thanked me for the way I had structured the workshop (in language groups using translanguaging strategies) stating it was the most engaged and interesting workshop the group had had. Students also thanked me as they often had frustrations with workshops delivered by other agencies that did not include translating, spoke too quickly in English, had too much English type on PowerPoint slides, and had content that was not conceptually or culturally understood (and not explained). I had known of these frustrations prior to developing the workshop due to my role in the institution, and this was a part of why I was delving into translanguaging strategies in the first place: I wanted to see if there were better ways to reach and engage with students. This workshop, even as a small first step, showed me that these strategies were important in our classrooms.

This simple workshop day was the beginning of what would become a tipping point in my own career, where I moved more concretely from the assumptions and “default positioning” of monolingual classrooms to a more pluralistic understanding and approach where translanguaging is encouraged. From here, I moved to a full-time faculty position in an academic department (not a language teaching program) at a local university, where I had also been teaching as a sessional for years. I decided to continue this line of translanguaging inquiry and praxis within this mainstream higher education environment, in my classes, and as a line of inquiry as discussed below.

As such, the research I undertook was meant to be used to advance excellence in adult education pedagogical approaches, concentrating on issues of equity in education at the local university. This research supported the local university’s strategic research plan in that it advanced knowledge related to “...identity, narrative, language, culture, community, and nationality as well as other aspects of the human experience.” (Algoma University, 2015, p. 6) while supporting the varying voices and worldviews in higher and adult education classrooms. The research supported the university’s commitment to the principles of diversity and equity which had been stated clearly:

- v. We will seek ways to integrate inclusive excellence throughout our university’s teaching, research, community engagement and governance. In doing so, we will engage with students, faculty, staff, our boards of governors, senates, and alumni to raise awareness and encourage all efforts. (Kent, 2017)

As a university that states it also has a diverse student body (Kent, 2017), our teaching strategies and instructional styles should reflect this diversity for student/faculty success, and translanguaging could potentially be seen as a useful pedagogical approach in terms of “inclusive excellence” as we focused forward.

Teaching and learning themes heralded at the university that would apply to translanguaging included: *Active and Collaborative Learning*, as this pedagogical approach does both in relation to the

specific and conscious planning and unfolding of these themes in classrooms; *Student-Faculty Interactions*, as we are partners in learning “with” each other through this approach (Garcia & Wei, 2014); and *Enriching Educational Experiences*, as this particular strategy has the potential to enrich our classroom environments. This enrichment happens by creating spaces for multiple understandings; specifically, this is related to how language and worldviews are conceptually tied to each other, how language is being socially constructed in real time, how we create our identities contextually (Creese & Blackledge, 2015), and how creating space for more than one language in a room can also create the space for the multiple worldviews that come with pluralistic and multi-linguistic environments (Mazak & Carroll, 2017). This last point delves into the potential of translanguaging to be used strategically as a tool for transformative learning as students experience “perceptual shifts” when exposed to the pluriverse (Martusewicz, Edmundson, & Lupinacci, 2011) of worldviews.

Methodology

This was a qualitative research project that surveyed both teaching faculty and students at the local university, and that was passed through the university’s Research Ethics Committee. Participants that were recruited included both faculty and students who volunteered to take the survey. Inclusion criteria for the faculty survey included any current part-time or full-time faculty member at Algoma University as per faculty email lists, and exclusion criteria for the faculty survey included anyone that was not a current full-time or part-time faculty member at Algoma University, also as per faculty email lists. Inclusion criteria for the student survey was similar and included any full-time or part-time students registered in classes during the 2018 year, as per the Algoma University Student Union (AUSU) student email list, and similarly exclusion criteria for the student survey was any prior students not registered in classes during the 2018 year. Recruitment beyond email lists included a survey awareness campaign for students through AUSU: putting the callout for survey volunteers (participants) onto the student news / calendar site as other events are advertised, and posters advertising the survey placed across campus.

Faculty and students were surveyed separately, using the same questions, for a comparative analysis of what was seen as current understandings, beliefs, and usage of translanguaging in classrooms and on the campus at large. Survey Monkey was used for the surveys as the questions were fairly simplistic. Participants were made aware of the potential use of their Survey Monkey data for meta-analysis due to US laws and regulations, and that, while unlikely, it would still be anonymous, there would be no identifiable data, and data could not be tracked back to individuals (<https://www.surveymonkey.com/mp/legal/privacy-policy/>).

As noted, surveys were being used to elicit understanding of the number of languages both faculty and student survey participants had and used, whether English was their first language, translanguaging strategies faculty and student participants currently used, and beliefs faculty and students had around monolingual/multilingual usage in classrooms and on campus.

The weakness of the study was that it was biased towards those interested in taking the study, as those who were, participated. The survey thus does not intend to represent the campus community, but is an entry point for further discussion; as such, it has the potential to strengthen further understandings within higher education teaching and learning settings regarding translanguaging usage and perception, and looks at the potential implications tied to transformative learning.

Results

Our local university is quite small compared to many, being the size of high schools in other jurisdictions. From this small base, eighteen faculty and thirty-five students participated in the surveys. As 89% of faculty who took the survey were English first language users but 46% of students who took the survey were not English first language users (only 55% of students were); the language diversity of the student participants was greater than the language diversity in faculty participants. Seven faculty presented with more than one language, and the number of additional languages they could function in depended on if it was speaking, reading, writing or listening as noted in Figures 1.1 to 5.1 below. Student surveys noted that 40% of students had two languages, and many had up to four and five languages that they could function in depending on if it was speaking, reading, writing, or listening as noted in Figures 1.2 to 5.2. This difference in language diversity between faculty and students would be interesting to track across the university as a whole, and as related to diversity hiring policies.

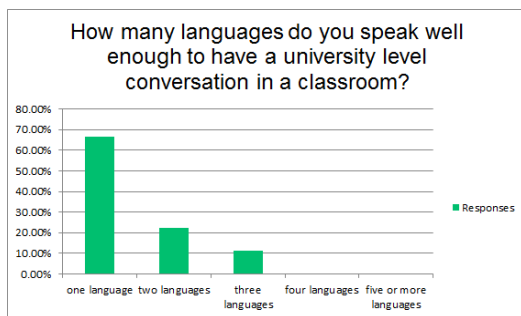


Figure 1.1 Faculty Response – speaking # of languages

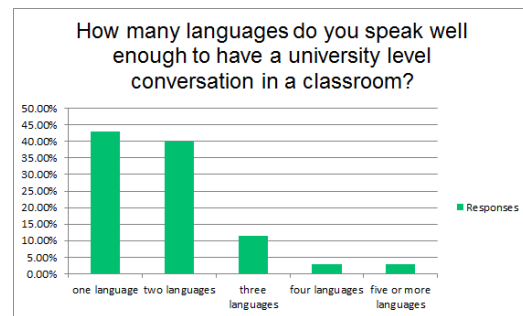


Figure 1.2 Student response – speaking # of languages

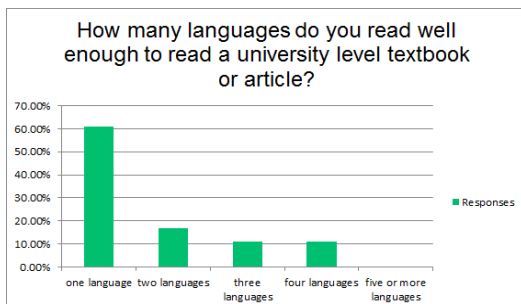


Figure 2.1 Faculty response – reading # of languages

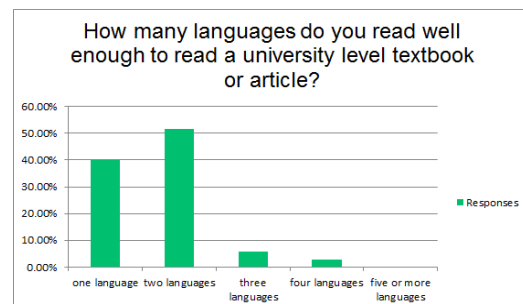


Figure 2.2 Student response – reading # of languages

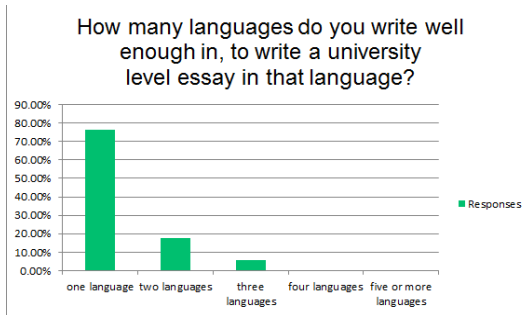


Figure 3.1 Faculty response – writing # of languages

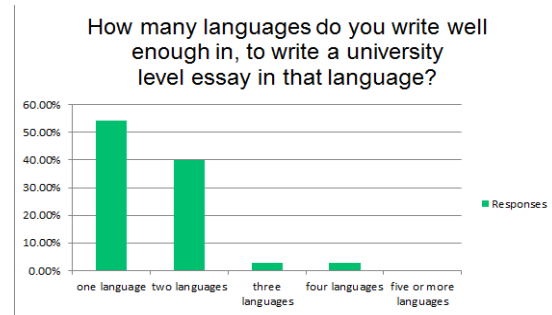


Figure 3.2 Student response – writing # of languages

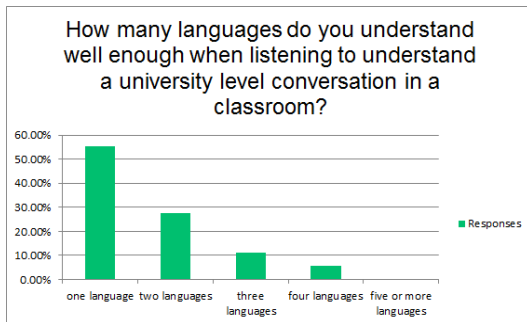


Figure 4.1 Faculty response – listening # of languages

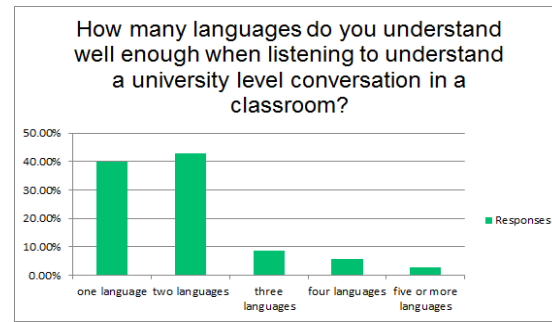


Figure 4.2 Student response – listening # of languages

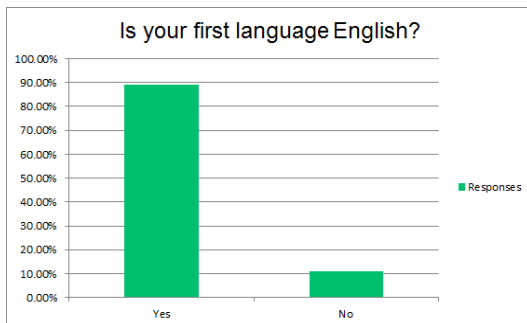


Figure 5.1 Faculty response – English 1st language

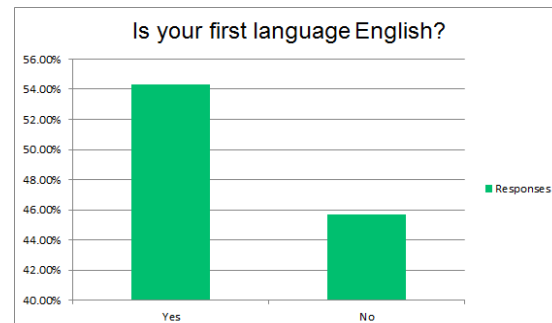


Figure 5.2 Student response – English 1st language

For both faculty and students whose first language was other than English, some seemed to use their first language in classrooms and on campus either “every day” or “some days,” yet more students replied “rarely” and “never” (Figures 6.1 to 7.2). The fact that students did not always use their first languages in classrooms, combined with the students’ use of translanguaging on campus more than in classrooms, could be related to: being a minority language user in classrooms but not in social situations; that students felt more comfortable using their first languages outside of classrooms; feeling there is an expectation of English language use in classrooms; having high levels of English language usage; or other reasons which would require further study to discern. For students that did use translanguaging strategies, they largely replied that they used their own language for writing, reading, and speaking, such as for notes, general class concepts, and speaking with friends. Some noted asking their teacher questions in

their first language if the teacher spoke the same language, and that they used their own language for presentation preparation, and when forming study strategies; Google, translators, and dictionaries were also being used often. Of the few faculty participants that had first languages other than English, they were using their first language for instruction, researching, clarifying in the classroom, making their own notes for lessons, and had computers set to their first languages.

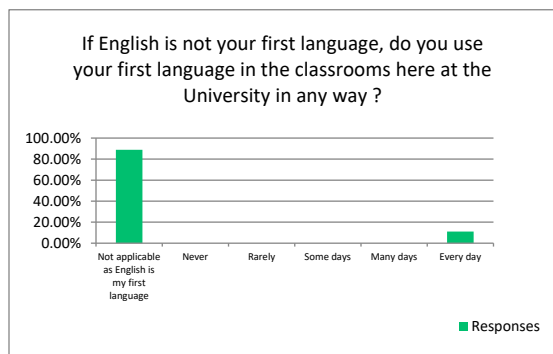


Figure 6.1 Faculty response – translinguaging in classrooms

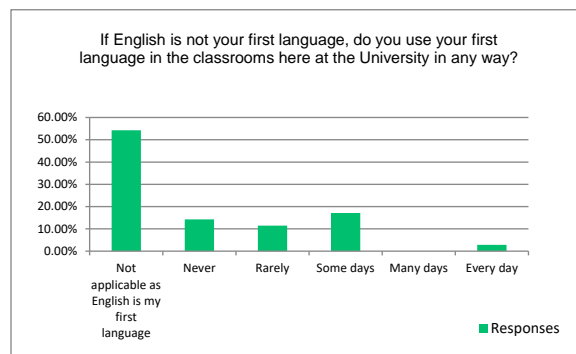


Figure 6.2 Student response – translinguaging in classrooms

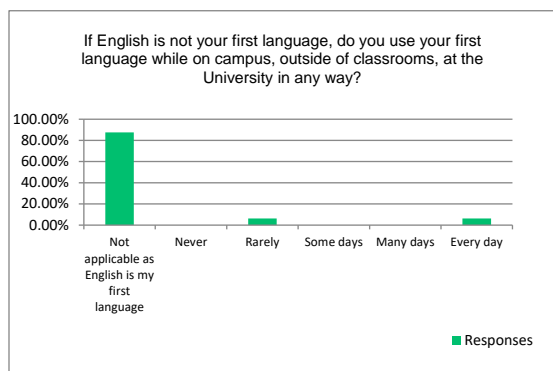


Figure 7.1 Faculty response – translinguaging on campus

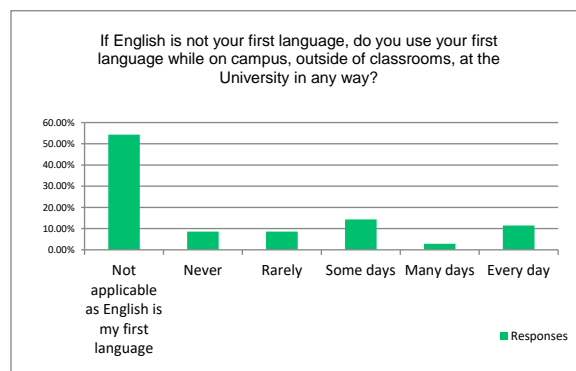


Figure 7.2 Student response – translinguaging on campus

Overall, the use of other languages in the classroom and translinguaging strategies seemed lower than expected given the language diversity of students. More students and faculty thought we should be encouraging the use of languages other than English on campus and in classrooms than not, yet both students and faculty largely did not encourage nor discourage first language use in classrooms (Figures 8.1 and 8.2). This could imply that neither faculty nor students see or understand the added value of translinguaging strategies within pedagogy, are unclear if they should be encouraging multiple languages in the classroom, or have other reasons which are unclear without further study; yet, faculty and student survey participants thought providing student services in first languages was important and something that should be done (Figures 9.1 and 9.2).

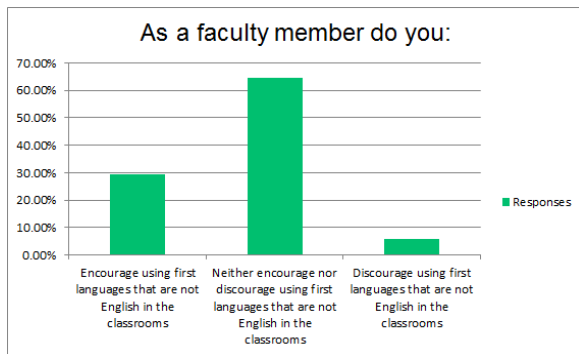


Figure 8.1 Faculty response – encouraging

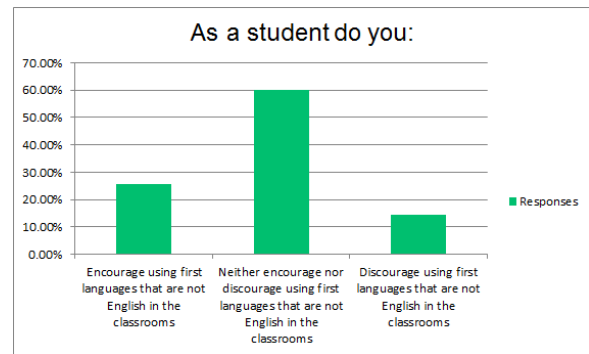


Figure 8.2 Student response – encouraging

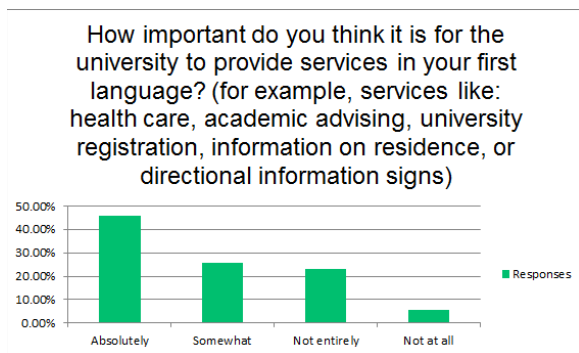


Figure 9.1 Faculty response – services

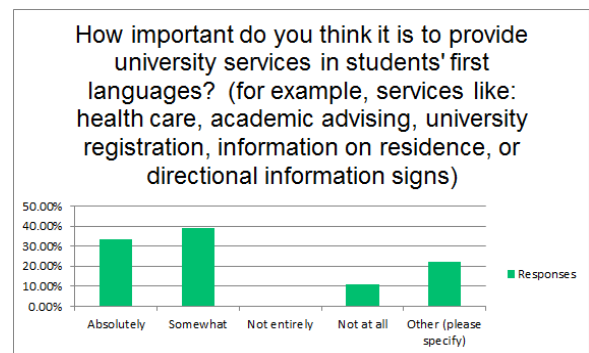


Figure 9.2 Student response – services

From Inclusionary Pedagogy to Transformative Learning

Of the faculty who did support translanguaging, one noted its importance to:

Promote comfort with multilingualism and translanguaging, particularly as we are going through conversations about decolonizing academic institutions and working cross-culturally. Part of this is encouraging comfort with the “unknown,” that sometimes people (whether students, staff, faculty, or community members) will say things (whether because of language use, register use, or other variations) that one simply won’t understand. Creating classrooms that are more embracing of linguistic diversity will not only promote deeper inclusion of students whose first language is not English, but also strengthen our (student & faculty) scholarship as we increase our capacity to dialogue through/across linguistic boundaries.

Another faculty member noted how it opened learning up to new possibilities as:

I particularly encourage comparative comments about how languages differ, as this illuminates the ways in which language both limits and enables thought—a key learning outcome of my discipline. Therefore, it is highly valuable to the whole class when a student exclaims “we cannot say that in our language; we would say ‘xxx’”. That opens up helpful discussion.

Both of these faculty saw the importance of the use of multiple languages in classrooms and translanguaging across languages. Although neither uses the term “transformative learning” in their quotes, both suggest perceptual shifts related to learning. It is in these spaces that translanguaging can become a strategy for transformative learning as Hodge (2019) describes processes related to emancipative learning through interacting with others. Hodge notes it is in our social interactions that we must face our limiting beliefs and self-reflect (p. 148-49), which, when related to adult education praxis, highlights that the end point of critical reflection can become the transformative learning moment (Hodge, 2019). Again, this speaks to learning that is “concerned with creating opportunities that challenge the dominant discourse and move individuals toward action embedded in social justice and social development” (Smith, 2017, p. 3). Challenging dominant discourse can also be seen in Garcia & Leiva’s (2014) idea of translanguaging being liberatory for students who find themselves in the language minority of a classroom as it normalizes bilingualism and as such is transformative when it reaches the potential of challenging and removing language hierarchies. This type of potential for transformation is echoed by the two faculty members in the survey, as the experience of dissonance moments related to other worldviews and ways of knowing, particularly as based in language expression, can lead to new learning. This is exactly why using translanguaging pedagogically for transformative learning holds such potential.

Conclusions

The prospect of using translanguaging for pedagogical purposes holds much promise as noted by the few faculty survey participants that stated its value. Their use and encouragement of first language usage in their classrooms, is hopeful. Certainly, educational awareness of what translanguaging is, strategies that can be used, ways of encouraging it, and general first language use in classrooms for learning could all be explored at the local level, and beyond, through professional development workshops.

Further, how translanguaging helps level power imbalances in classrooms, helps to form identity, can be used to bridge the “unknown” divides between cultures, and provides ways of actively working towards intercultural education, all need to be explored in higher education settings, beyond language programs, in more detail. Neither faculty or students encouraged nor discouraged multiple language use in classrooms or on campus in the local survey, yet there is promise in these spaces for transformational learning to occur with the use of translanguaging.

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