

A Critical Assessment on ‘*Translanguaging in a Chinese university CLIL classroom: Teacher strategies and student attitudes*’

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Introduction

The studies of translanguaging have increasingly captured the attention of scholars from different domains due to its breakthrough towards semiotic and linguistic studies. A Google Scholar search suggested 23,000 publications in March 2022 (Li and Gacia, 2022). I am not an exception as a bilingual learner and EFL pedagogical practitioner and the research I am criticizing or evaluating here is a research article entitled on ‘*Translanguaging in a Chinese university CLIL classroom: Teacher strategies and student attitudes*,’ which is relevant to my prospective thesis proposal on pedagogical translanguaging in the CLIL classroom in the Chinese tertiary context. The article was published in the peer-reviewed journal of *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching* in 2021 and co-authored by Zhou, X. (Emily) from Shanghai International Studies University, China and Mann, X from University of Warwick, Coventry, UK. Therefore, I present the paper here to have a detailed holistic critical evaluation, which is expected to shed light on my potential thesis study and yet unavoidably has limitations and room for further improvement. My assessment is listed as follows:

1. The Source and Abstract of the Article

As mentioned above, the journal of *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching* is peer-reviewed and issued four times a year by Adam Mickiewicz University, Kalisz, Poland. It is indexed in Q1 of Social Sciences Citation Index, among many other Indexes. In terms of the present article being assessed, it has been cited 15 times in the Web of Science since its publication as shown in ProQuest. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the article is from a reliable academic source.

The abstract clearly shows that this research utilizes action research (AR) method to delve into the dual aspects of classroom interaction: teacher strategy and student attitude in the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in the Chinese tertiary context. The abstract reveals that the data collection, the findings for further study, and of course the keywords as a routine. From my perspective, the abstract part does well in presenting capsuled the research gap ‘little is known about the attitudes of students towards this practice’ (p. 265), the methodology, the results, and implications, which is easy for the readers including me to grasp its main idea and believe this article is relevant to my potential study.

2. Literature Review and Research Questions

Before we look closely at the research objectives and questions, let us assess its literature review. Based on my observation, the authors narrow down gradually from macro-level of translanguaging research in general (its origin, definition, and development) to more micro-level (translanguaging in educational domain), then further to the very recent trend that efforts are paid on both teacher’s strategy and students’ attitude, and finally reach a research gap that no action research (AR) was employed for teachers to modify their strategies and also ‘a paucity of empirical evidence’ (p. 268). for collecting students’ feedback to improve

teacher's translanguaging practice. For me, the reviewing process is logically sound and the conclusion is naturally formed. The significance of both the research questions and the methodology is well established.

Technically, the article is found to reference from the primary source and literature is referenced widely and chronologically with both seminal and very current publications included so that a relevant theoretical framework is constructed. On the one hand, to elucidate the developmental history of Translanguaging research, the authors reference the seminal and fundamental publications, such as Cen Williams (1996) and Baker (2011) who respectively coined and translated the term into English and Garcia (2011) researching pedagogical translanguaging practices. On the other hand, more recent publications within last five years (Cenoz and Santos, 2020; Nikula and Moore, 2019, to name just a few) are included. The authors do identify a clear conceptual framework for the present study to display the fundamental conceptual framework.

However, there are some minor parts the author might have failed to notice. First, the authors mentioned that the purpose of the study is to 'thus eventually achieve a situated classroom ecology where students can benefit fully from their teachers' language input.' (p. 267), but the term 'classroom ecology' is not specifically conceptualized because the interpretation of pedagogical 'ecology' should be based on the research basis. Secondly, the literature reviewed does not include the relevant papers published in China, which might be insufficient, especially when researching in the Chinese college.

Based on the literature review above, instead of proposing hypotheses, the researchers raised three research questions in a straightforward way:

RQ1. What translanguaging strategies does the teacher/researcher employ?

RQ2. What are the students' attitudes to such translanguaging practices in class?

RQ3. In what way can the teacher/researcher learn from students' attitudes and adapt her teaching accordingly?

The three questions are relevant to research gap mentioned above. I think the researchers found the right research gap that the students' perceptions and feedback are rarely addressed and translanguaging should be observed from teacher-students interaction and the three questions can help fill the research gap, further investigating the teacher's practices and more significantly, the students' attitudes or ideology and the answering these research questions will help enrich the research scope as well as methodology. One tiny problem of these questions might exist that since actioned research is employed, longitudinal findings of students' changes of attitudes towards teacher's modifications are supposed to mention clearly in research questions. And technically, the research questions are supposed to be placed at the literature review part instead of methodology part.

3. Research Design and Methodology

This part introduces context, data collection methods, data collection procedures and analysis in detail.

First, the CLIL classroom where a theme-based reading course was observed. The participants are twenty-five English-major freshers. The researcher herself is the teacher, a young female practitioner and the interventionist the research.

Second, using mixed methods, the study collected both qualitative and quantitative data, including classroom discourse analyses, student questionnaires, and teacher reflections covering two academic terms. The analysis identified various translanguaging strategies—explanatory, attention-raising, rapport-building—utilized by the teacher, with transcript excerpts illuminating their application during instructional moments.

Third, the research explained the justification of action research and presented two AR cycles:

AR1: analysis of translanguaging practices and collection of students' attitudes

AR2: reflections on and modifications of translanguaging practices, as well as further collection of students' attitudes for contrastive analysis.

Fourth, the data of two terms in one academic year are collected, which include 60 audio-recorded sessions in two terms, two sets of questionnaires that were completed by the participants at the end of each term, respectively. The first set aims to gain an initial understanding of students' views on the teacher's translanguaging strategies, whereas the second to probe the students' attitudes towards the teacher's modification. The time spent on English/Mandarin were calculated by word count and timed analysis methods.

Here are my critical assessments on methodology part. To start with, the persuasiveness of action research might be doubted due to its limitations on generalization, but the author did well in admitting that and argued that action research can be a close examination of the teaching intervention. I agree with this argument that the merit of action research is to explore the insights through teacher's intervention or action from one specific context, and the findings may not be generalizable. Secondly, the two sets of questionnaires are well designed to explore the changing attitudes of students within the two cycles. However, there are some limits: 1) sample size is small with only 25 participants, which is not significant enough to reach a convincing conclusion. 2) It is valuable to explore the effects of teacher's modifications from the students' feedback, but the subjective feedback is not enough to prove the effects of modifications. A further test on student' content and language could be supplemented so that the findings will be more compelling. 3) In term of the types of translanguaging data collection, the present study only collected verbal practices of the teachers, other forms such as written forms and gestures are not considered. 4) there is potential bias due to the teacher doubling as the researcher and the author also acknowledged this limitation in the end.

4. Results and Relevance to the Theory

The paper reported the findings about teacher's translanguaging strategies and students' attitudes respectively.

First, the three types of teacher's translanguaging strategies (TTS) are categorized and exemplified in this part (the examples are omitted):

1) explanatory strategies used when the teacher used both English and Mandarin to explain textbook-related content such as grammar, vocabulary and cultural differences with specific examples recorded from CLIL classroom;

2) attention-raising strategies employed when getting students' attention for instructional and managerial purposes so that the class is on track;

3) rapport-building strategies used to elicit more output from students in an encouraging way to maintain interaction rather than nervous students.

As counted by the author, the percentages of each translanguaging strategy used in two terms can be seen from the table below:

	Term 1	Term 2
explanatory strategies	64%	61%
attention-raising strategies	27%	31%
rapport-building strategies	9%	8%

Table 1: the percentages of each translanguaging strategy used in two terms (cited from the article, p. 278)

As is shown in Table 1, there is no significant differences between all the three translanguaging strategies.

Second, since AR research focuses on two rounds or cycles of interventions, the longitudinal students' attitude towards TTS were presented and analysed with using two sets of questionnaires in four aspects. The modifications were made during the second term by the teacher based on the feedback from students in Questionnaire Set 1, including reducing, increasing, and balancing the employment of translanguaging strategies in different pedagogical moments. The table below shows a clear contrastive comparison between the two sets of questionnaires:

Content Categories of Questionnaires	Questionnaire Set 1 (before modification)	Questionnaire Set 2 (after modification)
General views about the teacher's translanguaging practices	80% expressed satisfaction 20% exceeded their expectation	92% expressed satisfaction
Attitudes to translanguaging practices in different pedagogical moments	Most believe that translanguaging should be avoided when the teacher explained the literal meanings of the text (N = 21), discussed literature or cultural contents directly or indirectly (N = 17), and conducted teacher-student interactions (N = 21). A tendency to favour translanguaging where the teacher was assigning homework and briefing teaching arrangements (N = 17), as well as explaining answers to after-class exercises (N = 17)	
The impact of the teacher's translanguaging on students	72% of the respondents (N = 18) stated that the teacher's translanguaging practices would not have a negative impact on their spoken language choice in class; Furthermore, 96% (N = 24) of the respondents considered that a small amount of translanguaging was more conducive to the learning of the English	

	language and content	
How the teacher/researcher modified her translanguaging practices based on students' attitudes		Of all the 25 participants, 88% of them (N = 22) had noticed certain changes in the teacher's language use in class and all 22 participants believed that the changes were positive

Table 2: the contrastive analysis of the major findings of two questionnaire sets (designed based on the article data)

I would assess the findings from the following points:

Firstly, it is highly worthwhile for the present research to investigate the students' attitudes or ideology of teacher's pedagogical translanguaging in CLIL classroom and the feedback from students can help teacher further improve the translanguaging strategies, though only within the specific context of the present research as limited by the scope of action research. The feedback could at least help other teachers or practitioners to find insights when implementing translanguaging in separate contexts. The high percentage of student's satisfaction would unveil some real thoughts of students and indicate the justification of translanguaging in CLIL classroom. Moreover, the categorizing of three types of translanguaging strategies as showed by previous studies is clearly echoed in this study.

Secondly, the findings from both teacher's translanguaging strategies and student's attitudes are clearly analysed, which is in accordance with the three research questions. The mixed-method research is exploratory instead of testing a hypothesis, but each method, either quantitative (questionnaires) or qualitative (questionnaire and class recording), is scientifically undertaken, contributing to the originality of the study.

Thirdly, every article has its own limitations. Besides the insufficient sample size (25 participants) and the impact of the dual identities as teacher and research, the findings or analysis could still be further made. On the one hand, as CLIL classroom stresses both content and language learning, the article did not pay enough attention to the impact of teacher's translanguaging practice on student's content knowledge learning and the reading course in this study is more language focused. On the other hand, using questionnaire is only one option to learn of the student's tendency, interviews to the students and teachers could well deepen the understanding of translanguaging in class.

Conclusion

The above is my detailed critical assessments, and I would say my assessment itself has limitations, but the significance of assessing process is to read, think, and write critically, hopefully benefiting my further research on translanguaging.

Reference

Li, W. and Garcia, O. (2022) 'Not a First Language but One Repertoire: Translanguaging as a Decolonizing Project', *RELC journal*, 53(2), pp. 313–324. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00336882221092841>.

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