

Translanguaging as a tool for equity in classroom assessment

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Current monolingual assessment practices are inherently inequitable for our emergent bilingual students. By incorporating translanguaging in the classroom, and on assessment, we can not only support student social-emotional wellbeing but reduce foreign language anxiety as well. Keywords: translanguaging, assessment, foreign language anxiety, equity, teacher education, secondary

What is translanguaging?

Translanguaging is defined by García (2009) as “accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximize communicative potential” (p. 140). The theory that emerged in the 1980s has since gained popularity and has expanded from its original bilingual focus to encompass multiple languages. Translanguaging promotes the inclusion of a multilingual learner’s full linguistic repertoire and challenges the traditional hegemonic practices of English-only pedagogy in the classroom. As our emergent bilinguals (EBs) learn to read, write, and communicate in a new language, they are drawing on their own diverse linguistic repertoire that contains a wealth of linguistic knowledge and features. As a future high school educator who will be working with diverse groups of students, I want to make sure that translanguaging is a welcomed and common practice in my classroom in order to make my classroom an equitable space for all learners.

While other teachers share my vision of equitable spaces for all students, assessment practices in the United States are a barrier to creating a linguistically inclusive classroom. This is because of practices that “are based on monolingual constructs whereby test-takers are expected to demonstrate their language proficiency in one language at a time” (Shohamy, 2011, p. 418). These traditional assessment practices view language as a finite system, when in fact language is dynamic and fluid. Additionally, when looking at the sociopolitical tenets of assessment, Shohamy (2011, p. 421) argues that “language tests are used as disciplinary tools to create and impose language ideologies and policies according to the agendas and authority of the nation-state.” In turn, current U.S. assessment practices are pushing an English-only agenda on our EB students. In addition to the sociopolitical implications, EBs experience heightened foreign language anxiety (FLA, Horwitz et al., 1986) due to monolingual assessment practices. FLA compounds classroom inequities as it “can reduce L2 users' willingness and motivation to communicate in that particular foreign language” (Dryden et al., 2021). Incorporating translanguaging pedagogies and allowing students to translanguage on assessments will reduce the foreign language anxiety felt by EBs. For this literature review, I will be focusing on the monoglossic language practices of classroom assessments and how the lack of translanguaging opportunities affects the social-emotional well-being of EB students. Finally, I will discuss what teachers can do inside the classroom to promote translanguaging on in-class assessments to increase the social-emotional well-being of EBs.

What are the current assessment practices in the United States?

The United States has a long history of monoglossic language practices, in all sectors of society – not just education. Monoglossic language ideologies and orientations see monolingualism as the norm in society (García, 2009) and cater to the 241 million English speakers that live in the United States (Dietrich & Hernandez, 2022). These views seep into the world of education and, in turn, affect policies and assessment practices and do not take into account the 68 million Americans who speak a language other than English at home (Dietrich & Hernandez, 2022), many of whom are school-aged children. Elana Shohamy (2011) discusses the sociopolitical implications and costs of monolingual assessments. Tests that are given in schools that are strictly in monolingual national languages send a message about language ideologies within the context of the state or nation, and “by conducting language tests in a given language, messages are being transmitted regarding the priority of dominant languages while marginalizing others, in line with national ideologies and agendas” (Shohamy, 2011, p. 421). Additionally, authors Danling Fu, Xenia Hadjioannou, and Xiaodi Zhou say in their book, *Translanguaging for Emergent Bilinguals: Inclusive Teaching in the Linguistically Diverse Classroom*, that “based on accountability expectations across the United States, EBs are often expected to take and pass the same standardized tests that their mainstream peers are required to take, which are created with English proficient students in mind” (Fu et al., 2019, p. 20).

There is a systemic issue of equity regarding the assessment of our EB students. The testing practices put in place by our governing bodies remind us that the “unwavering objective of much of schooling for EBs remains their linguistic assimilation into American English” (Fu et al., 2019, p. 17). There are many ways in which education is being gatekept from our EBs when it comes to both low- and high-stakes assessment. Being able to access their full linguistic repertoire on assessments through translanguaging should be a fundamental resource provided to EBs. It supports not only their language development but their social-emotional development as well.

Translanguaging as a tenet of social-emotional learning

Encouraging students to practice translanguaging during assessment has benefits beyond performance on tests. By inviting each student’s whole identity into the classroom, translanguaging can provide crucial social-emotional support for our EB students. Language, identity, and emotion are deeply intertwined. When building a language classroom, it is imperative that students’ identities and emotions are cared for and considered. When we put our students in an assessment environment that lacks the crucial social-emotional support provided by translanguaging, we open the door to FLA. Horwitz et al. (1986) discuss the impacts of anxiety on second language acquisition:

Anxiety contributes to an affective filter, according to Krashen, which makes the individual unreceptive to language input; thus, the learner fails to “take in” the available target language messages and language acquisition does not progress. The anxious student is also inhibited when attempting to utilize any second language fluency he or she has managed to acquire. (p. 127)

When we plunge our EBs into the linguistic and cultural deep end of English-only practices this anxiety is bound to increase.

One way that the field proposes addressing FLA is through the tenets of social-emotional learning (SEL). However, while translanguaging is shown to contribute to students' emotional well-being (García & Kleifgen, 2020), it is rarely discussed as a pedagogical strategy of SEL. If it is true that SEL is the process through which learners acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop their identities, manage emotions, and reach for personal and class goals, then something as critical to one's well-being as translanguaging should be considered central to SEL. Translanguaging is not only a way in which we can promote rigorous and meaningful engagement with the content, but it also allows students to fully express themselves in the classroom to build on those large-scale goals of SEL. Many studies have been done that show the link between translanguaging and emotion. Song et al. (2022) state that:

The view of translanguaging as a SEL strategy specifically emphasizes how translanguaging can provide multilingual learners with emotional and social support, through which they can develop several key competencies, including self-awareness and management, as well as relationship and collaboration skills. (p. 3)

Translanguaging as a key pedagogical strategy of SEL brings great benefits to the classroom, helping students deal with FLA as well as “complex issues such as depression, despair, frustration, trauma, and negative emotional expressions” (Dovchin, 2021, p. 841). Additionally, SEL with the addition of translanguaging enables multilingual learners to navigate new linguistic and cultural environments successfully at school (García & Kleifgen, 2020). EBs can also develop strategies for accessing their wide variety of competencies for academic success and personal growth.

The research discussed above shows that when we limit our students' freedom to express themselves, we are not allowing them to fully communicate their needs to us as educators. Given our current assessment climate as well as monoglossic practices, our EB students are at risk for increased FLA in these testing environments and this can, in turn, negatively affect students' willingness to participate and perform on future assessments or classroom tasks. In light of these serious implications to our students' lives, how can we as teachers incorporate opportunities for translanguaging into our classrooms?

What can we do as teachers?

Keeping the literature discussed above in mind, we can do the following things as educators to build a low-anxiety translanguaging testing environment in our own classrooms. The first thing that we can do is make use of translanguaging as a tool for creating equitable grading on assessment—especially content-focused assessments. With content-focused assessments, we want to “consider the whole linguistic repertoire and not only the skills in one language” (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021, p. 35). By doing this, we also allow students to excel in their interactions with the content without the anxiety of performing completely in the target language of English. This helps our classrooms work at the grassroots level against the monolingual assessment practices that are prevalent in the United States.

The second thing we can do as educators is to allow students to translanguage in the classroom as well as on assessments. By allowing students to use both their home language and English, we can minimize not only test anxiety but foreign language anxiety as well. Allowing translanguageing in testing scenarios reduces anxieties, and allows EBs to not only achieve on assessments given in the classroom, but they will be more likely to participate and produce language in day to day classroom activities. Remember what Dovchin (2021) states about students using translanguageing to discuss complex issues: allowing students to access their full linguistic repertoire in the classroom to fully express themselves will foster a safe and accepting classroom environment and continue to reduce any foreign language anxiety students may have. But you may ask, how do I actually incorporate these ideas into a real classroom? One source that I recommend for further reading on implementing translanguageing into your classroom is *Translanguageing for Emergent Bilinguals: Inclusive Teaching in the Linguistically Diverse Classroom* by Danling Fu, Xenia Hadjioannou, and Xiaodi Zhou. The authors argue for an inclusive translanguageing pedagogy in the classroom, and use vignettes of student experiences to further their argument and illustrate implementation. Additionally, the authors provide applicable suggestions for successfully implementing a translanguageing pedagogy in the classroom.

Finally, as teachers working with EB students, we can work to reduce our reliance on traditional testing practices and to consider alternative assessment in the classroom. These low-stakes assessments can come in the form of portfolios, interviews, creating and designing a product like infographics or posters, or creating an artifact for the classroom. These assessments would allow, with translanguageing practices, for students to use their full linguistic repertoire to convey the content being assessed. Additionally, portfolio assessments allow for students and the teacher to chart growth throughout the school year, rather than simply assessing a snapshot in the student's learning experience with a traditional high-stakes pencil-and-paper assessment. I hope these ideas will inspire you to incorporate translanguageing into your classroom. I will leave you with this question for consideration: If multilingual people translanguage in their daily lives, why would we not allow it in the classroom?

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Author bio

Angela DeFalco has recently graduated with her bachelor's degree in Spanish Teacher Education with a minor in TESOL at Illinois State University. Throughout her time at Illinois State, Angela has logged nearly 200 hours of clinical experience in settings ranging from K-12 to higher education as well as with diverse student groups. She has recently completed her student teaching experience at the high school level. Angela's areas of interest include translanguaging, social-emotional learning, foreign language anxiety, and the affective filter. Through continued study in these areas, she hopes to learn how to create an equitable language learning experience for all students.

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