

# Translanguaging: a paradigm shift for ELT theory and practice

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*Translanguaging theory and pedagogy have emerged as central to the recent multilingual turn in educational linguistics and language teaching, including ELT. This article will explore translanguaging from theoretical and practical perspectives, aiming to clarify what it is and is not claiming, and what types of pedagogic practice it advocates, both in its stronger and weaker forms. I argue that a paradigm shift is occurring in the field, parallel with the shift in understanding of the nature of language itself that underpins both translanguaging theory and integrationism in linguistics. Implications for practice in ELT are also explored, including a reorientation concerning the goals of language teaching, a recognition of English as a social construct with traditions of use rather than immutable rules, and a repositioning of the many translingual teachers around the world as the experts at the centre of the multilingual turn that is defining early twenty-first century language pedagogy.*

**Key words:** translanguaging, codeswitching, integrationism, TESOL, pedagogy

## Introduction

What we need is a more functionally oriented and culturally authentic theory, one that is true to the ecology of multilingualism and views the multilingual's linguistic repertoire as a unified, complex, coherent, interconnected, interdependent, organic ecosystem, not unlike a tropical rain forest. (Sridhar 1994: 803)

With this poetic description of the multilingual's attributes, S. N. Sridhar offers us one of the first glimpses of something that had, to that point, been largely absent from the Northern-, Western-, and Anglophone-dominant SLA canon in applied linguistics: a multilingual's vision of what language is for a multilingual. It contrasted markedly with the then-dominant deficit view of language learners of much SLA research, both anticipating and helping to usher in what later became known as the multilingual turn in applied linguistics. Importantly, Sridhar also calls for a new theory of multilingualism to represent accurately what every

multilingual knows, that we are not several monolinguals in one, but whole, coherent, yet complex ecosystems, both individually and socially. This theory is now known as translanguaging, and below I will argue that it constitutes a paradigm shift, in both applied and educational linguistics, and also in the field that gives its name to this journal—English language teaching.

In this article, I present an exploration of translanguaging theory and practice from the perspective of an English language teacher and teacher educator. I reprise a number of arguments I made in favour of translanguaging in the ELT Journal Debate at the 2023 IATEFL Conference, alongside a number of additional observations. At that event, Jeanine Treffers-Daller and I debated the motion: ‘This house believes that translanguaging constitutes a fundamental paradigm shift for the teaching of English’. In the interests of balance, it should be read alongside [Treffers-Daller’s \(2024\)](#) contribution to this Point-Counterpoint feature. Like Treffers-Daller, I am limited to fifteen references in this piece, but could provide many more, particularly concerning the evidence supporting translanguaging.

In the first half of the article, I aim to make the extent, the complexity and the diversity of translanguaging clear, as a theory both of communication and of pedagogy across classroom subjects, not only ELT. I hope to clarify what it is and what it isn’t claiming, and to clear up a number of the confusions that it precipitates, particularly among teachers, but also evident in Treffers-Daller’s (ibid.) characterisation of translanguaging theory and her misunderstandings of its diverse implications for practice, which are addressed at relevant points in the discussion. In the second half of the article, I focus specifically on the teaching of English, arguing that translanguaging constitutes a fundamental paradigm shift for those of us whose job it is to teach named languages, and I explore its implications for our classrooms, practices and identities as ELT practitioners. Throughout the article I prefer to use the term ‘multilingual(s)’ to ‘bilingual(s)’ to refer to those of us who have knowledge of more than one named language, dialect or other variety, and include English language teachers and learners whenever I do, as both emergent and fluent multilinguals.

## Understanding translanguaging

The rapid increase in interest in translanguaging has meant that the use of the term has expanded greatly since Cen William’s initial research in the 1990s, to Ofelia García’s notion of *dynamic bilingualism*, and then to the distinction between strong(er) and weak(er) forms of translanguaging (see [García and Lin 2017](#)). As such, it is important to note, firstly, that even many scholars who are critical of aspects of translanguaging theory typically support weaker versions of it (e.g., [MacSwan 2017](#)) and, secondly, that not all writers on translanguaging agree with each other. Understandings, therefore, are as wide, as complex and as varied as we might expect of any theory of communication, and these require nuanced discussion, rather than polarized debate, to be of use to us as language teachers. Despite these differences, many proponents of translanguaging would likely agree with [García and Li’s \(2014: 2\)](#) often-cited definition, which is adopted in this article:

...translanguaging is an approach to the use of language, bilingualism and the education of bilinguals that considers the language practices of bilinguals not as two autonomous language systems as has been

traditionally the case, but as one linguistic repertoire with features that have been societally constructed as belonging to two separate languages.

Key to this definition are the following: Firstly, the recognition of the multilingual's languaging resources as a single repertoire, building upon earlier arguments by Francois Grosjean and Vivian Cook, but going further to emphasize that what Cook (e.g., 1995) called 'multicompetence' becomes, in translanguaging, a unified competence. Secondly, the definition identifies translanguaging not only as a theory of language use, but also as an educational approach; i.e., a translanguaging pedagogy (discussed further below). Finally, there is recognition (not denial, as claimed by Treffers-Daller; *ibid.*) of named languages, but as societal constructs; products of nations, institutions and communities, rather than something innate either to the human condition or to our cognitive architecture (also, e.g., Li 2021). While rarely discussed by its proponents, translanguaging theory shares its underlying philosophy of language with integrationism in linguistics, a brief diversion into which may help to shed useful light onto why authors such as García and Li (*op. cit.*) are frequently at pains to point out the fundamental difference between translanguaging theory and earlier theories of multilingual language use, such as codeswitching theory.

### **The paradigm shift underpinning translanguaging theory**

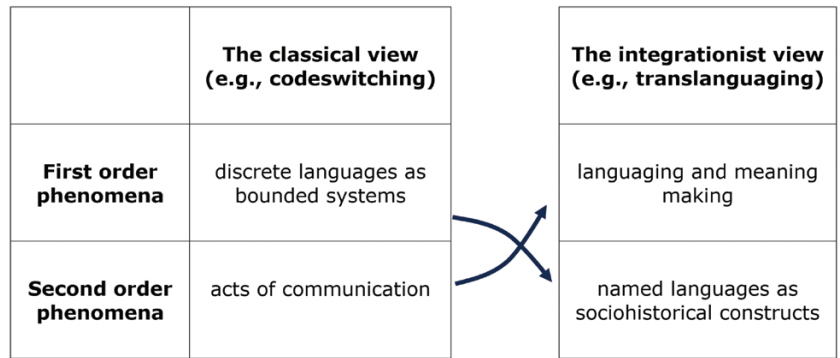
Integrationist<sup>1</sup> linguists (e.g., Love 2004) make a distinction between first-order languaging and second-order language, which, they argue, contrasts with the 'classical', code view of language(s). In the classical view, as underpins codeswitching theory, named languages are seen as the a priori reality; fixed codes that exist prior to acts of communication themselves, and therefore serve as an appropriate basis for analysing communication. In contrast to this, integrationist theory argues that it is the acts of communication themselves that are the first-order reality. Like many translanguaging theorists, they see the choice of resources from our wider repertoires alongside other semiotic signs and multimodal affordances as context-dependent, creative and flexible. Also like translanguaging theorists, integrationists recognize named languages as second-order constructs:

For the integrationist, a language is a second-order cultural construct, perpetually open-ended and incomplete, arising out of the first-order activity of making and interpreting linguistic signs, which in turn is a real-time, contextually determined process of investing behaviour or the products of behaviour (vocal, gestural or other) with semiotic significance. (Love *ibid.*: 530)

This difference is illustrated in [Figure 1](#).

Thus, integrationist theory offers a new way of looking at what language is and how we use it, a paradigm shift that displaces named languages from the centre of multilingual language analysis, and focuses on the acts of languaging themselves, the repertoires of the interlocutors and the interpersonal relations between them. As such, it should be noted that one can look at any conversation, text or act of communication from either a classical perspective (as codeswitching theory does) or from an integrationist perspective (as translanguaging theory does) – even

FIGURE 1  
Two contrasting views  
of language and  
communication.



an apparently monolingual text or utterance. There is no difference in the language acts, only in how we decide to analyse and understand them. Therefore, it makes little sense to try to find differences between translanguaging and codeswitching in raw data itself (as Treffers-Daller frequently tries to do; *op. cit.*) – such attempts are the source of much confusion over translanguaging. However, when it comes to issues of pedagogy, we can, of course, identify activities and practices that are more and less likely to be supportive of appropriate learning for a specific context and group of learners, including pedagogy that involves translanguaging.

### Translanguaging and pedagogy

When we attempt to ‘apply’ translanguaging theory to pedagogy things get a little more complex. Because, as both translanguaging and integrationist scholars rightly observe, named languages are fundamental to national systems of education, and education is typically funded by governments, who frequently have a vested interest in creating a sense of national identity through education (García and Lin *op. cit.*). One of the ways that this is done is through an emphasis on standardized codes as ‘official languages’, both as media (e.g., EMI) and subjects (e.g., EFL, Chinese, Hindi, etc.) of education, thereby reinforcing the illusion of the classical view of named languages as a first-order reality. Translanguaging theory comes in both strong(er) and weak(er) forms in response to this challenge. In its weaker forms, translanguaging adapts to the challenge, calling for a ‘softening of the boundaries’ (García and Lin *op. cit.*: 118) between languages and subjects in the classroom to create translanguaging spaces (both classroom space and temporal opportunities) for learners to make use of their full repertoires, at times, to understand, assimilate and interpret curriculum content. In this sense, any practices that can be seen to be inclusive of learners’ wider repertoires in the classroom and facilitative of learning can be seen to be appropriate to translanguaging pedagogy, including the use of mediation, translation, comparative analysis, whole repertoire conversations, the use of bilingual dictionaries or first language glosses—potentially all of the activities that Treffers-Daller lists (*op. cit.*: 66). However, this always depends, in part, on how it is done. García and Lin (*op. cit.*: 126) observe that this weaker form of translanguaging ‘has been, in some ways, with us for a long time’, discussing important earlier work by Jim Cummins in bilingual education, to which we can also add much of the recent literature on using the L1 in the L2 classroom, as Treffers-Daller observes.

In its stronger forms, translanguaging theory ultimately rejects the classificatory systems of most national curricula, positing that learners have the right *not* to have their repertoires, and their related identities as multilinguals, restricted. This moves translanguaging firmly into the political field, as a basis on which to argue for learners' rights, needs and welfare, particularly in the case of the most disadvantaged learners in any educational context—minority language speakers. This stronger form underpins García and colleagues' advocacy work in the USA, where discussion of language-in-education policy is highly politicized and many bilingual education programmes attempt to divide learners' wider repertoires into separate subject silos or silence them altogether (see García, Johnson, and Seltzer 2016). Thus, in addition to the above translanguaging activities, García *et al.* (ibid.) argue for the importance of activities that maintain and develop learners' *language-specific performance* in all their named languages (ibid.). Such activities not only strengthen learners' cognitive development, but also support their social and emotional learning by valorising their backgrounds and heritage as key elements of their identities. This adds further possibilities to the list of potential translanguaging activities, such as home language reading opportunities, projects that involve non-English-speaking family and community members, and displaying students' home language work in the classroom (ibid.). García *et al.* (ibid.), throughout their book, provide numerous examples of how three teachers, including an ESL teacher (called Justin) working in a highly multilingual class, may facilitate learning in ways that are inclusive of their learners' many languages, countering Treffers-Daller's claims that this is not possible (op. cit.: 69) or not clarified in the translanguaging literature (66).

The plethora of activities that have been documented under the label of translanguaging has led some scholars to argue that, with regard to pedagogy, translanguaging has become more of an 'umbrella term' for any activities or positions that recognise and draw upon the full repertoires of multilinguals (e.g., Cenoz and Gorter 2021; Heugh 2021). This is not necessarily an example of concept creep, as Treffers-Daller argues, rather a recognition of the multiple, diverse ways that teachers can facilitate translanguaging. Treffers-Daller's example of a wise Indian teacher who uses translanguaging pedagogy to teach evaporation (op. cit.: 69–70) demonstrates that many teachers around the world have always translanguaged in their classrooms, even if repressive policies and dominant pedagogies have attempted to prevent this (discussed further below). Implying that this cannot be a valid example of translanguaging because the teacher had never heard of the term is rather like suggesting that a teacher who builds learning on learners' prior understanding cannot be a constructivist if they have never heard of this term.

Considering the above discussion, both of translanguaging theory as a new way of understanding language, and of translanguaging pedagogy as inclusive of a wide range of activities that historically, in ELT, would have been categorised under the similarly broad label of 'using the L1', any attempt to assess the effectiveness of translanguaging must proceed with care. Firstly, many of the activities discussed as examples of weaker translanguaging pedagogy, and some of those considered stronger

**Desperately  
seeking  
Goldilocks**

translanguaging pedagogy have been researched, evidenced and promoted for many years. This includes research on ‘L1 use’ in language teaching (as Treffers-Daller rightly observes) and in the field known as either multilingual pedagogy or mother-tongue-based multilingual education. As Kathleen Heugh frequently observes (e.g., 2021), there is a huge body of over 100 years of evidence, particularly from the global South, attesting to the need for new learning to build creatively and flexibly on learners’ prior knowledge and multilingual repertoires without excluding these from the classroom. Secondly, any systematic reviews on translanguaging must be carefully evaluated, both from theoretical (Do the authors interpret translanguaging correctly? ) and practical (Do they include all activities that may be judged to be translanguaging? ) perspectives. Despite this, Treffers-Daller (op. cit.) makes biased claims that, for example, [Huang and Chalmers’ \(2023\)](#) review offers little evidence to support translanguaging, rather than reporting their findings accurately. Huang and Chalmer’s abstract notes (ibid.: 1):

Five [of ten] studies favoured translanguaging over English-only approaches, four of which were rated as having a high risk of bias. The remaining studies either detected no statistically significant differences between these approaches or favoured translanguaging in a small number of highly specific measures.

This constitutes tentative but clear support for translanguaging, as none of the studies analysed favoured English-only approaches. Further, Treffers-Daller’s (op. cit.: 69) expectations that research should be able to identify an appropriate ‘Goldilocks zone for the amount of English input’ reveals an apparent lack of awareness of the complexity of education, particularly the important influence of socio-economic and cultural contexts, stages, curriculum types and learning outcomes. To provide just one example to support this point, my own research ([Anderson 2022](#)) into the translanguaging practices of expert teachers of English in India revealed large variations in the use of what I call ‘English-mainly languaging’ among the cohort, even though all taught in government-funded schools at secondary level in the same national context.<sup>2</sup> Reasons for these differences are explored for two of these teachers (ibid.: 14–15), revealing a number of the many complex factors influencing these differences. As qualitative research in education has always shown, attempts to simplify teaching to simple metrics of one-size-fits-all end up oversimplifying pedagogy in ways that are frequently counterproductive and, ultimately, undervalue the expertise of teachers.

## The implications of translanguaging theory for ELT

A translanguaging view of language and pedagogy has significant implications for us as ELT practitioners. In this half of the article I explore a number of these implications, ultimately arguing that translanguaging theory both facilitates and reflects a fundamental paradigm shift that ELT is currently undergoing, mirroring the theoretical paradigm shift in how we view language and multilinguals discussed above.

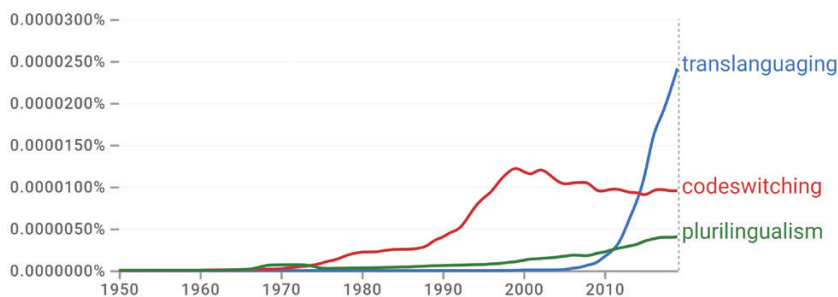
The first implication is the recognition that it is our job to facilitate the learning of a socially-constructed ‘thing’ – in reality, a set of resources with shifting traditions of use, rather than immutable rules of usage. As such, translanguaging theory offers a basis on which to reject the pervasive

view of the late 20th century that ‘English’ is an innate system that, in Chomskyan linguistics, separates the ‘haves’ (native speakers) from the ‘have-nots’ (non-native speakers), and view it as a set of resources that our students can learn to use in certain situations for specific purposes. In this sense, translanguaging offers a potential means to liberate them—and us—from the discrimination of native-speakerism in ELT.

The second implication is that we can now envisage a new goal for our teaching, and for our learners. For five decades, at least in Western discourse on ELT, this goal has been to develop learners’ *communicative competence*, a construct that has historically been envisaged monolingually, with, until very recently, no mention of learners’ repertoires or multilingualism. Translanguaging theory offers an alternative goal: for learners to become aware of, value and develop their whole languaging repertoire, ready for use depending on the situation, interlocutor and intention, as in Canagarajah’s (2013) notion of *performative competence*, or mine of *translingual competence* (Anderson 2018). As Canagarajah (2013: 6) puts it, ‘communication transcends individual languages’. The validity of this goal is supported by the emerging realities of global communication today, and the related needs of our learners to be able to use English both alongside and interacting with other languages in complex ways (Anderson 2018). This is a paradigm shift from an *intralingual* view of ‘competence’, or languaging ability, to one that is *translingual*, validating all our competencies and identities as twenty-first century multilinguals.

The third, and arguably most important implication, is the support that translanguaging theory gives for what the vast majority of English language teachers have always done. While Western, Anglophone discourse on ELT has, perhaps unsurprisingly, always been biased towards contexts in Western classrooms (e.g., ESL in the USA, EAP and Business English in the UK), and typically promoted an ‘English only’ or ‘English mainly’ approach to ELT, the vast majority of teachers of English in the world today work in mainstream education, as primary and secondary teachers of English. They work in classrooms across Africa, Asia, Australasia, Europe and Latin America, and in the vast majority of cases, they share a *community language* (this may be a standardized language or a more complex translingual repertoire specific to the school community) with the majority, or all, of their learners. Of course, many of these practitioners are ‘translingual teachers’ of English (Anderson, *ibid.*: 34). If we could be flies on the wall of their classrooms, we would observe a community engaged in complex translingual behaviour, both externally (the social practices) and internally (the learners’ cognitive, emotional and psycholinguistic development). We would observe learners gaining new literacies, learning new ways to speak, read and write, learning ‘to English’ (used here as a verb). Such learners cannot stop their current resources from making meaning—all they can do is build upon them (in the constructivist sense), because new ways of languaging inevitably emerge from within our current repertoires, never in isolation. Expert translingual teachers, as documented in my research (Anderson 2022), are able to understand, interpret, scaffold and assess this development appropriately because of their often intimate understanding of their learners’ backgrounds, culture, languaging practices and needs.

FIGURE 2.  
Google Ngram  
of three terms:  
translanguaging,  
codeswitching and  
plurilingualism.  
© Google Books  
Ngram Viewer, 2023.



Further, they are able to model effective practices themselves across the translanguing continuum, from what I have called ‘monolingualing’ (as required in normative exams and many writing conventions) to fluid translanguaging (Anderson 2018), serving as role models, not of some distant, monolingual native-speaker ideal, but of a multilingual user of many languages (including standard Englishes) – models of the new, translanguing goal of additional language learning. In this sense, translanguaging is both the means to the end (the practices that facilitate learning) and a key part of the end itself, as discussed above—translingual competence.

Further, the rapid increase in interest in translanguaging in Western ELT theory in recent years should be seen as a realignment, a learning to recognize—reclaim even—the norms of authentic classroom communication around the world; practices that have historically been viewed negatively as ‘traditional’ teaching, or oversimplistically written off as ‘grammar translation’. And while there remains a long way to go, this realignment constitutes a key part of the movement to decentre or decolonize ELT (Li 2021), a move for global social pedagogic justice, supported by the increasing number of Southern scholars working in applied linguistics and education (Heugh op. cit.), who either themselves are/were translanguing teachers, or who have benefitted from them in their own education.

## Conclusion

The paradigm shift that I believe is taking place in ELT today is not a product solely of translanguaging theory, but is rather a shift in understanding concerning where the ‘centre’ of ELT really is located, who the typical teachers of English really are, and how they really teach. Yet this *recentring* is commensurate with, and usefully supported by, translanguaging theory and pedagogy, particularly when compared with prior pedagogies of the twentieth century. This is why translanguaging is proving so popular to the disempowered, marginalized and overlooked majority of practitioners in ELT around the world—it speaks to their experiences, their reality, their repertoires. Treffers-Daller (op. cit.) speculates that the increase in interest observed is a product, primarily, of ‘a long line of position papers’ and ‘promotion . . . on social media’ (70). Here, I suggest, Treffers-Daller is merely observing evidence of the change, rather than its cause. Many of us promote our work in position papers and on social media; the fact that much of it is ignored while other outputs go viral is a reflection of popular interest, not an explanation. Treffers-Daller also suggests that ‘the clouds are gathering over



translanguaging', proposing 'plurilingualism' as a 'promising candidate' to replace it (ibid.: 70). Time of course, will tell, however, current metrics certainly do not support this view (see [Figure 2](#)).

Nonetheless, despite the difference in our opinions concerning the nature, validity and utility of translanguaging, there are two points on which I would cautiously agree with Treffers-Daller, in addition to one acknowledged above. Firstly, I agree that the translanguaging turn builds on, and to some extent was facilitated by, important prior research into codeswitching and bilingual language processing, even if it rejects the code view of language underpinning the interpretations of such research. Indeed, it is likely that the cumulative evidence from codeswitching research of 'languages [that] can hardly be disentangled' (Treffers-Daller op. cit.: 66) may have caused those who are now proponents of both translanguaging and integrationist theory to question the code view of language. And while I disagree that there is not sufficient guidance on translanguaging pedagogy—see work by Cenoz and Gorter (op. cit.), García *et al.* (op. cit.) and the wealth of free resources produced by the City University of New York,<sup>3</sup> all of which Treffers-Daller overlooks—it is true that there is still comparatively little for the many teachers who teach additional languages such as EFL around the world. Certainly, more such resources would be useful, but to be of greatest use these may need to be specific to curricular contexts (see Jasone Cenoz's extensive work in the Basque country, for example). As discussed above, contemporary language teaching methodology cannot be based on a one-size-fits-all approach, something that Cenoz, García, Li and other proponents of translanguaging are keen to avoid.

Nonetheless, as research cited in this article demonstrates, many teachers around the world are quite capable of implementing translanguaging pedagogy that facilitates effective learning without the guidance that Treffers-Daller expects, including the capable Indian teachers that both she and I discuss. For, in India, as in so many complex multilingual countries around the world, translanguaging is as old as pedagogy, as old as communication, and as old as humanity itself. Our task, as researchers, is to attempt to represent the practices of such teachers faithfully, interpret them appropriately, and learn from them usefully, and I invite Treffers-Daller to join me in my quest to do so.

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## Notes

- 1 'Integrationist linguistics' is used to refer to this body of work here. The term 'integrational linguistics' is used by some authors to refer to a separate field.
- 2 It should be noted that three different curricular authorities were involved.
- 3 See <https://www.cuny-nysieb.org/translanguaging-resources/> for numerous free resources for translanguaging for bilingual and ESL classrooms.

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