

A Translingual Approach to Language Teacher Identities in Teacher Education in Taiwan

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Abstract

Research on translingualism in Taiwan has so far observed existing translingual practices occurring in language classrooms. While it is important to investigate how translingualism is taking shape in Taiwan in its current form, what is missing is an exploration of the pedagogical applications of translingualism that have yet to occur and how it can be adopted. This article focuses on envisioning a certain future in which language teacher education in Taiwan is willing to take on a translingual approach and focus on fostering translingual teacher identities. What would such an endeavor look like? How would it be implemented? In this article, I will start by giving an introduction to the importance of language teacher identity and translingualism, and then shift to demonstrating the benefits translingualism can bring to teacher education programs and how translingualism can be enacted.

Keywords: translingualism, language teacher identity, teacher education

以跨語境理論探討臺灣語言師資培育的 語言教師認知

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摘 要

到目前為止，在臺灣的語言教室中，跨語境理論研究已經巍然成形，並且找到實踐的方法。儘管調查跨語境理論如何在臺灣成形為現今的形式很重要，但卻缺少了跨語境理論在教學應用上之探索，以及可以如何採納的方法。本文著重在構想出，未來臺灣語言師資培育積極採用跨語境的途徑，以及專注在培養跨語境教師的認知。在本文中，首先我會介紹語言教師認知和跨語境理論之重要性，再表明跨語境理論能為語言師資培育機構帶來的優勢，以及可以如何實施跨語境理論。

關鍵詞：跨語境理論、語言教師認知、師資培育

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Introduction: Why should teacher education programs focus on teacher identity?

One of the major contributions from language teacher identity research to second language (L2) teaching within the past decade is conceptualizing the development of teacher identity as equally important as the development of pedagogical theories and knowledge about language teaching in a L2 teacher education program. Furthermore, not only is teacher identity important but identity also impacts the way teachers teach. This idea has major implications for the way we prepare pre-service teachers in our teacher education programs. Traditionally, teacher education programs focus on equipping students with a substantial foundation in teaching pedagogy, curriculum and materials development, practical teaching experience, and language skills. Little, if any, of the teacher education coursework in Taiwan is spent discussing the intricacies of language teacher identity. In their study on teacher identity development, Kanno and Stuart (2011) focus on how two graduate students learn to teach and development their teacher identities over time, and they expressed the following conclusion:

Our findings compel us to claim that the central project in which novice L2 teachers are involved in their teacher learning is not so much the acquisition of the knowledge of language teaching as it is the development of a teacher identity. Knowledge acquisition is part of this identity development, not the other around. Moreover, changes in novice L2 teachers' classroom practice cannot be explained solely in terms of the changes in their knowledge; again, one needs to refer to their evolving teacher identities to fully understand why certain changes occur in their practice. (pp. 249-250)

Morgan's (2004) concept of "identity as pedagogy" also shares a similar line of thought by proposing that "a teacher's identity, his or her image-text, is a

pedagogical resource for bilingual and second language education” (p. 174). Thus, if teacher identity is indeed a form of pedagogy, Kanno and Stuart (2011) argue that “the development of L2 teacher identity should be at the center of research and debates on L2 teacher education because it is the central project novice teachers engage in” (p. 250).

This is a strong argument and one that may not be received with open arms by stakeholders in Taiwanese teacher education programs, namely teacher educators or administrators of teacher education programs, for several reasons. For one, focusing on teacher identity has no value, or “currency”, as Morgan (2004, p. 176) puts it, especially at a time when what is of value is determined by international rankings and standardized testing. Furthermore, focusing more on teacher identity seems to suggest replacing the current system of teacher education for something new and treading into uncharted waters is never taken lightly. Lastly, because a focus on teacher identity does not currently exist in teacher education programs in Taiwan, some may wonder what such a curriculum would even look like. The specifics of such an endeavor were not even explored by Kanno and Stuart (2011). However, they do specify that they are not claiming that the development of pedagogical knowledge should be completely taken out of teacher education curriculums; rather, what they suggest is putting “the development of L2 teacher identity in the foreground and conceptualize the acquisition of teacher knowledge as part of this identity development, rather than the other way around” (p. 250). Therefore, in this article, I will focus on introducing the concept of translingualism, what translingualism can contribute to L2 teacher education programs, and lastly how a translingualism can be applied.

What is translingualism?

Translingualism is often confused with bilingualism or multilingualism because of their focus on practices that involve more than one language. Therefore, it is helpful to make the distinctions between these concepts clear. According to

Canagarajah (2013), “while the term *multilingual* perceives the relationship between languages in an additive manner (i.e. combination of separate languages), *translingual* addresses the synergy, treating languages as always in contact and mutually influencing each other, with emergent meanings and grammars” (p. 41; italics in original). Therefore, a translingual approach “recognizes difference as the norm” and applies “a disposition of openness and inquiry toward language and language differences, not as a matter of the number and variety of languages and language varieties one can claim to know (Lu & Horner, 2013, p. 585). Therefore, from a translingual perspective, speakers of multiple languages do not use their languages in isolated, compartmentalized ways; rather, they “shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system” (Canagarajah, 2011, p. 401).

The act of shuttling between languages is called “translanguaging” and translanguaging can actually encompass forms of communication beyond language. According to Wei (2017), “translanguaging offers a practical theory of language that sees the latter as a multilingual, multisemiotic, multisensory, and multimodal resource that human beings use for thinking and for communicating thought” (p. 18). For Wei (2017), translanguaging includes not just the use of language but the use of the entire range of multimodal, semiotic signs that an individual has at his/her disposal as resources for communication. This is evident in his interpretation of the “trans” prefix in relation to the term “language. According to Wei (2017), “trans” can refer to *transcending* “socially constructed language system”, *transforming* the way individuals use language and perceive themselves as language users, and having a *transdisciplinary* reconceptualization for language and language learning.

Recent scholarship has recognized the use of translingual practices in various Taiwanese contexts, such as in junior high school EFL classrooms (Ke & Lin, 2017), in online intercultural exchange between Taiwanese and Japanese university students (Ke, 2016), and in aboriginal language revitalization efforts in multilingual classrooms (Huang, 2010). Ke and Lin (2017) argue that Taiwan has a particularly

suitable language education environment for adopting translanguaging approaches for two main reasons. First, Taiwanese students are growing up with increasingly multilingual repertoires, with Mandarin as their primary language and varying degrees of proficiency in Min-nan, Hakka, or indigenous languages as well as Vietnamese or Bahasa Indonesian for families with immigrant parents. This makes it all the more important for language teachers to enact translanguaging practices to help speakers navigate their multilingual repertoires in a way that values difference rather than looking down upon it. Second, Ke and Lin (2017) have found that “Taiwanese teachers have already been translanguaging”, such as using Mandarin and other local languages to teach English in K-12 EFL classes (p. 43). Indeed, more researchers and practitioners exploring the ways in which translanguaging can be applied in Taiwanese contexts.

What can translanguaging contribute to L2 teacher education programs?

For our discussion in this article, the question of what translanguaging can contribute is a question of the perceived value of translanguaging from a L2 teacher education perspective. This perceived value is directly tied to the discussion from the beginning of this article about the importance of language teacher identity for preservice teachers and the role teacher education programs can play in fostering language teacher identity. By approaching language teacher identity through a translanguaging lens, we can envision a specific kind of teacher that views his/her own professional self and teaching through translanguaging principles. Zheng (2017) focuses specifically on the concept of a “translanguaging teacher”, defined as “someone who is able to embrace and integrate his/her multiple linguistic identities as he/she becomes a teacher” (p. 32). Zheng (2017) emphasizes that not every nonnative English speaking teacher (NNEST) is a translanguaging teacher; rather being a translanguaging teacher is something that must be fostered and developed through critical reflection.

This is where language teacher education programs can play a crucial role in providing support and a “safe space” (Canagarajah, 2011) for preservice teachers to be able to take risks and develop translingual identities over time. Guiding preservice teachers to develop into translingual teachers brings two main benefits to both the preservice teachers and to their future teaching:

1. Integration of a teacher’s full multilingual repertoire as resources for teaching

The way in which a translingual teacher approaches the application of his/her multilingual repertoire as a resource for teaching is very different from how a bilingual teacher or a NNEST teacher might do so. To best understand these differences, we can compare a teacher’s approach to teaching with a musician’s approach to music. A bilingual teacher can be compared to a musician who uses two different genres of music in the same song, such as a song that contains both elements of hip hop and rock. In such a scenario, the two different genres are used in a way where they exist within the same song but it is still clear that they are treated as separate genres. In contrast, NNEST teacher can be compared to a musician who limits himself/herself to a single genre under an assumption that that may be what the audience prefers, or that mixing genres may lead others to question the purity, authenticity, and credibility of such a song. Instead of seeing his/her ability to integrate various music genres as a strength, the NNEST teacher perceives it as a mistake, something to be suppressed. Lastly, a translingual teacher can be compared to a musician who uses two or more different genres of film in a way that creates an integrated whole, perhaps a new type of genre on its own. Furthermore, according to Zheng (2017), “compared to a NNEST, a translingual teacher highlights the translingual resources she brings to the profession”. Thus, by comparing these different ways teachers relate to their language identities, we can see that a translingual teacher is able to make use of their entire multilingual repertoire in an integrated, unapologetic way in their teaching. In turn, this can have a positive effect on EFL student’s language learning; essentially, what translingual teachers can contribute is the ability to help

our students become competent English users who know how to utilize their repertoires in creative ways (Ke, 2016, p. 297).

2. Empowerment through linguistic difference

While the multilingual turn in applied linguistics has challenged the monolingual bias that has long persisted, hiring discrimination against NNESTs is still prevalent in Taiwan (Kung, 2015). Flores and Aneja (2017) argue that “teacher education programs must prepare preservice teachers to successfully balance their desire to challenge the monolingual bias with the need to accommodate the status quo” (p. 444). How can translanguaging achieve this? At the core of translanguaging is an effort to balance socially constructed ideas of linguistic normativity with validation of the linguistic diversity students bring with them. Therefore, through translanguaging, “when students’ first language as well as other linguistic repertoires became meaningful in English classes... the students were transformed from helpless learners to translanguagers, or agentic language learners and users, who accumulated translanguaging competence in the process” (Ke & Lin, 2017, p. 54). Therefore, translanguaging can bring a sense of empowerment to preservice teachers by transforming the way they perceive the language capabilities and the identities of not only themselves but also their students. Pennycook (2004) reminds us that “learning to teach is not just about learning a body of knowledge and techniques; it is also about learning to work in a complex sociopolitical and cultural political space ...and negotiating ways of doing this with our past histories, fears, and desires; our own knowledges and cultures; our students’ wishes and preferences; and the institutional constraints and collaborations” (p. 333).

How can we apply translinguistic principles to L2 teacher education in Taiwan?

Flores and Aneja (2017) conclude their article with a thought-provoking question, one that I believe is also relevant to envisioning translinguistic principles in Taiwan's L2 teacher education programs. They ask: "How would TESOL teacher education look if we provided spaces for students to develop projects that explore this linguistic diversity through a translingual lens?" (p. 460). These should be "safe spaces" provided by teachers where students can "adopt their multilingual repertoire for learning purposes" (Canagarajah, 2011, p. 402). Wei (2017) also explores the concept of a "translanguaging space", which he describes as:

... a space that is created by and for Translanguaging practices, and a space where language users break down the ideologically laden dichotomies between the macro and the micro, the societal and the individual, and the social and the psychological through interaction. (p. 15).

Such translanguaging spaces are created out of the translingual interactions by teachers and students within spaces like classrooms; thus, one can easily imagine a language teacher program to be an ideal context for creating a translingual space that can foster preservice teachers' translingual teacher identity.

The teacher education program at University of Taipei's Department of English Instruction is currently conducting a project with freshmen English majors with the goal of collectively creating a translanguaging space. This is a transdisciplinary project that involves students reading classic and contemporary works of English literature and performing their own interpretations of what they have read through short plays. Literature is one of the academic fields that preservice EFL teachers are required to take, and it is often perceived by preservice teachers as the least practical in terms of becoming an EFL teacher. Traditionally, the same literature-based part of

the curriculum would be taught using the original source material, teacher-led lectures, and student group discussions on the assigned reading. This project presents a radically different approach to teaching literature by not only asking them to read and discuss literary works but also reinterpret literary works into new contexts that they see the literary works as being connected to. This requires students to approach their reading of literary works through a translingual lens by applying the full range of their multilingual (English, Mandarin, Taiwanese, etc) and multimodal (textual, visual, aural, physical) resources in order to create new meanings and connections rooted in their own interpretations. Furthermore, it also requires students to reflect upon their identities within the context of the department by reshaping not only what kind of learner the department expects them to be but also what linguistic practices and identities can help them become better teachers.

Ultimately, as coordinators of this project, we have set three main goals for what we hope to achieve through this project. First, we hope that encouraging students to apply a translingual approach to literature will create a translanguaging space that provides the opportunity to experience how their linguistic repertoires can be used to gain deeper insight into literature and developing new translingual identities. Second, we also want the teachers involved in this project to have the experience of creating a translanguaging space by taking a part of their curriculum and redesigning it through translingual principles. Lastly, as our students are preservice EFL teachers in a L2 teacher education program, we plan to expand this translanguaging space to other parts of the preservice teacher curriculum, with TESOL classes in particular in mind. By the end of this project, we hope to have taken a first step towards applying a translingual approach.

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