

Pedagogical Translanguaging in Practice: Creating Spaces by Softening the Boundaries Between Languages

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Abstract—Translanguaging has been widely used in education to promote learning processes. Translanguaging can be spontaneous or pedagogical. This study focuses on pedagogical translanguaging. Given the importance of translanguaging, especially with emergent bilinguals, research on how Saudi secondary teachers implement pedagogical translanguaging practices in their classrooms is scarce. This study fills this gap by exploring the translanguaging strategies used by teachers and their perceptions of pedagogical translanguaging. In this qualitative study, the researcher collected data through semi-structured questionnaires and interviews. The results of this study show that the implementation of translanguaging yielded positive outcomes. First, teachers who acted as facilitators used translanguaging pedagogically as a scaffolding strategy so that students could make meaning of class content. Second, by implementing translanguaging, this study found there to be a boost in students' performance and self-esteem. Consequently, low-level and average students were encouraged to use their linguistic resources to communicate and fully engage in classroom activities. Third, this study concludes that creating a translanguaging space empowers students by activating their linguistic resources in their repertoires. This was possible because the teachers and their students shared the same languages.

Index Terms—pedagogical translanguaging, scaffolding, linguistic repertoire, qualitative study, semi-structured interviews

I. INTRODUCTION

Translanguaging has been used in classrooms to enhance learning, regardless of pedagogical translanguaging (Cenoz & Gorter, 2014), where lessons are strategically planned to serve instructional goals, integration of two or more languages, or are spontaneous (García, 2009). Moreover, in such classrooms, bilinguals naturally draw on their linguistic repertoire to carry out learning activities in which language boundaries are fluid and constantly shifting. Such translanguaging strategies are embraced to challenge monolingual ideology, which gained momentum with the advent of the direct method. Translanguaging, as a term in the field of education, was first coined by Cen Williams in the 1980s, who first used it in Welsh bilingual schools (Lewis et al., 2012). Otheguy et al. (2015), defined translanguaging as “the deployment of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages” (p. 283). This definition clarifies that translanguagers, either bilinguals or multilinguals, operate their entire linguistic repertoire (as one system) and thus do not see boundaries among languages. Specifically, Wei (2021) has provided a detailed explanation of the concept by saying that “the trans-prefix emphasizes multilingual language users' capacity to transcend boundaries, and the -ing suffix highlights the momentariness of their creative practices” (p. 167). He added that the term ‘language’ is kept in it “because it is intended to broaden the concept of language not narrowly as a set of code, but as a social practice and an assemblage of meaning-making recourses that go beyond the linguistic vs. non-linguistic, or verbal vs. non-verbal dichotomy” (p. 167). In such a practice, translanguaging is concerned with the use of all language resources at the users' disposal, rather than the number of languages they may speak. Unlike codeswitching, which treats languages separately, translanguaging views languages as a part of an integrated system. Baker (2001) listed a number of advantages of using translanguaging, stating that “it may promote a deeper and fuller understanding of the subject matter, help the development of the weaker language, facilitate home-school links and cooperation, and help the integration of fluent speakers with early learners” (pp. 281-282).

In the context of education, there has been a move away from separating languages in classes towards the concurrent and integrated usage of more than one language (Baker, 2010). In such scenarios, teachers use translanguaging to facilitate meaning-making among students by activating their full linguistic repertoire. Additionally, teachers can encourage students to link previously acquired languages with new ones in order to enhance their learning. Cenoz and Gorter (2022) called these planned strategies for pedagogical translanguaging, and argued that “learning can be enhanced when hard boundaries that isolate languages are replaced by soft and permeable boundaries” (p. 2). The significance of activating the full linguistic repertoire and the use of students' resources was highlighted in the companion volume of the Council of Europe (2018) as follows: “the construction of meaning may take place across languages and draw upon user/learners' plurilingual and pluricultural repertoires” (p. 27).

For better student engagement in multilingual classrooms, teachers may need to encourage the use of translanguaging, as some learners “may not actually be able to engage with the curriculum as they have limited command of the medium of instruction” (Li & Martin, 2009, p. 119). In essence, such translanguaging practice in second- or foreign-language classrooms is meant to aid communication so that language learners can express themselves clearly in a more natural and convenient manner. According to Williams (2002), translanguaging “entails using one language to reinforce the other in order to increase understanding and in order to augment the pupil’s ability in both languages” (p. 40). In terms of academic competence, he argued that the use of both languages concurrently in classrooms contributes to the development of language skills in both languages.

This study supports the view that translanguaging has a positive impact on learners’ performance, and thus discards the native speaker model of language learning. Some scholars believe that the focus should not be on the ‘native norms’ but instead on “the realistic language use for dynamic needs and goals of language learners” (Fang et al., 2022, p. 306). They further believe that the focus should be toward “communication in situ, where people adopt various multimodal and semiotic resources” (p. 306). As such, the aim should be to know how these learners use different languages rather than “comparing them with ideal native speakers of different languages” (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021, p. 15). This is because wanting to be native-like is a never-ending process, whereby learners may suffer from an ‘incomplete acquisition’ of the language being learned (Montrul & Silva-Corvalán, 2019). More importantly, Cots et al. (2022) have noted that “there still seems to be a dearth of empirical studies focusing on the pedagogic impact of translanguaging” (p. 2). Additionally, Chaisiri (2022) recommended that future research on translanguaging studies “should arise from the emic epistemological stance utilizing qualitative methodology to provide a thick description of the issue” (p. 72). Therefore, this study aims to address this gap in the literature by examining pedagogical translanguaging from the perspective of a qualitative approach.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Studies About Translanguaging*

In an attempt to challenge the monolingualism approach in education, Cenoz and Gorter (2022) assert that “It is not justified that multilingual speakers should aim to behave as if they were monolingual speakers” (p. 2). This is because learners would benefit from their first language (L1) to aid communication and improve their second language (L2) skills. Still, Pennycook (2008) has argued that it could not be enough “just to question monolingualism and argue for multilingualism, since both conceptions emerge from the same context of European-based thinking about language” (p. 30). He suggested that translanguaging practice could address such epistemological misconceptions. Some English language teaching (ELT) scholars, such as Wei (2011), have embraced translanguaging in their classes in order to create a ‘translanguaging space’ in which students can show their creativity and criticality about an issue. This process may also allow L2 learners who are considered to be ‘emergent bilinguals’ i.e., whose bilingualism is evolving and not yet fully developed, to promote the use of their home languages and cultural understanding (García et al., 2008). Such classrooms may be perceived as translanguaging environments, in which translanguaging is seen as “an authentic, rather than deviant, practice of the classroom community” and thus “facilitates the gradual emergence of translanguaging competence” (Anderson, 2018, p. 9). For translanguaging to be implemented successfully, pedagogical activities must be planned systematically to fulfill certain goals. In other words, translanguaging in education should not be viewed as a scaffolding strategy (García & Kano, 2014) or as another strategy to tackle language learning difficulties (García & Li, 2014). Chaisiri (2022) maintained that the strategic use of “this fluid approach to linguistic diversity practices has a transformative potential to develop learners and teachers into proficient emergent bilinguals” (p. 71). This is because, as Canagarajah (2013) pointed out, “the pedagogical domain is itself a site of complex translanguaging practices and generates useful insights into communicative practices” (p. 12).

Cots et al. (2022) argued against the monoglossic approach and examined the effect of a sustained pedagogical intervention by introducing a heteroglossic approach in an ESP university subject. Their study focused on (a) the teacher’s discursive accommodation to the new perspective using translanguaging and (b) the students’ response with respect to the development of their proficiency and attitude towards pedagogical innovation. The study found that a heteroglossic approach could have a positive learning effect on student performance. Likewise, Alharbi and Alqefari (2022) investigated university teachers’ perceptions of English as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia. After conducting a survey and semi-structured interviews with five university professors, the study suggested that classroom activities in which more than one cultural, dialectical, and linguistic code is incorporated to be considered as natural and humanistic phenomena. It also showed that university teachers prefer translanguaging because they share common linguistic and cultural backgrounds with their students.

Similarly, Tai and Wong (2022), in their study that aimed to empower students by constructing a translanguaging space, investigated how English teachers mobilized diverse multilingual, multimodal, and multi-semiotic resources to create a translanguaging space for L1 English students. They claimed that this translanguaging space has a transformative impact on students’ learning because it alters how students view languages as resources for communication and values linguistic and cultural diversity in the community. The study also found that translanguaging spaces could be created for all students to ensure that they can employ meaning-making through different means and enjoy meaningful experiences. Recently, Orcasitas-Vicandi and Perales-Fernández-de-Gamboa (2023) showed how multilingual students perceived themselves and what attitudes they held toward translanguaging pedagogies. The study found that most students viewed themselves

as multilingual speakers, with fluid interactions between their languages. The students' languages played an important role in building their multilingual self-perception. In addition, the students considered the intervention to have positively affected their critical thinking and self-concept development. Similarly, Guan (2023) investigated the effectiveness of pedagogical translanguaging in multilingual classrooms. The results of the study showed that pedagogically assisted multilingual students had enhanced their classroom participation, decreased their anxiety, and gained a deeper comprehension of academic literature.

Assessment of translanguaging is seen as a challenging task, especially when it comes to standardized tests in which monolingualism is embraced. This challenge may be because students read or listen to one language and then speak or write in another language. For this reason, in cases where the input language is different from the output language, García and Li (2014) noted that policymakers who commission and develop tests and teachers do not have clear intentions to integrate translanguaging in assessment. García and Li (2014) suggested using adaptive technologies to include translanguaged tasks in tests as an indicator of students' bilingual or multilingual knowledge, drawing on their whole linguistic repertoire. In addition, translanguaging in assessment could be done formatively through performance testing via the use of dynamic assessment. For translanguaging to be accepted in assessment, there has to be "a change in epistemology that is beyond the limits of what most schools (and teachers) permit and value today" (García & Li, 2014, p. 135). Such persistence and reluctance from policymakers and teachers to incorporate translanguaging in assessment is due to the fact that "assessment is often principally focused on monolingual proficiency" (Vallejo & Dooly, 2020, p. 8).

Language testing specialists have pointed out that multilingual competencies received no attention in language testing because it is difficult for "the language testing profession to develop and invent tests and rubrics that will be based on a broader multilingual construct of language" (Shohamy, 2011, p. 428). During this era of performance testing and multilingual turn in education, she recommended that "Language testers should take the role of resistance 'from below' to imposed ideologies and invent creative ways of testing, which reflect the diverse populations in this day and age and provide equal participation not limited to dominant languages and dominant people" (Shohamy, 2011, p. 428). In other words, tests have a significant role beyond the mere measurement of performance, which is the accommodation of the social, political, and economic contexts in which they operate. To avoid the likelihood of limited evidence of construct validity, language tests need to consider such aspects. In doing so, the test tasks were drawn from real-life language activities. This may help language testers to create multilingual tests based on a broader definition of language and language performance. The focus in this case is on function rather than form, cognitive activity, or language production (Lewis et al., 2012).

Currently, there is encouraging contemporary understanding of language use in some language tests such as the TOEFL iBT, which is now making use of varieties of English from North America, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand as test inputs "involving not just varieties of a language but also multiple languages and modalities" (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020, p. 33). The incorporation of translanguaging in language assessment practices will enable test candidates to effectively "draw on their entire repertoires as multilingual persons, and more authentically representing and valuing the translanguaged reality of current workplace language practice" (Baker & Hope, 2019, p. 421).

B. Context of the Study

English is taught as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia. Mainstream teachers and students still find the native speaker model very appealing to them. They saw this model as the standard and ultimate goal of teaching English in the country. Ironically, the vast majority of teachers and students still fail to speak like native speakers do. This study discards the native speaker model of language learning and, as a result, argues for the use of pedagogical translanguaging in Saudi Arabia, as it may have positive outcomes on the performance of learners.

C. Research Questions

1. What types of translanguaging strategies are used by teachers? To what extent did they use it?
2. What was the perception of teachers when they used translanguaging?

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

Ten English teachers (five men and five women) from five public secondary schools in Saudi Arabia were recruited for the study. Convenience sampling was utilized without prioritizing expertise or qualifications in English. All the participants were full-time Saudi teachers with at least a bachelor's degree in English. They had been teaching English for more than five years in secondary schools. Their age ranged from 30–45 years. Regarding classes, some teachers were responsible for teaching students from just one grade (e.g., first-year students), whereas others were teaching students from more than one grade. The participants' consent was obtained before the study. Closed questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were conducted for data collection. The researcher sent the questionnaire online to 41 teachers. Of these, 10 participants completed the questionnaires. The researcher then conducted semi-structured interviews with six teachers (three women and three men). The reason behind selecting a secondary school was that students were expected

to have a good command of English and Arabic; thus, teachers would use translanguaging more frequently in such classes than in intermediate or primary schools.

B. Materials

The researcher conducted the study at five public secondary schools in Saudi Arabia, ensuring that the timings were convenient for teachers. Data were collected in two phases over a period of two months. This study aimed to explore teachers' use of translanguaging in classrooms with students. Phase one included a semi-structured questionnaire designed to explore teachers' viewpoints on their use of translanguaging (i.e., when and how they use it). Likewise, a semi-structured interview was conducted to obtain a detailed description of the teachers' perspectives on their use of translanguaging and to verify the views that were stated in the questionnaires. The questions for the questionnaire and interviews were carefully formulated to ensure that they were within the scope of the study. The researcher received feedback from experts on the questions and conducted several trials with a small sample of teachers. The questionnaires were administered online, and face-to-face interviews were conducted.

C. Data Analysis

Data were inductively analyzed using content analysis, employing themes as the unit of analysis. The themes in this qualitative study were extracted largely from the questionnaires and interviews conducted. The themes were coded and analyzed using a computer program called NVivo. Then, the interviews were transcribed by the researcher, and the interview transcripts were returned to the interviewees for validation.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Questionnaire

(a). Advantages of Using Translanguaging in Class

Almost all the teachers reported that they found translanguaging beneficial to their students. More specifically, this happened when there was a breakdown in communication between the teachers and their students. One teacher mentioned that, "I used translanguaging whenever I say or explain something you know which is not familiar to my students, so I look at their faces and can tell that they do not know about it, and in this case I explain it in Arabic." The use of translanguaging here is meant to aid communication and ensure that the message crosses. Additionally, another teacher reported that, when he used translanguaging with his students "they made more sense of the materials and of the things being taught." Students were assisted in class via translanguaging to ensure that they understood the materials given to them. The teacher's role facilitated the learning process. One teacher had the following to say: "My job is only, you know, to make learning easier for my students".

Apparently, it seems that translanguaging was performed at different stages with a different focus on each stage. For instance, one teacher said the following in a writing class: "The most important thing to me when I use translanguaging with my students is in the brainstorming stage because they might be lost if they did not know how to begin the task... and quick look at the end before they finish the task to check if they did it right." This teacher seems to be using translanguaging for the sake of keeping her students on track and wanting them to have a clear idea of what they were going to do. She added, "When I explained the question in Arabic, one student realized that he was about to do something else that we did not want." The teacher then asked the whole class if the question was clear or required further clarification. The teacher's use of translanguaging helped the students overcome the difficulty of interpreting the question into something that was different from the purpose of the task. Furthermore, she explained, "The students' performance improved when I used translanguaging because they understood what I wanted from them." By implementing translanguaging, this teacher also saved the students' valuable time while responding to the task by helping those who struggled with the content in a language that is different from their home language. In doing so, some teachers felt, as they said in the questionnaire, "This sort of thing I believe... will make our students much better prepared for academic success." These results are consistent with the findings of Cenoz and Gorter (2022), who noted that learners benefited from their first language to aid communication and improve their second language skills.

(b). The Challenges of Using Translanguaging in Class

Some teachers faced challenges when implementing translanguaging. One teacher indicated, "It is, you know, difficult to know if the student is using at the moment the full linguistic resources." This teacher may have felt that the students' movement from English to Arabic and vice versa might not be considered a sufficient indicator of full use of linguistic repertoire. Therefore, he may have thought they did not use language fluidly through translanguaging, but rather separately and traditionally, as in code-switching, where languages exist independently from each other.

Another teacher pointed out that "the school sometimes does not encourage teachers to use Arabic a lot in class." This is due to the fact that the old-fashioned model of the native speaker is still prevalent in this context, and thus, the monolingual ideology rather than the multilingual view is the dominant policy. He added, "It is sometimes difficult for us to give the same time for talking in English or Arabic. So, I think one language will win over the other." This teacher meant that, when students used their full linguistic repertoire using both languages, it could be that one language might be given more time in class at the expense of the other. As a result, some students may be disadvantaged because they

have limited opportunities to develop competence in the target language. This finding is in line with the findings of Rafi's (2023) study, which noted that, although translanguaging yielded positive outcomes, it was expected to face revulsion from different stakeholders due to their biases towards monolingual policy.

Assessing students' language while using translanguaging was also an additional challenge for almost all the teachers. For example, one teacher said, "I think it takes time and effort to find appropriate ways to assess my students while using translanguaging." He added, "They were, I think, one time writing about something in English, which is the task I gave them. Then, they asked me to write the translation under each question... I do not feel this is right either." This teacher may have found that such assessment practices, in which test questions are written in two languages, are laborious not only in the administration process but also in the design and scoring processes. In addition, he may have thought that such assessment methods may not provide an accurate picture of students' performance. This finding is in accordance with Shohamy's (2011) conclusion regarding multilingual competencies. She stated that "It is a challenge to the language testing profession to develop and invent tests and rubrics that will be based on a broader multilingual construct of language" (p. 428).

(c). The Role of the Students' Native Language in Class

Most teachers found the use of the Arabic language in class to be an important tool to make the content more accessible to students. One teacher mentioned, "I used Arabic with my students, but not all the time... Only with difficult words because I want them to have a deep understanding of the topic." This happened during a reading class in which the teacher gave them a reading passage and then asked them to discuss it as a group. The students read the passage in English, and when they presented it to the whole class, they used English and Arabic words. The teacher added, "They used Arabic for words that they could not pronounce well in English, or with difficult words that I translated for them." During this activity, the teacher noticed that some students did not progress well in the text for the above-mentioned reasons. Therefore, he applied translanguaging through scaffolding to help students understand the passage. Another teacher added, "It was easier for my students to talk in English when I allowed them to use Arabic in class, especially with you know, shy and weak students." This was a speaking exercise where students gave presentations in English and used Arabic words. In doing so, the teacher encouraged low-level and average students to use their linguistic resources to communicate and engage fully in classroom activities. This finding is consistent with the findings of Orcasitas-Vicandi and Perales-Fernández-de-Gamboa's (2023) study, which suggested that the use of students' home languages in class can enhance their understanding of class materials. More importantly, the results of this study are in line with Abdeljaoued's (2023) study, which found that students' engagement in academic materials increased when teachers used translanguaging.

B. Interview

(a). Types of Translanguaging Strategies Used

Most of the teachers interviewed in this study indicated that they had applied translanguaging in classes in different forms. One teacher said, "I used translanguaging to explain the test questions or sometimes maybe to clarify the task by translating difficult words so that students will know what they should do in order to get the answer right." This purposeful use of translanguaging was intended to support learning and enhance performance. This teacher illustrated, "The students' performance, as I noticed in some exams, improved because of translanguaging, because they understood the task." While the teacher read the prompt in English, some students responded in Arabic as they guessed the meaning of the words. When they received the translation right, he immediately approved of it or sometimes gave an accurate translation of the term. This teacher allowed for a translanguaging space as he invited the students to come up with translations of the terms they knew from their own repertoire. This finding is in line with the results of Tai and Wong's (2022) study, which pointed out that students were empowered when a translanguaging space was constructed. Such a space can change the way students view languages as resources for communication, which has a positive impact on their performance.

Another teacher mentioned that he used translanguaging to "encourage students to interact while discussing something in small groups." The students spoke Arabic most of the time, courtesy of the teacher's observation when he was moving around the groups to check their progress and facilitate the materials for them. He said, "The students were speaking in Arabic, even those who do not normally talk in class, but I asked them to take notes in English for the group presentation, and sometimes, you know, they mixed languages in their notes." These students used translanguaging not just for the sake of interaction, as the teacher pointed out, but to support their fluency when they presented to the whole class. This was clear when the teacher said, "They were referring to their notes frequently during the presentation, and they had Arabic pronunciation of some English words that they asked me earlier to pronounce for them when they were doing the task." This finding is consistent with Guan's (2023) study, which noted that pedagogical translanguaging played an active role in connecting students with varying degrees of fluency during teamwork as well as making them feel comfortable when taking part in discussions.

Likewise, translanguaging has been used in class to encourage low-proficiency students to participate in classroom activities. One teacher stressed, "I found translanguaging to be very helpful for average or below-average students in English because they have the confidence to speak in Arabic and English at the same time, and you know, I accepted this because this is what they can do with the language at this level." This teacher created a space for translanguaging with his students, which helped activate their linguistic resources in their repertoires. In other words, the students felt that there

were fluid boundaries between Arabic and English, and thus, took part in class activities. More importantly, the teacher added, “Despite the fact that I encourage them to use Arabic with English, I try as much as possible not to let them do this all the time because they have become better.” This means that the use of translanguaging gradually disappears as students become more proficient in the target language, which is English in this case. This finding is in accordance with Zhang and Jocuns’s (2022) study, which concluded that translanguaging assisted students with low proficiency to actively participate in reading activities for comprehension, even with a moderate use of scaffolding.

(b). Teachers’ Perceptions of Translanguaging

Most of the teachers interviewed in this study reported that they found translanguaging to be very convenient when applied to their students. For instance, one teacher mentioned, “Because we have the same languages, I mean, and my students speak both Arabic and English, we feel we understand each other.” The implementation of translanguaging was possible because only two languages were shared by both the students and their teacher. This finding is in line with Alharbi and Alqefari’s (2022) study, which concluded that teachers of English as a foreign language favored translanguaging because both teachers and students shared linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Likewise, another teacher commented that, when he allowed the students to use their prior knowledge of Arabic, it was clear “translanguaging helped my students to overcome anxiety and make them, you know, better creative connections between Arabic and English.” This was during an activity where students were delivering a group presentation and were speaking in English, but used Arabic words to fill the gaps. This happened while they were moving between the slides and preparing for the next idea, talking with each other before their turns came. It seems that, when the teacher empowered her students with the use of translanguaging, their self-esteem was boosted and they achieved unexpected results. This finding is consistent with Guan’s (2023) study, which concluded that pedagogical translanguaging can assist anxious students in using “other languages to supplement their ideas and no longer have to worry about cognitive and psychological issues resulting from language barriers” (p. 252). In addition, the results of this study are consistent with Cenoz et al.’s (2022) study, which indicated that students’ anxiety reduced due to the use of pedagogical translanguaging.

V. CONCLUSION

This study examined the pedagogical use of translanguaging by secondary school teachers and their perceptions of pedagogical translanguaging. The findings of this study demonstrated that pedagogical translanguaging has a positive effect on students. More specifically, this was seen when teachers whose roles were just facilitators of learning applied translanguaging pedagogically through scaffolding as a means to enhance students’ meaning-making processes. In doing so, this study found that there was an improvement in students’ performance and their self-esteem, to was also positively impacted. Consequently, this situation has encouraged low-level and average students to fully engage in classroom materials, making full use of their linguistic resources. Furthermore, this study concluded that the activation of students’ entire linguistic repertoire was achieved via the creation of a translanguaging space for students. More specifically, students are prioritized in such translanguaging contexts “through bringing their personal trajectories, perspectives, and voices into classroom activities and into learning” (Wei, 2024).

Nonetheless, the findings of this study should be interpreted with caution because the sample size is not representative of teachers in Saudi Arabia. Similarly, the results of this study cannot be generalized to other contexts because the study was conducted at only five public secondary schools. Furthermore, this study employed a qualitative approach and thus lacked insights based on a quantitative approach. For more robust and credible results, future studies on pedagogical translanguaging should include larger representative samples of teachers. Likewise, future research should consider the inclusion of other voices, such as students, parents, and administrators, to obtain multiple sources of evidence. Furthermore, for the purpose of validation, future studies should employ a mixed-method approach (qualitative and quantitative) in which the data are triangulated. The results of this study have implications for secondary school English teachers. To implement pedagogical translanguaging successfully, the participants of this study recommended that linguistic and cultural backgrounds should be shared between both the teacher and students. In addition, teachers need to create a space for translanguaging, especially with the emergent bilinguals.

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