

FOUND IN TRANSLATION: PLURILINGUALISM AS PEDAGOGY FOR TEACHING POST-SECONDARY VOCABULARY

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Abstract

Monolingual language teaching practices persist as the norm in increasingly linguistically and culturally diverse settings like Canada. This monolingual predisposition in second language (L2) education ignores multilingual students' fluid and overlapping linguistic realities, and it neglects the full potential of their existing linguistic repertoire and competences in developing specific aspects of L2 acquisition. On the contrary, an emergent pedagogical framework—plurilingualism—offers an innovative approach to language teaching by highlighting this relationship between languages and encouraging agency in multilingual language use in the classroom. To that end, this article summarizes empirical research in applied linguistics that report on the advantages of practicing plurilingual pedagogies in classroom tasks when teaching L2 vocabulary at the post-secondary level. Studies include English, Spanish, and Sepedi as target second or additional languages, and were conducted in Canada, United States, and South Africa. Both quantitative and qualitative results are discussed. The article aims to provide an evidence-based resource guide for post-secondary English as Second Language (ESL) teachers on how to and why practice the following plurilingual techniques—(1) translanguaging, (2) translation, and (3) cross-linguistic analysis—when teaching L2 vocabulary. As well, when applicable, online resources exemplifying the step-by-step use of these plurilingual strategies are also cited.

L2 Vocabulary Teaching in a Multilingual Canada

Words are not isolated units of a language: they are components of a larger interconnected system that allow second language (L2) learners to access other components in that system (Nation, 2013). For example, knowing a word is systematically linked to knowing its spelling and pronunciation. Indeed, vocabulary proficiency has even been shown to predict post-secondary English as a Second Language (ESL) students' reading ability, as well as their capacity to read on their own (Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010). As such, the development of L2 learners' vocabulary knowledge intuitively equates to the overall development of their L2 competencies.

While there are many different techniques that can be applied in the L2 classroom to raise students' vocabulary competencies, there is a paucity of resources that inform and support post-secondary educators of emergent plurilingual pedagogies—teaching strategies that highlight a similar theme of interconnectedness, in this case between the languages in a learner's linguistic repertoire. In the field of teaching ESL, Canada's growing linguistic and cultural diversity offers the perfect opportunity to practice pedagogies that capitalize on language learners' plurilingual backgrounds. Indeed, between 2011 and 2016 alone, there was 17.5% growth in the number of Canadians who reported speaking more than one language at home, and 7 out of 10 of whom even speak a mother tongue other than English or French (Statistics Canada, 2017).

That said, I will provide in this article an up-to-date review of applied linguistics research illustrating the advantages of incorporating plurilingual techniques when teaching vocabulary in post-secondary ESL, with a focus on (1) translanguaging, (2) translation, and (3) cross-linguistic analysis. As a background, I will first discuss how contemporary L2 education in Canada have succumbed to a unilingual tendency that draws on historical and existing language policies, which ignore accumulating research on the advantages of multilingualism. As well, I will briefly define plurilingualism as a theoretical and as a pedagogical framework before delving into its practical classroom applications. Towards the

end, I will include a short section listing existing online resources (e.g., videos; websites) that are useful for practicing plurilingual techniques in ESL.

Lost in Translation: ESL in a ‘Bilingual, Multicultural’ Canada

There is now consistent evidence in applied linguistics research confirming the many cognitive and practical benefits of learning and speaking multiple languages, both inside and outside of second language (L2) classrooms (e.g., Kroll, Gullifer & Rossi, 2013; Peal & Lambert, 1962). However, existing L2 curricula and programs in increasingly multilingual settings like Canada still largely deliver language courses in a monolingual way (Piccardo, 2013; 2017). For example, teachers and students would often use the target language only, while students are especially not encouraged to draw on their potentially larger existing linguistic repertoire and competences (Cummins, 2007). Much to the disservice of many L2 learners, this pedagogical practice contradicts what empirical research illustrates: that multilinguals’ known languages are all activated in the brain when they speak since they cannot consciously nor selectively separate these languages from each other (Bickes, 2004); indeed, this language non-selectivity is specially true when accessing, recognizing, comprehending, and producing vocabulary (Kroll et al., 2013).

What such unilingual pedagogy subscribes to, however, are existing language policies in Canada that promote the use of one of the two ‘official’ languages over the other ‘minority’ ones. The federal government for example has historically pushed for a ‘bicultural Canadian’ within a ‘bilingual state’ that officially speaks English and French—the languages of the nation’s supposed founding ‘races’ (e.g., Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism; Krasny & Sachar, 2017). This eventually led to current pervasive language policies, both in social and administrative spaces that neglect contributions from other linguistic and ethnic communities to today’s Canada, while deceptively—if not also ironically—promoting bilingualism in a multicultural country (e.g., Bilingualism in a Multilingual Framework; Haque, 2012). At a micro level, such mandates have influenced the creation of provincial governing bodies that police the proper use

and teaching of ‘correct’ versions of a language (e.g., French; Office québécois de la langue française, 2019).

Hence, it is not surprising that many Canadian language teachers and learners find it challenging to overcome the ‘monolingual predisposition’ of L2 education even in multilingual and multicultural contexts (Piccardo, 2013). From experience, I can attest that this continues to be the case in ESL classrooms in Québec’s Collège d’enseignement général et professionnel (CÉGEPs), post-secondary institutions that serve as an alternative to or a stepping stone toward a university education. However, recent inclusive changes in language curricula in Canada demonstrate that it is possible and necessary for L2 education to reflect Canadian students’ ethnic and linguistic plurality. For example, Alberta is set to offer K-12 Filipino language and culture programs by 2020, which is in response to the province’s fastest growing Tagalog-speaking population (French, 2019).

Thus, considering the significance of vocabulary learning in L2 students’ overall language development, it is imperative that language educators, including those who teach at the post-secondary level, are informed and have access to evidence-based resource guides that illustrate how plurilingualism meets vocabulary teaching in practical classroom pedagogy.

Plurilingualism as Theory

As a theoretical framework, plurilingualism supports the idea that a language speaker possesses a linguistic repertoire that consists of all that speaker’s known languages, which are interrelated (Council of Europe [CoE], 2001). In line with empirical evidence cited above (Bickes, 2004; Kroll et al., 2013), this theory then also reflects and exploits how multilinguals’ cognitively store and access their languages. Indeed, this single repertoire acts as a tool box that contains one’s named languages as individual but overlapping tools, which are available to be flexibly drawn from and used as necessary (Coste, Zarate & Moore, 1997/2009). For example, one might have to use their English to read and write certain texts for school, but they could go home and switch from English to French to communicate with family members. In this sense, one’s linguistic competence

is then not reduced to individual and separate proficiencies that they attain for each of their languages, but is attributed to what they are capable of achieving using their composite linguistic resource pool (CoE, 2018).

Plurilingualism as Pedagogy

As an emerging pedagogical framework in teaching ESL, plurilingualism then highlights the relationship between languages and the inherent cultural knowledge that comes with knowing these languages. The goal of this pedagogy is not only to develop learners' proficiencies in one language, but also to build up a communicative competence in all of the languages in the learners' repertoire exactly through an associative use of these languages (CoE, 2001). In other words, plurilingualism, unlike the monolingual view to L2 instruction, puts forth this interrelationship between the students' languages to encourage agency in their own language use (Marshall & Moore, 2018). Ultimately, this awareness of and capitalization on the language learners' composite multilingual and multicultural resource pool will be part of their plurilingual and pluricultural competence (PPC) (Costa et al., 1997/2009; CoE, 2001; 2018), a skill that L2 teachers can further foster in their classrooms through plurilingual approaches to language teaching.

Plurilingual Approaches to Teaching ESL Vocabulary: How and Why?

What follows is a brief guide to using 3 translanguaging, translation, and cross-linguistic analysis in teaching ESL vocabulary at the post-secondary level, based on recent and relevant quantitative and qualitative studies in applied linguistics. While English is not the only target language involved in the selected research sample below, all nonetheless support the use of a plurilingual pedagogy to promote L2 lexical acquisition among college and university students.

(1) Translanguaging

Translanguaging refers to the language practices of multilinguals and plurilinguals, which involve strategic and fluid use of the languages in their linguistic repertoire to make meaning (García, 2011). In L2 classrooms,

translanguaging has also come to refer to the process of “purposeful pedagogical alternation of languages” (Hornberger & Link, 2012, p. 262) in order to gain knowledge, make sense, and communicate about a target language in written or spoken modes (Wei, 2011).

One example of explicit teaching strategy employing translanguaging is contrastive elaboration. In vocabulary lessons, contrastive elaboration means allowing learners to criss-cross between their known languages to enhance understanding, and extend the meanings, of target vocabulary items and concepts beyond the language of input (Makalela, 2015). Other examples of translanguaging tasks could involve engaging students in pedagogical and spontaneous translanguaging by encouraging them to: think and talk about their personal plurilingual practices; guess vocabulary meanings of non-target language items; and speculate about interpretations of L2 idiomatic expressions (Galante, forthcoming).

Research evidence

Using control and experimental groups and a pretest-posttest design, Makalela (2015) investigated the effectiveness of contrastive elaboration as a pedagogical treatment in developing vocabulary knowledge among post-secondary students who are learning Sepedi as an additional language in a South African university. Pretest scores from a word recognition test show that both control and experimental groups performed similarly (and poorly) prior to the introduction of the translanguaging treatment. Six months after the experimental group received instruction using collaborative elaboration, posttests show that they significantly outperformed the control group (which received conventional teaching practices) by about 36 points in the word recognition test. As well, statistical analyses support the significance of the translanguaging group’s better vocabulary gains.

Another study in Toronto, Canada looked at the impact of pedagogical translanguaging tasks (see above) on the lexical development of international post-secondary students enrolled in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program (Galante, forthcoming). This study tested the EAP students’ academic English vocabulary at the end of the program to investigate differential vocabulary

gains between a translanguaging treatment group and a monolingual comparison group. Similar to the above-mentioned study, results show that vocabulary gains among students in the treatment group (who engaged in translanguaging during classroom tasks) were significantly higher after the EAP course than among those in the comparison group. These findings further support the facilitative effect of pedagogical translanguaging on academic vocabulary learning.

Online resource

For a video about incorporating translanguaging in a vocabulary activity, refer to Zullo's (2019) YouTube video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OUoXAK7Cdb&t>). This activity was designed for teaching idiomatic phrases, one of the contexts in which new word forms and meanings are learned (Nation, 2013), to advanced adult learners of English as an Additional Language (EAL). That said, this activity was prepared with a particular student context in mind, hence some modifications might be required when partially/wholly adapting it in other classroom settings.

(2) Translation

As one of the more straight-forward plurilingual technique, translation in L2 vocabulary teaching involves using direct translations of the target words from the language of input into the students' first (L1) or additional languages. Similar to translanguaging, the goal is to generate associations and meanings from L1 translations of L2 vocabulary to scaffold students' acquisition of new words, which could require abstract reasoning skills, especially when learning more abstract post-secondary materials (Pujol-Ferran, DiSanto, Rodríguez & Morales, 2016). Particularly among L2 learners with lower (i.e., beginner's) proficiency levels, teachers can help reduce the cognitive costs of learning new vocabulary items if L1 translations are provided instead of L2 definitions; this aids learners to focus their cognitive resources more on acquiring unknown vocabulary and less on learning the meanings of the target language (Joyce, 2018).

Research evidence

The following research draws from findings involving the teaching of L2 English content words to immigrant students enrolled in subject-area courses at an American college (Pujol-Ferran et al., 2016). These courses include: Chemistry, which used translation for teaching scientific concepts in English; Education, which used translation for discussing content English vocabulary; and Drama, which used translation for learning English vocabulary during script readings and memorization. The courses are taught in classrooms comprised of multilingual students who speak mostly Spanish, but also French, and African and Asian languages as their mother tongue. It is also noteworthy that students in the study are simultaneously taking remedial or ESL instruction along with the abovementioned courses.

Course achievements of students reveal that a large majority of them did not drop their classes, and even passed the courses' assignments, including mid-term and final exams. Specifically, up to 80% of students in the Chemistry course remained in and passed the class, while 95% and 100% of students, respectively, remained in and passed the Education and Drama courses. Course evaluations by students also reveal positive feedback toward the Chemistry and Education classes. These findings are supported by earlier research, which demonstrates that introducing academic content, such as new vocabulary, through the learner's strongest linguistic modality has a positive effect on their ultimate academic achievement and attitude (Honigsfeld, 2003).

Online resource

For a video about using translation in a vocabulary lesson, watch dela Cruz and Nguyen's (2019) YouTube video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9L2b6bbrEw&t>). This activity was designed for teaching common vocabulary to adult learners of Tagalog as a heritage language, while also introducing affixation (in-fixing and partial reduplication) in the target language. Similarly, this activity was prepared with a particular classroom context in mind, hence modifications should be considered when adapting it in other settings.

(3) Cross-linguistic Analysis

Cross-linguistic analysis (CLA) involves a systematic comparison and contrasting of target L2 words with their L1 counterparts. In this process, similarities and differences between vocabulary forms and meanings are made explicitly or implicitly. For example, connections can be made through a word's spelling, pronunciation, and definitions between the L2 (e.g., English in ESL) and the learner's L1. In addition, analysis of vocabulary items can be done at the semantic and syntactic levels, in order to learn new words in grammatical and meaningful contexts. One of CLA's goals is not only to advance multi/plurilingual students' mastery of specific aspects of a language such as vocabulary, but more importantly to strengthen their metalinguistic skills and enhance their multilingual proficiencies, allowing them to be able to think about the target language in the context of their multilingual minds (Pujol-Ferran et al., 2016). This way, students are also made aware about potential positive transfer or interference of their L1 knowledge to/with the L2 that they are learning.

Research evidence

Another course in the same American college was investigated in Pujol-Ferran et al.'s (2016) study, which is partially discussed above. The class, Comparative Linguistics (English/Spanish), had a heterogenous group of bilingual Latin students with varying competencies and proficiencies in English and Spanish; most students are simultaneously taking ESL or remedial classes as well. Specifically for employing CLA, the teacher followed these steps: 1) in pairs or small groups, students were asked to make connections between two materials, and highlight similarities and differences between English and Spanish; 2) then the class as a whole discusses the lesson's focus based on step 1; 3) and the teacher elaborates when needed.

Results show that 91% of the students did not drop the course: they also passed course requirements including the mid-term and final exams. Student evaluations also reveal positive feedback toward the teaching approach used in the course. These findings have huge implications for the given context, especially because students are not all equally highly proficient in the course languages of

instruction. Even more important, these findings show that a large majority of the students were able to succeed in the class despite needing remedial and ESL classes. This study supports how CLA can make academic, especially vocabulary, more accessible to minority students by stimulating them to manipulate their input and relate them to their existing linguistic knowledge.

Online resource

The previously mentioned (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9L2b6bbrEw> &t) video by dela Cruz and Nguyen (2019) also demonstrates the employment of cross-linguistic analysis when teaching new word forms and structures (e.g., infixing and partial reduplication). Again, this activity was prepared with a specific context in mind and must be adapted accordingly.

Found in Translation: ESL in a Plurilingual Canada

The importance of developing L2 learners' vocabulary knowledge is key to developing learners' overall L2 proficiency. Just as important, however, is for teachers to have access to and use teaching techniques that validate and capitalize on their students' full linguistic potential. The studies cited in this article elucidate how plurilingual pedagogies can help in the acquisition of new lexical items by post-secondary learners in ESL and other L2 programs as evinced in students' vocabulary test results and overall course achievements. Yet, the paramount take-home message is this: there is increasing necessity and potential for language programs to reflect in classroom pedagogy the pluricultural and plurilingual realities and practices of learners, especially in growingly diverse settings like Canada. Even if they work only with the more rudimentary units of L2 learning such as vocabulary, language educators still possess the capacity to overcome monolingual policies that permeate multilingual classrooms, and all the while support their students' language gains through a validating, meaningful, and authentic language learning experience—one word at a time.

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