

Translanguaging at Canadian Academy

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Background



Canadian Academy (CA) is a PreK-12 international school located in Kobe, Japan, that has cultivated an inclusive and diverse community since its founding in 1913. As a multilingual learning community, CA recognizes that while English is the primary language of instruction, its students possess a diverse array of home languages that are central to their identities, perspectives, and individual ways of learning. The CA Language Policy states that “all education is language education and that all teachers are language teachers, regardless of specialty area.”

In our action research project, conducted through the Multilingual Learning Research Center (MLRC), we were interested to learn how and why CA teachers and students use translanguaging. Translanguaging is defined by CA as the natural and strategic use of a student's full linguistic repertoire to think, communicate, and learn. Specifically, the research focuses on how teachers and students in grades 5–10 navigate the school's linguistic landscape, moving beyond traditional "English-only" assumptions to utilize multiple languages as a bridge for cognitive scaffolding and academic achievement.

Research Question



How do Canadian Academy teachers and students in grades 5-10 use translanguaging during learning experiences?

Literature Review

Translanguaging originated during the 1980s in Wales as a planned pedagogical activity involving the purposeful alternation of languages for input and output to maintain bilingualism (Baker, Colin, et al.). Since then, scholars like Ofelia García have expanded the concept into a paradigm shift that challenges the view of languages as distinct systems, seeing them instead as a single, unified linguistic repertoire (Prilutskaya; Zhou et al.). Current literature categorizes the practice into two distinct categories:

- **Spontaneous (or Universal) Translanguaging:** Refers to natural, fluid linguistic usage in daily life where boundaries between languages are constantly shifting to meet communicative needs (Thomas et al.).
- **Academic (Pedagogical or Teacher-Directed) Translanguaging:** Denotes a planned instructional strategy facilitated by teachers to utilize students' entire linguistic repertoires for specific learning goals (Prilutskaya 5; Thomas et al.).

Academic translanguaging is the instructional mobilization of students' full linguistic repertoire to promote academic achievement and productive contact across languages (Cummins). Described as a "ground-up" pedagogy, teachers activate and steer individual learner input to make them co-creators of knowledge (Ticheloven et al.).

Key strategies include:

- **Teacher-Led Models:** Teachers plan activities using scaffolding—such as bilingual worksheets and "translanguaging cues"—to trigger language switching and support mixed-ability learners (Thomas et al.).
- **Socio-Cognitive Behavior:** This approach utilizes executive functions, such as reasoning and comparing, to internalize information in one language and reformulate it for output in another (Thomas et al.).
- **Pedagogical Tools:** Strategies like comparing language features and sounds are used to enhance metalinguistic awareness, explain complex content, and build student rapport (Prilutskaya; Zhou et al.; Anderson and Lightfoot).

Contexts and Benefits

Empirical research has examined **academic translanguaging across various educational settings**, including English Language Teaching (ELT), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), and English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) (Prilutskaya).

Studies indicate that utilizing a student's first language (L1) as a resource can increase learner empowerment and self-confidence, enhance comprehension of difficult scientific or mathematical concepts, and support the development of a strong multilingual identity (Anderson and Lightfoot; Zhou et al.). For example, the use of "Identity Texts" and dual-language writing allows students to showcase their "inner skills" beyond basic tasks, connecting classroom learning to their prior lived experiences (Cummins and Early). Furthermore, it allows teachers who do not speak all their students' languages to incorporate those languages into instruction .

Challenges and Institutional Constraints

Despite its theoretical growth, the implementation of academic translanguaging faces significant hurdles:

- **Monolingual Ideologies:** Many institutions operate under "monoglossic" assumptions or "two solitudes" policies that demand strict language separation, often leading to a sense of "guilty multilingualism" or "guilty translanguaging" (Cummins; Anderson and Lightfoot).
- **Stakeholder Concerns:** Teachers, students, and parents may fear that translanguaging causes confusion, isolates students who do not share a common L1, or hinders the acquisition of the dominant school language (Ticheloven et al.; Prilutskaya).
- **Collaborative Planning:** Research highlights a need for explicit instructional training and scheduled time for co-planning between language specialists and subject teachers (Prilutskaya; Spencer). Without leadership support for such collaboration, support often remains ad hoc and less effective (Spencer).

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs an **action research framework** designed to investigate and improve translanguaging practices within the multilingual educational setting of Canadian Academy.

The methodology integrates two distinct data collection instruments - a student survey and a teacher survey - providing a comprehensive view of the linguistic landscape from both instructional and learner perspectives. The focus is narrowed to students and teachers in grades 5 through 10, in order to bridge the end of the **Primary Years Program** to the end of the **Middle Years Program**.

We used thematic analysis to identify salient themes in response to key questions from the surveys, analyzing

- **student responses across grade levels** to identify the changing practices along a developmental trajectory
- **teacher responses across frequency of implementation** to identify the specific instructional practices that can be incorporated or expanded

Student Survey

The anonymous student survey aimed to map the linguistic identities and resources of the Canadian Academy student population in grades 5-10. The survey acknowledges the school as a multilingual community where students often use more than one language daily.

Defining Home Language: The survey explicitly gathers data on the student's "home language," defined as the primary language spoken, understood, or used for daily communication within their family environment.

Identity and Learning: The survey investigates how these diverse home languages contribute to the students' identities, perspectives, and individual ways of learning.

Student Survey Questions

- Is English your primary home language?
- What languages do you use at home? (Check all that apply)
- Do you ever use your home language(s) to help you understand lessons, texts, or instructions at school?
 - How do you use your home language(s) to help you understand lessons, texts, or instructions at school? Please give an example.
- How often do you talk about class content in your home language with your classmates before expressing your understanding in English?
- When you don't understand something in class, what do you usually do?
- Do you use your home language(s) when working with classmates?
 - Why or why not do you use your home language(s) when working with classmates?
- Have teachers ever encouraged you to use your home language(s) to help with learning?
 - How have teachers encouraged you to use your home language(s) to help with learning?
- Do you think using more than one language helps students understand ideas better? Please explain.
- Are there times when you feel students should not use their home language at school? Please explain.

Teacher Survey

The anonymous teacher survey is used to identify the opportunities and constraints CA teachers face when managing a multilingual classroom.

Instructional Practices: Teachers self-reported the situations in which they use translanguaging, as well as the specific strategies that they incorporate and employ.

External Pressures: Teachers are asked to report whether they feel pressure from the curriculum, assessment, school culture, or parents to limit the use of home languages in the classroom.

Professional Confidence: The survey measures the educators' levels of confidence in managing multilingual practices, ranging from "not confident" to "very confident".

Support Needs: Finally, the instrument solicits feedback on the specific types of support or professional development that would help teachers better implement and mobilize translanguaging practices.

Teacher Survey Questions

- How often do you intentionally allow or encourage students to use their home language(s) for learning?
- In what situations do you encourage or permit home-language use? Check all that apply.
- What strategies, if any, do you use to support translanguaging in your classroom?
- What benefits do you think translanguaging offers for student learning?
- What concerns, if any, do you have about students using their home languages in class?
- Do you feel pressure (from curriculum, assessment, school culture, or parents) to limit home-language use?
 - If you answered "yes" to the question above, please explain. What pressures do you feel to limit home language use?
- How confident do you feel in managing multilingual practices in your classroom?
- What kind of support or professional development would help you better implement translanguaging practices?

Findings

Main Use #1 - Vocabulary Development

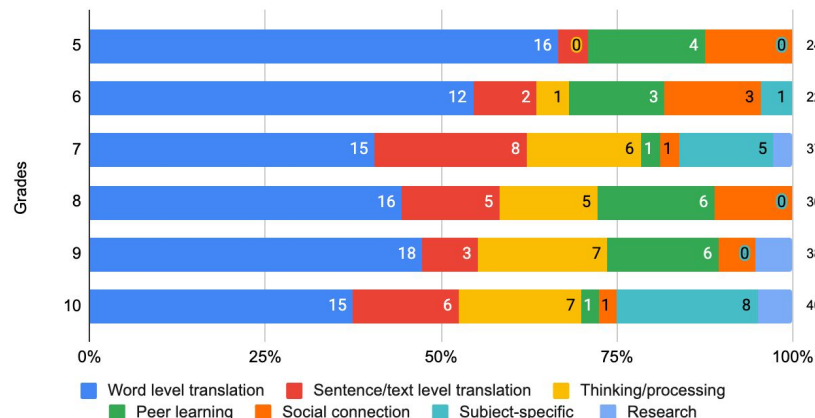
Both Teachers & Students indicated **vocabulary development** as the most common way that they currently use translanguageing.

Both groups suggest that the practice is primarily *in response to a breakdown in comprehension or communication*, and that the students translate for each other, or use a translation tool or application. Rarely, they ask a teacher for help.

There are interesting shifts in usage as students get older.

- **Grade 5 and 6 students** mainly use home languages for word to text level translation, peer learning, and social connection.
- **Older students** begin to use home languages more for thinking and processing, subject-specific learning, and research.

How Students Use Home Languages



Main Use #2 - Social cohesion

Both Teachers & Students indicated strong benefits to a sense of belonging, safety, confidence, and identity building.

Importantly, teachers indicated that our entire school community benefits from a strong multilingual identity.

Students showed a remarkable degree of awareness of and sensitivity to the relative language strengths of their peers. They reported that they choose to use a home language or the instructional language in large part according to *the needs of others* as well as *the requirements of the learning task*.

- **G10 Student:** "It should be used especially if it allows students to feel more comfortable in the school environment."
- **G10 Student:** "Students should be able to express themselves and have their connections in a language that they are comfortable in, not just English."
- **G9 Student:** "When my all of my teammates speak my home language, I will use my home language. If the teammates speak English, I will use English"
- **G6 Student:** "I use my home language when my classmate that I am working on also speak the same home language but when it is like group work and some people doesn't know my home language, then I speak in English"

Positive Practice

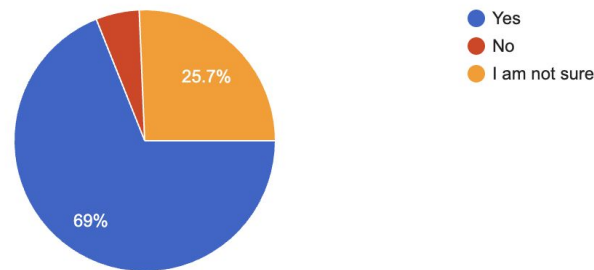
Both Teachers and Students indicated that they believe translanguageing benefits students in a wide variety of ways.

The most common type of benefit is related to **cognition and metacognition**, including synthesizing, analyzing, comparing, and deep comprehension.

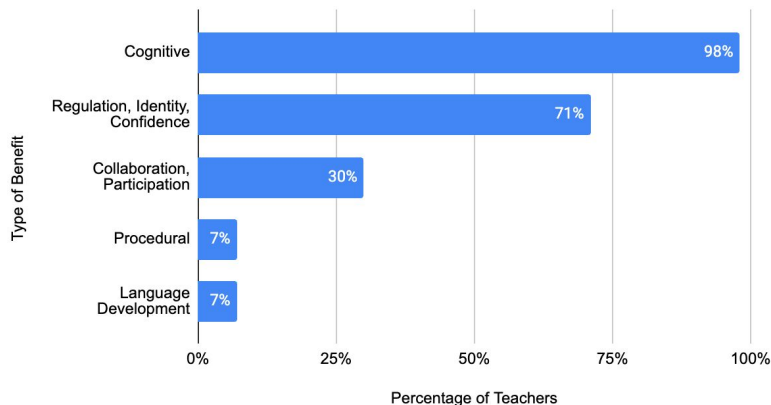
The second most common type is related to **social-emotional learning**, including confidence and identity building as well as emotional regulation.

Do you think using more than one language helps students understand ideas better?

335 responses

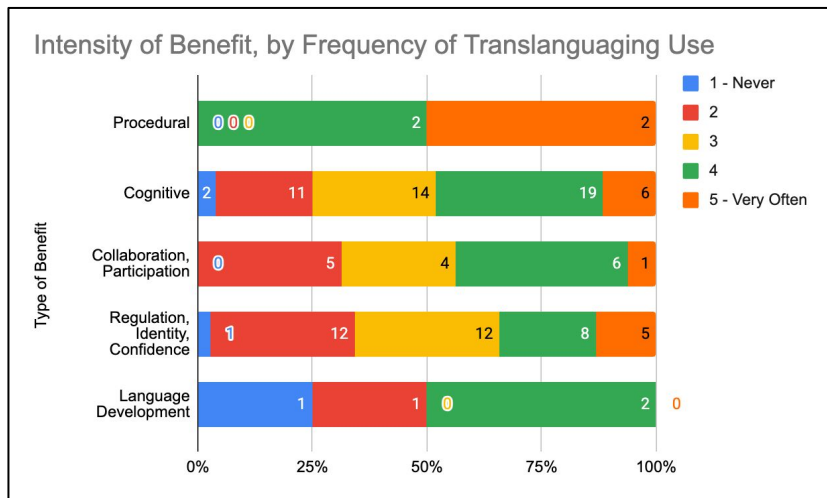


Percentage of Teachers vs. Type of Benefit



Positive Practice continued

Nearly all teachers at CA believe that translanguageing benefits students' ability to think, understand, analyze, compare, and evaluate. There is some nuance, however, in the range of benefits that teachers experience, according to how often they use translanguageing in their classes.



- Teachers who often or “very often” use translanguageing see a strong procedural benefit, but no language development benefit.
- Teachers who often use translanguageing reported the widest range of benefits, including procedural and in language development.

Teacher: “[Translanguageing] allows students to understand a concept much more easily.”

Teacher: “Students can deepen their understanding by making connections to concepts and skills they use in their home language.”

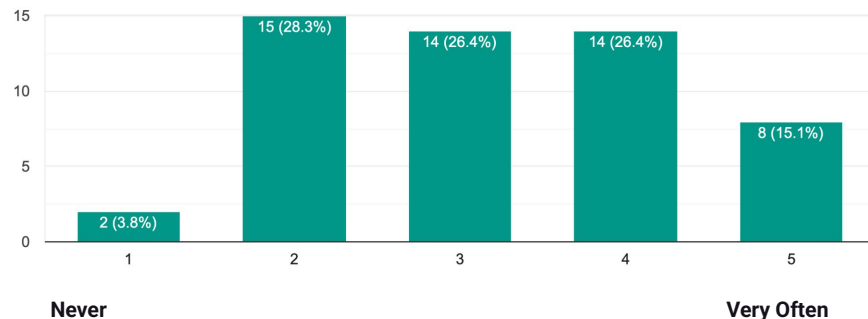
Teacher / Student Divide

A major disconnect exists in the data regarding how often translanguageing occurs for learning. While over 65% of teachers self-report they "sometimes" to "very often" intentionally allow or encourage L1 use, over 63% of students report that teachers have never encouraged them to use their home language for learning.

This divide highlights the spontaneous nature of translanguageing practices within CA. Teacher support is often perceived by students as passive "permission" rather than a visible, planned pedagogical strategy. Due to the lack of explicit instructional cues many students experience a "monolingual pressure," with some reporting they are told to speak "only English" to improve their fluency.

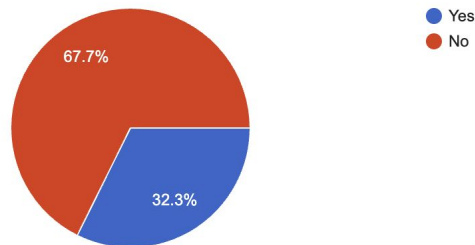
How often do you intentionally allow or encourage students to use their home language(s) for learning?

53 responses



Have teachers ever encouraged you to use your home language(s) to help with learning?

297 responses



Inclusion / Exclusion

A primary concern for both teachers and students is that L1 could be used to exclude peers who do not share the same language, either inadvertently or intentionally.

63% of teachers indicated a major concern was that students might feel excluded. 72% of students feel there are times when students should not use their home language, and a primary reason for this was that it might exclude other students.

Despite this, **both teachers and students also indicated that they viewed translanguaging practices as a way to create an inclusive classroom.** This tension was highlighted in their comments.

Language isolation & Linguistic exclusion

Student: "People use their [L1] to say something bad about people."

Student: "Students are saying inappropriate things"

Student: "Makes me feel excluded."

Student: "Others can't understand and they feel left out."

Teacher: "We don't know if the students are just chatting or communicating with others in a constructive way if the teacher doesn't understand the language."

Linguistic inclusion, understanding & belonging

Student: "If you can talk in many languages you can help more and more people. That can't speak English and Japanese"

Student: "Using more than one language can allow students [to be] inclusive (also exchange) with other cultures."

Teacher: "[Translanguaging] helps with belonging or a sense of being able to contribute (particularly when new or at a lower language phase)."

Teacher: "This supports their confidence... and fosters a strong sense of belonging within the group."

Discussion

Background



We began this process, with a shared interest in understanding translanguaging practices at Canadian Academy and their impact on student learning, specifically for the population of long-term English language learners with whom we both work. At the research symposium in Beijing, we focused our project on understanding how teachers and students currently use translanguaging before trying to understand the implications of current translanguaging practices for long-term English language learners.

Through this process, we were assisted by a professional learning community group which met periodically during Wednesday PD meeting time. This group contributed background research, reviewed the survey questions and data, and acted as a sounding board for the ideas being developed in the Action Research project.

While we have mostly focused our discussion in the following slides on the direct implications of our findings on our research question, we see broader implications for multilingual learners at Canadian Academy and hope to continue exploring these next school year.

Teacher Practice

Translanguaging is a persistent feature in the learning environments of CA. However, it remains **predominantly spontaneous rather than pedagogical**. Although teachers are **highly likely to permit** L1 use, particularly for word level breakdowns, collaborative group work, and reading or research, they are significantly **less likely to actively encourage** translanguaging as a tool for learning. Consequently, translanguaging often arises spontaneously for peer efficacy and comfort, rather than as a structured pedagogical scaffold.

In the survey, teachers indicated a desire for professional development focused on practical tools and coaching on how to incorporate translanguaging practices into their teaching. This is an encouraging finding, as it suggests that **the faculty is ready to develop skills in the area of pedagogical translanguaging**. There are a few specific areas of PD that the findings imply would be useful for teachers and beneficial for students:

- Concept-based vocabulary instruction in content areas, especially math
- Name opportunities for translanguaging that are incorporated into task instructions, thinking routines, and classroom discussions
- Structure and name the process moving students from initial research or brainstorming in a home language to final academic composition or presentation in English

Student Practice

Students at CA are highly aware of the relative linguistic strengths of themselves and their peers. Many students reported that they use their home or additional languages **to support the learning of classmates** who need it, either to comprehend the instructions of a task, or to more deeply understand the content.

We assume that students are being generous with their time and skills in order to preserve social harmony and complete assignments. However, by assuming their peers' needs, they may be **preventing the productive struggle** that can lead to long-term learning, academic language development in both languages, and individual student agency.

This is an area of opportunity for further professional development for teachers to guide student development of:

- Co-constructed language agreements before and during collaborative learning experiences
- Shifting from assuming others' language needs to asking and challenging
- Skill to purposefully select a working language
- Reflecting on language development *in addition to* content-related skills and knowledge

School Policy

Canadian Academy is in the process of revising the school's language policy to formally identify the school as a multilingual learning community where every educator, regardless of their subject area, is considered a language teacher, and recognize the importance of leveraging and supporting the growth of students' multilingual competencies.

While the school's "CA Way" behavioural framework currently promotes the use of "inclusive language" as a means to ensure a shared medium of communication. Our research indicates that the many students perceive this as an exclusionary "English-only" rule. This interpretation can lead to feelings of guilty multilingualism within the student body. To reflect the school's true linguistic diversity, CA should **develop a unified whole-school framework** that explicitly redefines inclusivity to include the strategic use of all students' language resources.

Additionally, to help bridge the gap between teacher and student perceptions, we recommend the school support faculty through **targeted professional development on translanguageing practices** and **provide or incentivize language development in Japanese or Mandarin Chinese** for faculty, empowering teachers to better understand and interact with CA students' diverse linguistic backgrounds. Furthermore, we recommend that the school establish a **regular and systematic review of the student body's linguistic profiles**, ensuring that academic programming, staffing, and language offerings continuously reflect school community and student body.

Reflections About Research



Through this process we have seen the research reflected in our school setting in important ways. It is reassuring to know that what we experience as teachers corresponds with ways that international school communities more generally engage with language. This leads us to believe that the next steps and solutions suggested in the research might also be applicable here.

We have learned some important lessons about research design, most significantly in narrowing or broadening the scope. Although we were proud of the narrowing of our research question, the broad scope of the information we gathered was at times overwhelming. We received very reassuring feedback and guidance from the MLRC coaches about how to narrow the scope of the information in order to arrive at a conclusion that still addressed the core question.

For both of us it was incredibly helpful to have a thought partner and collaborator. We approached and processed the data in very different ways, but were each able to come to important insights about what it meant for our school as well as what it means for the field.

Looking Forward



Our next steps are centered around deepening our engagement with action research through our Translanguaging PLC group. We will continue to use this space for inquiry, reflective practice, and developing schoolwide instructional practices based on the findings of our research in support of multilingual learners. This group will be tasked with addressing some of the issues we uncovered in our research and we fully intend to participate in future research symposia.

We are also looking toward the possibility of leading and supporting other colleagues at our school through the action research process, expanding a culture of inquiry beyond our immediate team and into the wider school community.

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