

A Case Study of Teachers' Translanguaging in College English Classrooms at Xizang University

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Abstract: In recent years, translanguaging as a pedagogical method has gained both consensus and divergent perspectives. However, studies focusing on the translanguaging of College English teachers in China's ethnic minority regions remain relatively scarce. This study employs qualitative methods, including classroom video observations and post-video stimulated recall interviews, to analyze the translanguaging of teachers in College English classrooms at Xizang University. The findings reveal that teachers primarily utilize three types of translanguaging resources, respectively, linguistic, embodied and semiotic resources. The purposes for employing these resources can be categorized as supporting language acquisition, diagnosing and adapting to students' learning needs, activating classroom interaction, optimizing teaching efficiency, transmitting cultural meanings, and fostering literacy development.

Keywords: Teachers' translanguaging; College English classrooms; Xizang University

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1. Introduction

As an important component of China's higher education system, the College English course bears the dual mission of serving national strategic needs and promoting students' personal development^[1]. At present, there are problems in English teaching in Chinese universities, such as tight class hours, traditional teaching methods, and the need to improve teaching effectiveness. There is an urgent need for continuous exploration and updating of teaching concepts and methods. Against this practical backdrop, bilingual or multilingual phenomena are common in College English classrooms in ethnic minority regions, and teachers frequently employ multimodal tools such as gestures, facial expressions, and multimedia. These practices require a rational theoretical interpretation and value reevaluation. Therefore, translanguaging theory provides a new theoretical lens, breaking away from rigid language separation. It posits that communicators, to achieve effective meaning negotiation, view target language learning as a process of integrating existing linguistic resources with new ones^[2]. This perspective provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the multisemiotic nature of College English classrooms, elevating teachers' flexible use of multimodal resources from mere teaching techniques to a

systematic pedagogical method. Thus, examining College English teachers' instructional behaviors through the lens of translanguaging holds significant practical and theoretical value.

2. Literature review

2.1. The development of translanguaging theory

The evolution of translanguaging theory reflects a profound shift in academic understanding of language and language teaching. Originating from a Welsh language revitalization project in the 1990s, Williams first used the term “trawsieithu” to describe the phenomenon of using two languages in the classroom ^[3]. Baker further conceptualized this as “translanguaging” and introduced it to academia, proposing the “unitary language repertoire” hypothesis, which challenges the traditional view of languages as independent systems ^[4]. García systematically developed Baker’s hypothesis, critiquing the ideology of “double monolingualism” from a sociolinguistic perspective and establishing language as a dynamic social practice ^[5]. Simultaneously, Li’s “translanguaging space theory” complemented this by emphasizing translanguaging as a social field for stimulating critical thinking and identity negotiation ^[6]. Subsequently, García and Li integrated these theoretical perspectives, clearly distinguishing translanguaging from code-switching and marking the initial formation of the theoretical framework ^[7]. Recent developments have further highlighted the inherent multimodal dimension of translanguaging. Li reconceptualized language as a communicative resource encompassing multisensory and multisemiotic elements ^[2]. This expansion not only responds to the multimodal realities of communication in the digital age but also provides a more comprehensive theoretical tool for analyzing complex semiotic interactions in educational settings. In light of the theoretical trajectory above, this study defines translanguaging as teachers’ pedagogical practices of integrating multiple resources by crossing boundaries of semiotic systems, languages, and modalities in foreign language classrooms.

2.2. Empirical research on translanguaging of foreign language teachers

Research on translanguaging has evolved from early descriptive accounts of multilingual phenomena to in-depth explorations of the complexities of teachers’ practices. For instance, initial studies primarily focused on how teachers strategically used multiple linguistic resources to facilitate content understanding in bilingual classrooms. Saputra and Atmowardoyo further conducted micro-level classifications of teachers’ translanguaging behaviors, identifying types such as inter-sentential, intra-sentential, insertion, congruent lexicalization, and entire translanguaging ^[8], thereby deepening the understanding of the diversity of translanguaging forms. Subsequently, the research focus shifted from form classification to functional analysis. For example, Cenoz and Gorter distinguished between “pedagogical” and “spontaneous” translanguaging ^[9], emphasizing the intentionality and situational adaptability of teachers’ practices. In recent years, the research scope has significantly broadened, systematically analyzing how teachers integrate multimodal resources such as gestures, postures, and digital tools to cross-cultural boundaries, facilitate knowledge comprehension, and achieve classroom inclusivity, thereby constructing more effective learning environments. Although relevant domestic research started relatively late, it has developed rapidly, achieving important progress in aspects such as internationalized teaching in higher education, content and language integrated learning (CLIL) classrooms, and translanguaging in English-medium instruction (EMI) contexts.

From what has been discussed above, there remain two major gaps in the existing research. Thematically, existing classifications of translanguaging resources remain broad and lack refinement, with minimal attention directed toward teachers’ translanguaging resource utilization in higher education within border regions. In addition, while EMI and CLIL classrooms have received considerable scholarly attention, College English,

a compulsory course for undergraduates in China that plays an indispensable role in cultivating students' comprehensive literacy, has been underexplored. Methodologically, few studies have integrated objective records of teachers' overt behaviors with their subjective intentions. Since post-video stimulated recall interview has been recognized as an effective means to bridge observable behaviors and internal reflections ^[10], its application in translanguaging research remains limited. Therefore, this study adopts a mixed-methods approach combining classroom video observations with post-video stimulated recall interviews. Focusing on College English teachers at Xizang University, it seeks to address the following two research questions:

- (1) What translanguaging resources are employed by teachers in College English classrooms?
- (2) What are the purposes behind teachers' use of translanguaging resources in College English classrooms?

3. Research design

3.1. Research context

This study is administered within the setting of the College English classrooms at Xizang University, where students are primarily divided into elementary-level classes and advanced-level classes according to their English subject scores of the College Entrance Examination (Gaokao). Different textbooks are applicable to each level. "New Horizon College English (Fourth Edition)" is adopted for advanced-level classes, while "New Generation English (Second Edition)" is utilized in elementary-level classes. The course schedule varies across semesters. In the first semester of the freshman year, classes are held twice per week, with each session lasting 90 minutes. In the second semester of the freshman year and the first semester of the sophomore year, classes are held once per week, with each session lasting 135 minutes.

3.2. Research participants

This study selected College English teachers from Xizang University as the research samples. As the only comprehensive university and the sole "double first-class" discipline construction university among the eight universities in Xizang Autonomous Region, Xizang University exhibits typical translanguaging within its College English classrooms based on findings from a pilot study. As a consequence, selecting Xizang University for investigating teachers' translanguaging in College English classrooms holds certain representativeness within the context of universities in border regions. After the identification of the research scope, a combination of purposive sampling and convenience sampling is employed to select eight participants (**Table 1**) in order to ensure both the rationality and feasibility of participant recruitment.

Table 1. Specific information of research participants

Research participants	Years of teaching experience	Class type	Observation duration (Minutes)	Interview duration (Minutes)	Transcription word count
T1	28	Freshman Elementary-level	135	39.45	15580
T2	7	Freshman Elementary-level	135	37.26	10347
T3	30	Sophomore Elementary-level	135	46.09	11303
T4	13	Sophomore Advanced-level	135	35.07	11076
T5	14	Sophomore Elementary-level	135	49.54	10501
T6	5	Freshman Advanced-level	135	44.26	10875
T7	14	Freshman Elementary-level	135	45.45	12219
T8	14	Freshman Advanced-level	135	57.02	12097

3.3. Data collection

Data collection for this study spanned five months and consisted of three phases: a pilot phase, an initial data collection phase, and a supplementary data collection phase. Two primary instruments were employed, respectively, classroom video recordings and post-video stimulated recall interviews. Non-participatory classroom observations were conducted to capture teachers' employment of translanguaging resources. Classroom sessions and subsequent interviews were recorded with the teachers' consent. During the pilot phase, three teachers were observed to gain a preliminary understanding of translanguaging in College English classrooms. In the phase of formal data collection, a total of 24 classroom video recordings and corresponding teacher interview audio recordings were obtained.

3.4. Data analysis

Data processing and analysis were conducted by applying ELAN 6.9 and Excel. To address the first research question, classroom segments were selected based on the diversity of translanguaging, the completeness of teaching procedures, and relevance to the research question. These segments were observed and annotated in ELAN 6.9 to annotate the use of translanguaging resources. The annotation scheme was based on the operational definition. An additional researcher specializing in English language teaching was invited to co-annotate a portion of the data to ensure reliability, achieving an inter-coder consistency rate of over 90%. Discrepancies in coding were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. In terms of the second research question, thematic analysis was applied to the interview data ^[11]. The specific steps included transcribing and thoroughly reading the text, conducting line-by-line coding to extract significant excerpts, grouping codes to generate candidate themes, and reviewing these themes collaboratively with two other researchers while referring back to the data. This process resulted in an analytical framework comprising 6 main themes and 17 sub-themes. This framework was then adopted to explore the purposes of teachers for applying translanguaging resources, supported by illustrative excerpts from the interviews.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Results and discussion from classroom video observation

This study quantified the translanguaging resources utilized by the eight teachers in College English classrooms (Table 2).

Table 2. Classification of translanguaging resources employed by teachers

Classification	Subclassification	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8
Linguistic Resources	Chinese	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
	English	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
	Tibetan			√					
Embodied Resources	Gestures	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
	Positional Movements	√	√	√		√	√	√	√
	Facial Expressions	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
	Eye Contact	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
	Body Postures	√	√	√		√	√	√	√
	Head Motions	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Semiotic Resources	Texts	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
	Pictures	√				√		√	
	Board Writing	√	√		√	√		√	√
	Videos		√		√	√		√	√
	Audio Materials		√					√	√

As shown in **Table 2**, the translanguaging resources employed by teachers in College English classrooms can be categorized into three main types, including linguistic resources, embodied resources, and semiotic resources. This classification framework aligns with some existing studies ^[12], but also diverges from others ^[8,9]. The discrepancy is potentially attributable to this study's specific focus on certain purposeful teachers' translanguaging within the College English classroom context.

Language, embodied behavior, and symbolic resources together constitute the resource system of teacher's translanguaging practice. The selection and integration of resources by teachers are conscious teaching designs based on learning situations, content, and goals, reflecting their multimodal literacy. These findings support the translanguaging theory's emphasis on the flexible deployment of semiotic resources ^[13] and resonate with multimodal communication theory ^[14], revealing the role of multimodal resources in facilitating comprehension, optimizing input, and enhancing interaction. Therefore, translanguaging in the College English classrooms can be viewed as an effective teaching strategy. This study suggests that teacher professional development should prioritize cultivating teachers' translanguaging competence, the ability to identify, design, and integrate diverse semiotic resources to better navigate the complex and dynamic realities of classroom teaching.

4.2. Discussion

Through thematic analysis of the interview data, this study identified six core purposes for teachers' use of translanguaging resources in College English classrooms. They are respectively supporting language acquisition, diagnosing and adapting to learning needs, activating classroom interaction, optimizing teaching efficiency, transmitting cultural meanings, and expanding literacy cultivation, collectively forming a systematic framework of pedagogical support.

4.2.1. Foundational support: Supporting language acquisition and adapting to learning needs

The primary purposes of using translanguaging resources are to provide crucial support for students' language acquisition and to enable dynamic adaptation based on real-time diagnosis of their learning needs. These two aspects form the foundation for effective teaching in College English classrooms. Support for language acquisition manifests as teachers using translanguaging resources to build scaffolds for students' understanding, thus reducing their cognitive load and facilitating their internalization of target language knowledge. However, effective support needs to be built upon accurate diagnosis of and adaptation to students' learning needs. Teachers must continuously diagnose students' learning backgrounds, proficiency levels, and real-time states, adjusting their teaching accordingly.

4.2.2. Process enhancement: Activating interaction and optimizing efficiency

Subsequent to establishing the teaching foundation, teachers further employ translanguaging resources to deepen the teaching process by activating classroom interaction and optimizing instructional efficiency. Activating classroom interaction refers to teachers using translanguaging resources to engage students' senses, mobilize their affect and cognition, and transform them from passive recipients into active participants, thereby fostering a highly engaged classroom dynamic. For example, T5 used sudden positional movement to disrupt students' expectations and refocus their attention, serving as an effective starting point for activating an interactive atmosphere ^[15]. Meanwhile, optimizing teaching efficiency involves teachers integrating translanguaging resources to reduce time consumption and cognitive load, thereby enhancing teaching effectiveness per unit of time.

4.2.3. Ultimate goal: Transmitting cultural meanings and fostering literacy development

The explicated purposes of using translanguaging resources are the transmission of cultural meanings and, ultimately, serving the cultivation and expansion of students' comprehensive literacy. Transmitting cultural meanings involves teachers in transforming the language classrooms into sites of cultural practice. T8 used video resources to guide students in comparing concepts of friendship across different cultures, thereby expanding the language classroom into a field for cultural practice. Ultimately, all these practices aim at students' broader literacy development. Meanwhile, T8 used video content to guide students in connecting the material to their own lives and reflecting on handling romantic relationships, achieving the transferable cultivation of social literacy. This phenomenon primarily indicates that translanguaging resources can both deepen language and cultural literacy internally and promote social and life literacy externally, collectively demonstrating their breadth and depth in whole-person education, echoing the goals of "comprehensive cultural literacy" and "whole-person education" outlined in "College English Curriculum Requirements (2020 edition)".

In summary, teachers' adoption of translanguaging resources reveals a hierarchical structure of purposes, progressing from "foundational support" to "process enhancement" and finally to "literacy development". The underlying logic is student-centered, constructing a coherent learning path from knowledge internalization to literacy development through the integrated adaptation of resources. Thus, translanguaging transcends being a mere teaching technique and emerges as a significant agentive strategy for teachers to achieve systematic instructional design within complex classroom contexts ^[7].

5. Conclusion

Focusing on College English teachers at Xizang University, this study systematically investigated the classification and purposes of their translanguaging. The findings reveal that teachers' translanguaging consists of linguistic, embodied and semiotic resources. Moreover, their employment demonstrates a clear hierarchy of purposes, extending from the foundational level of providing language acquisition support and adapting to students' learning needs, to the process level of activating classroom interaction and optimizing teaching efficiency, and ultimately aiming at the explicated goals of cultural transmission and literacy development. Theoretically, this study constructs a framework for translanguaging resources and reveals the systematic hierarchy of their purposes, deepening the understanding of translanguaging. Practically, it provides a reference for teachers to reflect upon and optimize their teaching, and suggests that teacher education should emphasize developing teachers' ability to integrate diverse translanguaging resources. However, this study has limitations, including a single source of participants, a limited observation period, and a lack of data from the student perspective. Future research could expand the sampling to different regions and incorporate students' achievement data and feedback to further explore the relationship between translanguaging and teaching effectiveness, thereby deepening the research on foreign language teachers' translanguaging in universities within ethnic minority regions.

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Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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