

Translanguaging in action: a single case study of pedagogical acts in a newcomer classroom

ISSN 2657-9774; <https://doi.org/10.36534/erlj.2026.04.06>

Jinhua Wang *, Socorro G. Herrera **, Kendra Herrera***

*Topeka High School/Kansas State University, USA; jinhuaawang@ksu.edu

**Kansas State University, USA; sococo@ksu.edu

***Kansas State University, USA; kdherrer@ksu.edu

Abstract

In response to the growing need for equity in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms, this single-case study investigates how a middle school ESL teacher in a rural Midwestern setting enacted decolonial and situated language approaches — specifically pedagogical translanguaging and Biography-Driven Instruction (BDI) — to support newcomer students in diverse classrooms, fostering equity, inclusiveness, engagement and intercultural competence. Centering students’ biopsychosocial histories, the teacher integrated dynamic, contextual translanguaging and BDI strategies to challenge monolingual, deficit-based paradigms, legitimize students’ cultural backgrounds and full linguistic repertoires, and cultivate equitable, inclusive learning spaces where language, identity, and academic content converge. Three central themes emerge: (1) navigating ideological tensions between prescribed curricular structures and asset-based, humanizing education; (2) reimagining instructional patterns through intentional and strategic translanguaging as decolonial and identity-affirming praxis; and (3) transforming BDI-informed translanguaging practices to empower student voices and choices while promoting engagement, academic rigor, and learner agency. Findings demonstrate how strategic, intentional translanguaging affirms learner identities, fosters engagement and academic rigor, enhances linguistic development, and promotes social-emotional wellbeing. The study also highlights tensions between curriculum expectations and culturally responsive teaching, and the complexities of implementing translanguaging and BDI within monolingual ideologies and limited institutional support. This study offers practical insights into culturally responsive instruction and curriculum design that weave language, content and social-emotional learning, positioning translanguaging as both a curricular stance and a transformative tool for reimagining newcomer education through decolonial, asset-oriented, biography-informed, and humanizing practices.

Keywords: *translanguaging, Biography-Driven Instruction, pedagogical translanguaging, strategic translanguaging, newcomers, cultural responsiveness, relevance of instruction*

Introduction

The increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in K-12 public schools across the United States necessitates comprehensive teacher preparation, ongoing professional development and responsive instructional approaches to meet the multifaceted needs of Emergent Multilingual Learners (EMLs), especially newcomer students who are simultaneously navigating linguistic, academic and sociocultural transitions. Newcomer students arrive with complex biographies shaped by migration experiences, multilingual repertoires, and diverse educational trajectories. Despite these rich resources, newcomer programs in the U.S. have historically operated under deficit-oriented paradigms, positioning EMLs as linguistically and academically disadvantaged due to limited English proficiency (Elshafie & Zhang, 2024). These programs often prioritize rapid English acquisition and expedited program exit, overlooking the rich linguistic, cultural, and cognitive assets that multilingual learners bring to the classroom.

Traditional English as a Second Language (ESL) programs frequently emphasize monolingual English development and standardized curricular expectations, leaving limited space for students’ lived linguistic practices and sociocultural knowledge. As a result, recent arrivals are mainly placed in classrooms that lack the scaffolding necessary to support meaningful access to grade-level curriculum (Kalocsányiová, 2017). Consequently, these

students are likely to experience marginalization, reduced access to rigorous instruction, and diminished opportunities for identity affirmation, and a weakened sense of belonging within the school context.

Such educational conditions are not incidental but are deeply rooted in historical ideologies of language and schooling. Monolingualism has long functioned as both an educational norm and a political project, particularly within school systems shaped by colonial language hierarchies and assimilationist ideologies (Li, 2023). Traditional models of bilingual education have often conceptualized language learning through additive frameworks that view languages as separate and bounded systems to be acquired alongside one another (Cummins, 2000). However, recent sociolinguistic scholarship challenges these assumptions by arguing that multilingual individuals draw upon integrated and dynamic linguistic repertoires to make meaning across contexts (García & Li, 2014; Li & García, 2022). From this perspective, languages are not discrete and autonomous systems but interconnected resources that multilingual learners use fluidly in communication and learning.

Translanguaging theory emerges from this reconceptualization of multilingual language practices. Translanguaging refers to the dynamic and strategic use of a learner's full linguistic repertoire to communicate, construct meaning, and engage in learning (García & Li, 2014; García et al., 2017). Rather than viewing multilingualism as interference or deficiency, translanguaging recognizes multilingual language practices as valuable semiotic resources that enable learners to cognitively engage with academic content and social interaction. Within ESL and newcomer classrooms, translanguaging pedagogies have been shown to enhance comprehension, facilitate content learning and foster collaborative, humanizing learning environments in which students' linguistic knowledge becomes a shared resource rather than a barrier (García et al., 2017).

While translanguaging provides a powerful theoretical lens for reframing multilingual language education, its pedagogical potential is further strengthened when incorporated with instructional frameworks that center students' lived experiences. Biography-Driven Instruction (BDI) (Herrera, 2010, 2016, 2022) offers such a framework by foregrounding learners' biopsychosocial histories as central to instructional planning and classroom practice. Rooted in the concepts of funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018), BDI situates students' identities, languages, cultural experiences, and migration histories as essential resources and as a springboard for teaching and learning. Rather than treating these experiences as supplemental to academic instruction, BDI encourages teachers to intentionally connect academic content to students' biopsychosocial histories in order to support rigorous learning and meaningful classroom participation. Through strategies that leverage students' linguistic and cultural assets, BDI promotes instructional practices that foster engagement, belonging, and agency among multilingual learners.

Although translanguaging and biography-driven frameworks have been widely discussed in multilingual education scholarship, limited studies have closely examined how these frameworks are enacted through everyday pedagogical practices in newcomer classrooms. Understanding how teachers intentionally and strategically leverage students' full linguistic repertoires and biopsychosocial histories in real classrooms therefore remains an important inquiry. This study addresses this gap through a qualitative single-case study that examines how biography-informed translanguaging practices function as pedagogical acts within a newcomer ESL classroom. Specifically, this study explores how these translanguaging practices support students' access to comprehension and academic mastery while affirming their linguistic and cultural identities and sustaining their engagement in learning.

Research purpose and research questions

The purpose of this study is to examine how one middle school newcomer teacher strategically and purposefully enacts pedagogical translanguaging and BDI to support her students. Pedagogical translanguaging and BDI serve as both pedagogical approaches and theoretical frameworks that guide this study, providing a lens for the analysis of the teacher's decision-making. Specifically, the study explores how translanguaging, informed

by students' biopsychosocial histories, shape instructional patterns, student engagement, and academic rigor. The following research questions guide this study:

1. What translanguaging practices are enacted by the teacher when designing and delivering instruction for newcomer students?
2. How do these translanguaging practices reflect the biopsychosocial histories of the newcomer students?
3. What functions do these translanguaging moments serve in fostering an inclusive classroom ecology?

Theoretical background

Translanguaging, both as a theoretical framework and pedagogical approach, offers a compelling alternative for opening inclusive learning spaces by acknowledging learners' full linguistic repertoires and leveraging their prior experiences and identities regardless of educational context (García & Li, 2014). The concept 'translanguaging' originated in the context of Welsh language revitalization (Williams, 1994) where it was initially used to describe pedagogical practices that encouraged students to use multiple languages for learning and communication in daily life. Later, informed by related concepts such as *linguaging* (Swain, 2006) and *multicompetence* (Cook & Wei, 2016), translanguaging evolved into a practical theory of communication and cognition that transcends disciplinary and linguistic boundaries (Li, 2018).

Over the past decade, translanguaging has become one of the most influential concepts in applied and sociolinguistics with focus on its pedagogical applications, theoretical foundations and/or associated classroom practices (García & Li, 2014; Li, 2018). Importantly, translanguaging is more than just code-switching; it refers to "the dynamic and functionally integrated use of different languages and language varieties, but more importantly a process of knowledge construction that goes beyond language(s)" (Li, 2018, 15). Translanguaging recognizes meaning-making occurs as multilingual individuals orchestrate multiple linguistic and semiotic systems—multisensory and multimodal—toward the fluid integration of diverse skills and resources within a single communicative event (Li, 2018; Zhu et al., 2020). During communication, a translanguaging space is "created by and for translanguaging practices" (Li, 2011, 1223), where learners' histories, identities, ideologies, experiences and cognitive capacities converge. This space enables language users to integrate various dimensions of their personal histories, lived experiences, environments, beliefs, ideologies, linguistic resources, and cognitive capacities into coherent and purposeful communication. Therefore, translanguaging practices embody identity construction, knowledge representation, subjectivity expression while also fostering spontaneous acts of creativity and criticality in meaning-making processes (Li, 2018, 2022).

García's foundational work on 'translanguaging' (2009) underscores the importance of incorporating students' first languages (L1) into classroom instruction (García & Li, 2014). Extensive research has since documented the pedagogical benefits of translanguaging ranging from leveraging learners' full linguistic repertoires to support academic learning (García et al., 2017) to increasing multilingual students' engagement and improving learning outcomes (Uddling & Warren, 2023). Translanguaging practices have also been shown to enhance meaning-making processes and affirm students' linguistic and cultural identities (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022), while also expanding peer interaction and collaboration in multilingual classrooms (Tai & Dai, 2023).

Pedagogical translanguaging is a theoretical and instructional approach that aims to improve language and content competences in school contexts by drawing on resources from the learner's whole linguistic repertoire. Studies across multiple disciplines have documented its effectiveness in supporting students' academic development in science (Fine & Braaten, 2024; Uddling & Warren, 2023), social studies (Schlepppegrell et al., 2024), English language arts (González & Machado, 2022; Hansen-Thomas et al., 2020), and social-emotional learning (Song et al., 2022). Collectively, these studies illustrate the power of pedagogical translanguaging to increase student engagement and promote learners' social-emotional wellbeing, language development and academic outcomes. Although researchers advocate the inclusion of students' L1 in classroom learning (Cummins, 2017), questions remain about how teachers can best enact translanguaging practice within classroom interaction and

instructional decision-making (Hansen-Thomas et al., 2020). Further research is also needed on how translanguaging functions in social and relational dimensions of classroom community (Poza, 2019).

Despite the growing body of literature on pedagogical translanguaging, relatively little research has investigated how teachers enact translanguaging in newcomer ESL classrooms, particularly in rural Midwestern contexts. This study addresses that gap by exploring how a middle school newcomer ESL teacher reimagines the educational space and disrupts the traditional paradigms of language instruction by responding to students' trajectories through culturally and linguistically responsive practices grounded in students' *'biopsychosocial histories'* (Herrera, 2022). Students' biopsychosocial histories — including their identities, migration experiences, languages, and prior educational backgrounds — inform instructional decision-making that acknowledges and leverages learners' assets to advance learning. Anchored in Biography-Driven Instruction (BDI) (Herrera, 2010, 2016, 2022), the teacher intentionally deconstructs instructional models that have historically placed multilingual students at a disadvantage. Through the strategic use of pedagogical translanguaging, she fosters student engagement, supports academic development, and attends to learners' social-emotional well-being. By centering learners' full identities, lived experiences and intellectual capacities, the teacher challenges deficit-based models of language education. Translanguaging is thus utilized as a pedagogical tool to empower students to reach their academic potential while attending to the full scope of their identities, histories, and intellectual capabilities.

Through pedagogical translanguaging, the teacher reimagines newcomer students as capable and resourceful learners while orchestrating meaningful student engagement with prescribed curriculum. However, it is important to note that the theoretical frameworks adopted here are not presented as unproblematic or universally effective. Translanguaging and BDI operate within institutional structures that continue to privilege monolingual norms and high-stakes accountability. The present study therefore examines not only the affordances of these approaches but also the ideological and practical tensions that arise when a teacher attempts to enact them inside a prescribed curriculum.

Methodology

Case study

A qualitative single-case study (Yin, 2018) was designed to examine how one middle school ESL teacher enacted pedagogical translanguaging informed by Biography-Driven Instruction (BDI) in a newcomer classroom. The single-case approach was selected to allow for an in-depth, contextualized analysis of everyday pedagogical decision-making and classroom interaction within a specific institutional and demographic setting. The case was embedded within a larger longitudinal ethnographic project conducted across eight elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school in a rural Midwestern school district located near large-scale farming, ranching, and beef-packing industries. The district's student population was predominantly Hispanic (82%), followed by White (14%), African American (1.7%), and Multiracial (1.5%). Newcomer enrollment remained relatively stable each year due to ongoing migration patterns.

From the larger pool of participating educators, one teacher was purposefully selected as the focal participant because of her extensive experience working with newcomer students and her documented use of BDI strategies. The unit of analysis was the teacher's instructional practices and the classroom interactional ecology she co-constructed with her students.

Research context and participant

The focal classroom was a middle school sheltered ESL English Language Arts (ELA) class serving recently arrived newcomer students who were simultaneously navigating linguistic, academic, and sociocultural transitions. The class included 15 students in grades 7-8. The primary first languages (L1) included Spanish and Indigenous Central American Languages such as K'iche and Mam as well as African languages (including Swahili), Kichwa, and Farsi. Most students had been in the United States for less than two years. Instruction was delivered

primarily in English, with the teacher drawing strategically on Spanish and multimodal resources to support comprehension and participation. The class operated as a sheltered English setting within a larger middle school that also served longer-term multilingual students.

The teacher participant, referred to by the pseudonym Ms. Dolores, is a bilingual educator fluent in Spanish and English. Her own biopsychosocial history includes seasonal migration and multiple relocations during childhood. She began her career as a paraeducator supporting newcomer students for five to six years, later worked as a substitute teacher in newcomer settings, and subsequently completed her bachelor's degree in order to gain greater instructional autonomy. At the time of the study she has been working at the school for approximately eight to ten years in various roles and was teaching full-time in the newcomer program. Her personal and professional trajectory informed an ideological stance toward asset-based, humanizing pedagogy and a willingness to negotiate prescribed curriculum in light of students' linguistic and cultural resources—a stance examined in detail in the Results section.

Data collection

Data were collected over 16 weeks in Spring 2025 during the 2024-2025 school year through multiple complementary sources to enable triangulation: class observations, semi-structured interviews, classroom discourse transcripts and student artifacts.

Three full-class observations were conducted and each lasted approximately 80 minutes. Observations focused on instructional design, language use, teacher-student interaction, and student engagement. Detailed field notes were taken, and selected segments of classroom discourse were audio-recorded (with consent) and later transcribed, with timestamps retained to preserve sequential context. Two individual interviews were conducted with Ms. Dolores (totaling approximately 100 minutes). Interview protocols explored her pedagogical decision-making, her understanding of students' biopsychosocial histories, her enactment of BDI strategies, and the tensions she navigated between mandated curriculum and asset-oriented practice. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Verbatim transcripts of key instructional episodes (including teacher prompts, student responses in Spanish and English, and collaborative talk) were generated from the audio recordings. Additional artifacts included student-generated notes, Linking Language charts, vocabulary sheets, and other multimodal products produced during observed lessons.

Together these data sources allowed the research team to examine both the teacher's stated rationales (interview data) and the actual enactment of translanguaging practices in real time (observation and discourse data).

Data analysis

Data analysis proceeded in iterative stages. First, observation field notes and transcripts were reviewed to identify discrete instructional episodes that contained transparent instances of pedagogical translanguaging. These episodes were time-stamped and excerpted for closer examination. Second, In Vivo coding (Stringer, 2014) was applied to preserve participants' own language and perspectives. Third, pattern coding (Saldaña, 2013) was used to group recurring practices and tensions into larger categories. Fourth, focused coding (Saldaña, 2013) refined these categories into the three overarching, analytic themes presented in the Results section: (1) navigating ideological tensions, (2) reimagining instructional patterns, and (3) transforming BDI-informed translanguaging practices.

Throughout the process, analytic memos documented emerging interpretations and explicit links between data excerpts and the three research questions. Particular attention was paid to Research Question 2 (how translanguaging practices reflected students' biopsychosocial histories) by tracing concrete connections the teacher made to students' prior knowledge, cultural references, migration-related experiences, and preferred modes of expression. Small analytic vignettes were then constructed to illustrate the strategic yet organically

occurring nature of the teacher's translanguaging practices while retaining the sequential and interactional texture of classroom events.

Subjectivity of the researchers

The three authors bring diverse ethnocultural backgrounds (Asian, Caucasian, and Hispanic/Latina) and extensive professional experience supporting culturally and linguistically diverse students, including newcomers. Two authors are bilingual (Spanish and Chinese as heritage languages); the third is a native English speaker with intermediate Spanish proficiency. One author was working directly with newcomer students at the time of the study. One author has taught in ESL/EFL contexts and one holds administrative experience at the secondary level. Two researchers led primary data collection; all three participated in analysis and interpretation. The team remained reflexive about how their own linguistic and professional histories shaped both data collection and analytic decisions.

Assurance of confidentiality and ethical issues

Given that this qualitative study involved human participants, the researchers followed the established standards of ethical conduct and ensured the protection of participant's identity and well-being. Appropriate Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained prior to the start of the study, and informed consent form was secured from the participant. The research site, all individuals, and any affiliated institutions were not revealed; a pseudonym was used for the participant to protect anonymity. The participant was informed that she could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and was encouraged to raise any questions or concerns throughout the research process. We approached the participant's lived experiences with respect and care, acknowledging the integrity of her voice and interpreting her narratives without judgement. In alignment with Creswell's (2007) guideline of "giving back to the participant for their time and efforts" (p. 44), we expressed sincere gratitude for the participant's willingness to share her experiences with BDI-informed translanguaging practices. Furthermore, we remained attentive to the participant's health, emotional well-being, and intercultural sensitivity.

Results and analysis

The findings shed light on how one middle school newcomer teacher, Ms. Dolores, enacted Biography-Driven Instruction (BDI) and pedagogical translanguaging within a newcomer classroom. Three overarching themes emerged from the analysis of interview transcripts, classroom observation field notes, and time-stamped discourse transcripts: (1) navigating ideological tensions between prescribed structures and asset-based, humanizing education; (2) reimagining instructional patterns through intentional and strategic translanguaging; and (3) transforming BDI-informed translanguaging practices: pathways to empower student voices and choices, promote engagement, rigor, and agency.

In this study, *humanizing education* refers to instructional practices that treat students as whole persons whose linguistic, cultural, emotional, and intellectual resources are recognized as central to learning rather than as deficits to be remediated (Bartolomé, 1994; Salazar, 2013; Peercy et al., 2025). Consistent with recent scholarship on humanizing pedagogies for multilingual learners, such practices center the resources of students and their families, position learners as subjects rather than objects of instruction, and challenge institutional structures that constrain educational decision-making about multilingual students (Peercy et al., 2025; Peercy et al., 2024). Humanizing practices therefore include intentional efforts to affirm identity, invite multimodal expression, connect academic content to students' lived experiences, value what students can do with the cultural and linguistic resources they bring, promote respectful and trusting teacher-student relations alongside academic

rigor, and create low-risk environments in which students can participate using the full range of their communicative resources (Salazar, 2013; Viesca & Commins, 2025).

Navigating ideological tensions: prescribed structures versus asset-based, humanizing education

One central theme was the teacher's navigation of ideological tensions between a standardized, often monolingual curriculum and her commitment to an asset-oriented, humanizing pedagogy for newcomer students. These tensions were shaped by her own biopsychosocial history and were addressed through deliberate advocacy of BDI strategies within prescribed structures.

Teacher's biopsychosocial history as ideological positioning

Field notes and interview data documented that Ms. Dolores is a bilingual educator whose personal history includes seasonal migration and multiple relocations across states. She grew up watching her parents struggle with language barriers so she wanted to make an impact — big or small — in every student that crossed her path. In an interview she explained how this history positioned her against deficit-oriented institutional norms,

I was a para for newcomers first...until I decided to become a substitute teacher with newcomers... then I decided to go back to school and get my bachelor's. I worked with newcomers and right now I'm still with the newcomers. I wanted to go back to school because as a para, you see the needs. But you are just a para. You don't get to decide what to do. You don't get to decide, like what strategies to use or how to modify that...So going back to school, I knew that I will have a curriculum, but I will get to decide how to teach them... I love newcomer students. They come to the country and they want to learn. They are open and they bring so much different variety of cultures. You know it's just... being able to help them adjust to this country.

(Interview data)

This narrative reveals an ideological stance that frames newcomer students as culturally rich, motivated, and intellectually capable — an asset-based perspective that stands in contrast to deficit-oriented, mandated curriculum. Rather than accepting a deficit view of limited English proficiency, Ms. Dolores positioned herself as an agent who would negotiate prescribed curriculum in order to acknowledge students' assets. Her earlier experiences of limited professional autonomy shaped her commitment to leveraging the resources that newcomer students bring to the classroom, informed her strategic use of translanguaging as a tool to support newcomer students in navigating unfamiliar linguistic, cultural, and educational system, and further strengthened her determination to exercise pedagogical agency once she became a certified teacher.

Advocating the use of BDI within curricular constraints

Classroom observations and interview data show that Ms. Dolores treated BDI as a purposeful, practical response to the ideological tension between fixed standards and asset-based, student-centered practice. A concrete manifestation of this tension was the pacing guide. As a relatively new classroom teacher, she initially feared falling behind,

I think, at first, I was just struggling with the pacing guide... I don't want to fall behind or not be into, especially as a new teacher. I don't want to get in trouble... But I don't find it a challenge anymore. I just like it's a necessity. It's something that I'm going to do. And if it makes me fall behind, we will find a way to get back on track... I like [the strategies], I'll implement them in anything.

(Interview data)

Instead of positioning herself opposing to the standard curriculum, she contrasted her stance with that of some longer-serving colleagues, who, in her observation, maintained more rigid, one-size-fits-all approaches,

Probably the simplest thing [is to] just get to know your students, have that willingness to change, because a lot of teachers that have been teaching for years do not have that willingness to change and to adapt to the new people coming in, you know, the new languages coming in, they feel like they don't know.

(Interview data)

Here 'a lot of teachers' refers to colleagues she observed who resisted adaption. Her 'willingness to change' reflected an ideological commitment to biography-informed instruction rather than mere curricular flexibility.

She also illustrated how BDI strategies allowed her to reconstruct prescribed content. For her, knowing students' linguistic and cultural biographies was a prerequisite for rigorous instruction. Referring to the 'Linking Language' activity during an interview, she stated,

If I was just to go off curriculum, I don't think students would learn. I have to implement something. That's why I like the [BDI strategy] ---- 'Linking Language', because it's hands on, you know, and they're moving around... and I can ask them questions. ¿Por qué piensas eso? ¿Y qué está pensando aquí? [Why do you think that? And what is he/she thinking here?] So you know and a lot of them are able to explain... and then I'll explain: ¿Recuerdas cuando viste esta foto? ¡Oh sí sí sí! [Do you remember when you saw this photo? Oh yes, yes, yes!]... it's always... it keeps their brain moving.

(Interview data)

Here the tension is not simply framed curriculum versus care, but about a deconstruction and reconstruction of prescribed curriculum through biography-informed design. Ms. Dolores described the BDI strategy 'linking the language' activity as a 'tool in the hand' to initiate conversations and inquiry, inviting students to move, ask questions and translanguage with prompts such as *¿Por qué piensas eso? Y qué está pensando aquí?* Through doing various translanguaging activities, she explained she was able to 'get more out of it than just teaching the vocabulary'. Such translanguaging practices thus made the curriculum content more interactive, cognitively engaging and relevant to their lived experiences rather than vocabulary-focused drill practice and compliance. Together, these practices expanded opportunities for meaning-making, critical thinking, and authentic participation.

Observation field notes confirmed that during Linking Language activities students physically moved, pointed to images, and responded in Spanish or mixed Spanish–English while Ms. Dolores prompted them in both languages. These moments transformed vocabulary instruction from passive reception into interactive meaning-making grounded in students' prior visual and experiential knowledge. Through BDI strategies and BDI-informed translanguaging, she further argued that investing time in students' biographies increased rather than decreased instructional efficiency,

I feel like that [Linking Language] activity in itself brings out the best in every student, you know, in different ways, but it brings out the highest level... I feel like BDI makes it easier in the end for you to teach...if you take that time to get to know the kids.

(Interview data)

Finally, Ms. Dolares extended the value of BDI beyond the newcomer classroom,

I wish everybody would do [BDI] strategies... It does not just benefit newcomers. It does not just benefit the bilinguals. It benefits all of those students... It helps everybody, it helps all of the kids.

(Interview data)

Collectively, the interview and observational data demonstrate that Ms. Dolores treated BDI not as an add-on but as a strategic means of negotiating ideological tensions while sustaining academic rigor, expanding student engagement, increasing cognitive complexity, elevating instructional effectiveness and promoting academic outcomes. By framing BDI as being beneficial to all learners, Ms. Dolores challenged the positioning of newcomer supports as a temporary intervention and repositioned biography-driven instruction as both a pedagogical approach and a practical strategy for navigating instructional constraints while sustaining a student-centered,

asset-based, and humanizing learning environment. In alignment with Herrera et al. (2017), her consistent implementation of BDI strategies addressed students' biopsychosocial realities and cultivated a classroom culture that has the transformative power to affirm identities, intensify engagement and elevate cognitive rigor. Meanwhile, this finding extends the literature by situating BDI within broader systemic power dynamics, illustrating how teachers can employ biography-driven practices as a strategic negotiation of ideological tensions between standardized curriculum and humanizing education.

Reimagining instructional patterns: intentional and strategic translanguaging as decolonial praxis and identity-affirming practices

Across observed lessons, Ms. Dolores systematically and strategically utilized both instructional translanguaging (teacher-initiated use of students' full linguistic repertoire to make content accessible) and interactional translanguaging (responsive use of Spanish and English during classroom dialogue). These practices reflected deep responsiveness to students' biopsychosocial histories and linguistic repertoires, positioning language as a resource and/or an asset rather than a barrier.

Strategic use of instructional and interactional translanguaging

In one observed lesson, newcomer students engaged with an English-language narrative text (preceded by a short video the previous day) through a blend of strategic questioning, guided discussion and purposeful translanguaging. Ms. Dolores began by activating prior knowledge. The lesson focused on comprehension of story elements and academic vocabulary. Classroom discourse transcript (5:12-7:58) shows the following sequence. Teacher asked, "*What did you understand from the video?*" Students responded primarily in Spanish; and their responses were affirmed rather than corrected. Then the teacher reformulated key ideas in English. She continued with experiential prompts, "*In what situation will you get bored? What happened when you get bored? What do you do when you get bored?*" Students offered single English words and elaborated in Spanish, demonstrating partial comprehension and meaningful participation.

When giving procedural instructions in English, brief Spanish clarifications were strategically incorporated as needed, rather than as absolute translation, when students' facial expressions or incomplete responses indicated potential misunderstanding. This intentional use of translanguaging created space for students to draw on their full linguistic repertoires to access content and engage with instruction. As the lesson progressed (8:00-10:02), Ms. Dolores used the five W's to scaffold students' recall of story details and deepen comprehension. During the subsequent reading segment (10:03-13:20), she seamlessly alternated languages while connecting story content (canned food, cooking) to students' everyday experiences. Field notes recorded that students' participation increased once these experiential links were made, and several students volunteered extended responses in Spanish that demonstrated comprehension of the English text.

By linking academic material to familiar contexts, Ms. Dolores fostered cognitive engagement and conceptual accessibility, creating a supportive learning ecology where language functioned as a bridge rather than a barrier. These patterns illustrate instructional translanguaging used to scaffold access and interactional translanguaging used to validate and extend student contributions. Her dynamic and reciprocal use of translanguaging practices affirmed the value of students' first languages (L1) and cultures as resources for building linguistic proficiency and academic competency.

Intentional and student-initiated collaborative translanguaging

Later in the same lesson (27:02 onward), Ms. Dolores prompted students to move from verbal explanation to written production, "*Remember the first time...? You explained it earlier. Now can you write it?... Today, new information*" (27:23). During small group work (27:45), students asked vocabulary-related questions in Spanish. Ms. Dolores first responded in Spanish to secure comprehension, then restated the explanation in English,

modeling purposeful bilingual mediation. From 28:03 to 29:10, students used tablets to add notes to a shared linking language chart, predominantly in Spanish, demonstrating engagement with academic tools and content. At 29:50, Ms. Dolores regrouped students and directed them to compare responses with new partners. Field notes and transcript excerpts show students moving between groups, reading one another's notes, and adding further comments—again largely in Spanish—while remaining on task. When Ms. Dolores joined groups, she posed reflective questions in English; students replied in Spanish yet completed the academic task accurately, indicating that comprehension and cognitive engagement were not dependent on English-only production.

The seamless integration of translanguaging, technology and peer collaboration created a space where student voices were honored, student agency was intensified and flexible language use was supported. These documented sequences validated students' full linguistic identities while supporting academic learning, indicating that translanguaging was both teacher-orchestrated and student-initiated, fostering a classroom ecology where flexible language use enhanced conceptual understanding and sustained participation.

Transforming BDI-Informed translanguaging practices: pathways to empower voices and choices, promote engagement, rigor and agency

Understanding students' lived experiences is essential for creating culturally responsive, equitable and empowering learning environments. When translanguaging was explicitly informed by students' biographies, it functioned as more than a linguistic scaffold; it becomes a means of amplifying student voice, increasing engagement, maintaining academic rigor, and fostering agency.

Translanguaging informed by students' biographies empowers their voices and choices

At 23:50 in an observed lesson, Ms. Dolores introduced the academic vocabulary item *"excruciatingly."* A student first offered an incorrect Spanish definition. Rather than correcting the student immediately, Ms. Dolores activated a shared cultural reference, *"Remember there was a soccer player?"* (24:22). This reference immediately captured students' attention and created an emotional connection. Students' facial expressions shifted to recognition; one student responded in Spanish. Ms. Dolores affirmed the response and clarified, *"Something that feels really bad? Yeah, like really, really bad pain! You remember it because of the picture."* She then introduced the word *"catastrophic"* (25:11). When a student volunteered *"earthquake"* in English as an example, she validated the example and supplied a brief Spanish explanation to ensure full comprehension across languages.

These moments indicate how translanguaging and familiar references can help bridge students' lived experiences with academic vocabulary, enhancing comprehension and engagement. In a subsequent interview, Ms. Dolores articulated the underlying principle,

I've learned to look at what everybody brings to the table. Like which class is capable of doing this. Which class I can push to do this extra... with the curriculum I have to hit certain targets still. But I'm able to make it my own and make it their own, you know, to where they are. Just...make them feel comfortable and using the information that they know to bring it back to the story, to relate it back to what we're learning... That's how they remember.

(Interview data)

The classroom episode and the interview reflection together show how biography-informed translanguaging positioned students' prior knowledge and cultural references as legitimate entry points into academic vocabulary, thereby expanding the range of voices that could contribute meaningfully and cultivating a classroom community where language, identity, and learning were deeply intertwined.

Translanguaging informed by students' biographies promotes engagement, rigor and agency

Interview and observation data indicate that BDI-informed translanguaging broadened student participation by acknowledging students' biographies and legitimizing multiple modes of expression. Ms. Dolores observed,

It just opens up that door for them to participate more...I feel like linking language has benefited all of my students, whether they can speak the language, whether they can draw me a picture, whether they can express themselves in whatever way they want.

(Interview data)

Ms. Dolores' practice demonstrated that when students are invited to speak, draw, and freely express themselves, communication extends beyond linguistic interaction to include all possible meaning-making forms. This asset-driven approach valued multilingual learners' full repertoires, allowing them to use various formats such as language, pictures, and other representations that made sense to them as valid pathways for constructing meaning. Providing such flexibility in knowledge production validated students' identities and significantly increased engagement. This finding resonates with Herrera's (2022) assertion that utilizing BDI along with validation of learners' first languages (L1) and lived experiences informs and enriches all forms of communication within school contexts.

Ms. Dolores further described allowing students to write in Farsi or Swahili on Linking Language charts and then asking them to explain: "Now what does this say?" —sometimes attempting to repeat the words herself, eliciting laughter and relationship-building. While students naturally transitioned between languages without worrying about being judged, academic rigor remained central to Ms. Dolores' instruction. Success was not simply confined to standardized test score or English-only production, but defined by students' comprehension and ability to apply knowledge. Ms. Dolores shared,

At the end of the day, they're language learners, English language learners, if they can understand from notes and from text that they have pictures that they've drawn, sentences that they've made, if they can understand that, comprehend that, to use it on a test, I feel like that's a win.

(Interview data)

Field notes confirmed that students frequently combined spoken Spanish or English with drawings and written notes on Linking Language charts. From her description, students were able to transfer their notes, texts, and personal representations when they were preparing for tests. Comprehension is prioritized over rote memorization. Multiple forms of student artifacts functioned as reliable scaffolding for conceptual understanding rather than multiple choices on standardized assessments. Translanguaging thus enabled access to rigorous learning without lowering the academic standards. Eventually, increased learner agency became visible both in student behavior and in the teacher's reflection on the shift from teacher-directed to student-generated meaning-making. Ms. Dolores stated,

I think it makes a big impact in moving forward with their own learning. Oh, I can produce this. So next time they want to tell me what they think, next time they want to tell me what it means... their involvement becomes a lot bigger once they're producing their own stuff... compared to when I tell them, oh pues escriben esto [oh well, write this], you know, now what do you think this means?

(Interview data)

A concrete example of agency emerged through flexible grouping. Ms. Dolores described a student (Annalise) who was highly capable yet slow in reading and writing and initially appeared withdrawn. After the teacher and a colleague observed background knowledge and participation patterns and reconfigured groups, the student assumed a leadership role,

Now she's like the leader... She will raise her hand... She understands everything I'm telling her... We've seen a big difference in the way she... in what she's producing, how much she's participated and how much help she's providing everybody else now.

(Interview data)

Shifting from teacher-centered instruction to student-generated responses redistributed teacher authority and positioned multilingual learners as active knowledge contributors. Collectively, the data show that when

translanguaging was anchored in students' biographies, the classroom ecology shifted toward greater student ownership of learning while preserving cognitive demand.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study address the three research questions by demonstrating how Biography-informed translanguaging shaped instructional practices and classroom ecology for newcomer students.

Firstly, the teacher strategically enacted both instructional and interactional translanguaging through flexible language use across students' first and second language (L1 and L2), bilingual explanations, multimodal resources, and opportunities for students to interact through speaking, writing, and visual representation. These practices, documented in classroom discourse transcripts and observations field notes, align with translanguaging pedagogy that perceives multilingual learners' full linguistic repertoires as valuable resources for meaning-making and engagement (García & Li, 2014; Hamman-Ortiz et al., 2025).

Second, these translanguaging practices reflected students' biopsychosocial histories by integrating their first languages (L1), cultural backgrounds, prior knowledge, lived experiences and preferred forms of representation into small-group conversations, collaborative discussions, and whole-class interactions. By opening the classroom to learners' backgrounds beyond school walls, the teacher created a socially responsive environment where diverse identities and experiences could be acknowledged and leveraged (Lee & Li, 2025). These practices also resonate with Herrera's (2022) emphasis on incorporating learners' linguistic and cultural assets into instruction to support each learner's individual needs.

Third, the observed translanguaging moments functioned as a catalyst for fostering an inclusive classroom ecology in which student engagement, academic rigor and learner agency were cultivated. Through validating multilingual expression and multimodal participation, the teacher created a space in which students could contribute meaningfully to academic learning while strengthening their confidence and sense of belonging (Hamman-Ortiz et al., 2025). As Li (2023) argues, translanguaging pedagogy becomes transformative not only through the intentional design of flexible translanguaging practices but also by foregrounding learners' personal trajectories, perspectives, and voices into classroom activities.

A distinctive contribution of this study is the role of the teacher's own biopsychosocial history. Ms. Dolores's experiences as a child of seasonal migration, her early work as a paraeducator with limited instructional autonomy, and her subsequent decision to become a certified teacher who could "decide how to teach" shaped her ideological stance and her willingness to negotiate prescribed curriculum. Her bilingual proficiency and personal familiarity with the challenges of linguistic and cultural transition enabled her to recognize students' assets quickly and to deploy translanguaging in ways that felt authentic rather than additive. This finding underscores that teachers' own biographies are not peripheral; they can become powerful resources for enacting decolonial, asset-based practice, particularly when educators share linguistic or migration-related experiences with their students.

Theoretically, this study contributes to translanguaging scholarship by showing how translanguaging practices become more empowering and transformative when deliberately informed by students' biopsychosocial histories through Biography-Driven Instruction (BDI). The findings extend translanguaging theory beyond the use of learners' full linguistic repertoires by emphasizing the importance of learner biographies in shaping meaning-making and fostering inclusive classroom ecologies.

Pedagogically, the findings suggest that teachers can better support newcomer students by intentionally and strategically integrating flexible language use, multimodal resources, and culturally responsive connections into both lesson planning and instructional delivery. Teacher education and professional development should prepare educators to view students' biopsychosocial histories as assets and to design biography-informed activities that actively engage students in learning. Additionally, curriculum design should offer translanguaging opportunities

and multimodal pathways that allow students to demonstrate comprehension and critical thinking beyond traditional monolingual norms.

Meanwhile, the single-case nature of the study limits generalizability. Classroom organization for newcomer students varies widely across national and local contexts. In many international settings, access to bilingual teachers is limited, newcomer cohorts are highly heterogeneous in language background, and institutional policies strongly favor rapid transition to the dominant language. Under such conditions, the specific forms of translanguaging observed here—frequent, fluid use of a shared L1 by both teacher and students—may not be immediately replicable. Practical obstacles include insufficient professional development on translanguaging, high-stakes accountability systems that prioritize monolingual assessment, and lack of curricular materials designed for multilingual meaning-making. Nevertheless, the core principles illustrated in this case—centering students’ lived experiences, legitimizing their full linguistic repertoires, and treating identity affirmation as integral to academic rigor—remain transferable. Educators in monolingual or linguistically diverse settings can still draw on students’ prior knowledge, invite multimodal expressions, and create space for students to use the languages they know as resources for learning, even when the teacher does not share the same languages.

To conclude, this study underscores the potential of BDI-informed translanguaging to reimagine newcomer education through decolonial, asset-based, and humanizing perspectives. By centering students’ linguistic and cultural assets — and by recognizing that teachers’ own biographies can serve as resources for this work — educators can cultivate safe, meaningful, and inclusive classroom ecologies in which multilingual learners’ voices, identities, and agency are valued and sustained. The research findings provide a practical reference for educators seeking to use translanguaging to enhance the responsiveness and relevance of instruction for bilingual and multilingual learners and to create classroom communities where every student is recognized as a full participant.

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