Translanguaging and literature: Enhancing language proficiency in the BFI classroom

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ABSTRACT

The French Education system has a long history of integrating foreign curricula within its own curriculum through specific programs such as the International French Baccalaureate (BFI) (formerly known as the OIB – International Option of the Baccalaureate). This article aims to present some practical ways of introducing translanguaging activities in the classroom to help students' linguistic skills to bloom. This article seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice by presenting real class situations where students are encouraged to use translanguaging to build and strengthen their linguistic skills in a plurilingual context of shared quadrilingual education.

Keywords: Plurilingualism, Languages, Translanguaging, Education, Interlanguaging.

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1 INTRODUCTION

I have been teaching in French schools abroad for about 10 years now, in Kenya, China, Uruguay and Spain. These schools are part of the network of French schools abroad run by the AEFE (Association des Ecoles françaises de l'étranger – French schools abroad association). I teach and train teachers in a context that is highly plurilingual and pluricultural as well. The French education system, be it in mainland France or abroad, is facing the same challenges as its European counterparts amid harsh criticism and low results in the world education rankings[2]. This is especially the case with language teaching which has now become a clear indicator of a system's success within the context of globalisation. How can we strengthen our students' linguistic capabilities to reach the European ideal of turning young Europeans into trilingual citizens[3]? The French Education system has worked on redesigning its decade long OIB program (Option Internationale du Baccalauréat) to upgrade it from a bilingual to a trilingual and potentially quadrilingual program with binational agreements involving foreign entities and their partners. The French school of Barcelona in Spain has launched such a program, now called BFI (Baccalauréat Français international[4]). The school has chosen to open a trilingual version (French, Spanish and English) and a quadrilingual version (French, Spanish, English and Catalan). Through language and literature classes, students build their cultural and linguistic skills turning away from the traditional teaching of languages in isolated unilingual blocks to a more translinguistic approach aiming to foster the students' capacities to increase their linguistic skills through comparison and contrast.

2 METHODOLOGY

Through activities and recordings of class discussions, I collected some interesting instances of translanguaging (using a multiplicity of shared languages to achieve a given task) and interlanguaging (using a multiplicity of languages to achieve a given task through conscious comparative and contrastive techniques) activities which will be used for this short article. The BFI program is taught in 1ere (Year 12) and Terminale (Year 13). Students choose to join the program to enhance their already developed language skills and reinforce a plurilingual education. The class is mostly based on language and Literature content.

3 RESULTS

In many bilingual or plurilingual educational systems, the national curriculum is taught in two or three languages. These plurilingual sessions are taught in isolation, without real co-construction or institutional coordination between them. Each language is learned separately, without systematic cross-referencing or reinforcement of skills, limiting potential synergies. While some connections do occur, they are often incidental rather than intentionally integrated into a structured pedagogical approach. As a result, certain skills are repeated from one language to another without optimising the learning process. It is therefore essential to move from a side-by-side monolingual model to an

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[2]Martin, Emmanuel, France's Education crisis (May 30th 2023) - https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/france-education-crisis/.

[3] Mother-tongue +2 project - https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/142/language-policy.

[4]Source: https://www.lfb.es/le-bac-francais-international/.

approach that fosters the co-construction of plurilingual skills, enabling a richer and more effective weaving of language learning. 'Considering learners as plurilingual and pluricultural beings implies allowing them, if necessary, to use all their linguistic resources, encouraging them to see similarities and regularities as well as differences between languages and cultures.' (CEFR, 2018)

Dominique Bucheton in her multi-tasks agenda emphasises the importance for teachers of "weaving" everything students learn. 'Weaving is the teacher's concern that leads them to connect the different parts of the lesson. This concern is realised in two main ways: highlighting the introduction and ensuring a smooth transition at the end of each unit.' (Bucheton, 2014)

Bucheton's concept can help build plurilingual curricula and ensure that students' learning is woven around common objectives in a seamless progression where the concepts and skills are articulated around the progressions in the different languages. This is where translanguaging comes into play. Translanguaging in the classroom embraces and values the linguistic realities of our students, reflecting their daily interactions in the school but also outside the school. Moving from a **plurilingual** class, where languages coexist separately, to a **plurilingual** class, where languages interact fluidly, allows students to draw on their full linguistic repertoire. In our BFI context, where Spanish, Catalan, English, and French are official languages alongside other home languages such as Dutch, Arabic, Italian, and Japanese, rigid notions of a single mother tongue become irrelevant. Likewise, the concept of a fixed language of schooling becomes blurred as students navigate and construct knowledge across multiple languages. Recognising and fostering translanguaging supports deeper learning, identity affirmation, and meaningful communication. Let's now have a look at how this can be implemented in the classroom.

Example 1: translation and trans / interlanguaging:

The BFI classroom is a space where language is approached through the study of literature. The students already have a basis of the languages present in the program, but they tend to have one or two stronger languages on which to build their linguistic skills in the other languages of the program. In my year 12 class, we studied Ann Radcliffe's novel, A Sicilian Romance, a gothic novel which the students must study for their final exam. The students are split into language groups for a translation exercise (Appendix 1). They choose the target language to translate the passage we have chosen. Some students join the group of their native language (Student 3.1, 3.2, 3.4). Others like student 3.3, has joined the native Italian speakers' group despite a B1 level in Italian, a country he resided in for two years. As for group 1, all the students composing the group are native Catalan speakers. Phase 1 consists of utilising the shared languages (English and the target language) and to discuss translation results amongst experts. Students tend to speak in the target language and express in this target language the product of their understanding and comprehension of the original English text:

Ferdinand listened to this narrative in silent horror. He remembered the temerity with which he had dared to penetrate those apartments—the light, and figure he had seen—and, above all, his situation in the staircase of the tower.

Every nerve thrilled at the recollection; and the terrors of remembrance almost equalled those of reality. (Ann Radcliffe, A Sicilian Romance – Chapter III)

Phase 2 consists of an **interlanguaging** activity where students reposition themselves into plurilingual groups and explain their translation choices in a language the whole group might not understand. This is an intense moment of translanguaging where students use the language the most easily accessible to the group and to the task to express themselves. The discussions are of the highest values as students explain the potential differences in the strategies to adapt to the language. Contrasting and comparing languages and strategies (word choice, change in the grammatical category, punctuation change…) becomes a way to better understand the original text. This collaborative activity uses interlanguaging and translanguaging to enable students to tap into their language skills to access the implicit of the original text but also the understanding of the implicit by the rest of the group.

Example 2: Essay writing on Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë

Year 13 students also work on Literature and essay writing and while working on an essay on Jane Eyre, I organised a group work for them to share ideas and let them use whichever language suited their purpose. In this situation, they tend to use one of the four languages shared in our school: French, Spanish, English or Catalan. Here is a sample of a group discussion on this particular task:

[…]

Student 1: il est marié à Bertha Mason pour maintenir l'argent dans sa famille.

Student 2: Yeah but for Bertha Masson, it's the same thing. Like, I don't think she was in love with him, no?

Student 3: Creo que sí… Se supone que elle si es in love y que el, no.

Student 4: Are we taking it too far if we say that Bertha Mason al principio lo quiere, sabes, love, pero que lo de duty es como vengarse?

Student 1: Si es como vengarse!

Student 3: O me estoy volviendo loco… Vengarse de que?

Student 4: Vengarse de él, de lo que le ha hecho…

Student 2: non mais je ne crois pas qu'elle l'aime toujours…

Student 3: si parce qu'elle ne part pas du castle. Elle est prisonnière de son amour, tu vois.

Student 5: sauf quand Grace Poole elle est drunk.

Student 2: Moi ça je l'ai plutôt lu en mode, elle veut la prévenir de ce qu'il va se passer…

Stdeunt 5: Oui et quand elle voit que c'est trop tard, elle se suicide…

Student 2: yo creo que, pour ça elle se crame vivante…

Student 5: Oui beh elle se suicide…

Student 3: pero eso, lo ponemos o no?

Languages used by the students: English, Spanish, French

This moment of translanguaging is still somewhat frowned upon in the French language classrooms. It is however a clear moment of shared understanding for students who share multiple languages. In this activity, students work in small, **plurilingual groups** to analyse a complex issue, such as Rochester's love for Bertha Mason or the sublimity of Gothic castles. They are encouraged to **use all their languages**—whether Spanish, Catalan, English, French, or other home languages like Dutch, Arabic, Italian, or Japanese—to clarify concepts. If a term or idea is difficult to express in one language, they can switch to another to refine their understanding. This deepens comprehension and allows for more nuanced perspectives, drawing from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

As students prepare their arguments, **translanguaging** fosters creativity by allowing them to select words or phrases from different languages that best capture their ideas. This flexibility expands their lexical choices and encourages innovative thinking in forming arguments.

During the debate, **translanguaging** strengthens group dynamics by ensuring inclusivity—students feel comfortable expressing themselves in their strongest languages. By pooling their linguistic resources, they construct a richer, more comprehensive discussion that reflects the diversity of their classroom.

3.1.1 Appendix

Appendix 1: Translation exercise – Year 12 – A Sicilian Romance – Anne Radcliffe

Student 1.1, Student 1.2, Student 1.3, Student 1.4, Student 1.5 - Catalan En Ferran va escoltar aquesta narrativa en horror silenciós. Va recordar la temeritat amb la qual es va atrevir a penetrar aquells apartaments— la llum, i la figura que havia vist— i, per sobre de tot, la seva situació a l'escala de la torre. Cada nervi era exaltat per la recol·lecció ; i els terrors del record quasi igualaven als de la realitat.	Group 1
Student 2.1, Student 2.2, Student 2.3, Student 2.4 - Spanish Fernando escuchó esta narrativa en un silencio horroroso. Recordó la temeridad con la cual se había atrevido entrar en estos apartamentos – la luz, y la figura que había visto – y, sobre todo, de su situación en la escalera de la torre. Cada nervio se exaltó ante el recuerdo; y los terrores de sus recuerdos casi ecualizó aquellos de la realidad.	Group 2
Student 3.1, Student 3.2, Student 3.3, Student 3.4 - Italian Ferdinando ascoltó la narrazione in un silenzio pieno di orrore. Ricordó la temerità con la quale aveva osato penetrare quegli appartamenti - la luce, e la figura che aveva visto - e, soprattutto, la sua situazione nella scalinata della torre. Ogni nervo rabbrividó al ricordo, e i terrori della sua memoria bilanciavano quasi con quelli della realtà.	Group 3

Student 4.1, Student 4.2, Student 4.3, Student 4.4 - Spanish Fernando escuchó esta narrativa en un silencio horroroso. Recordó la temeridad con la cual había atrevido a penetrar estos apartamentos–la luz, y la figura que había visto–y, sobre todo, su situación en las escaleras de la torre. Cada nervio se exaltó ante su memoria; y los terrores del recuerdo casi igualaron los de la realidad.	Group 4
Student 5.1, Student 5.2, Student 5.3 - French Ferdinand écoutait cette histoire dans un silence effrayant. Il se rappelait la témérité avec laquelle il avait pénétré ces appartements — la lumière et la silhouette qu'il avait vues — et surtout, sa situation dans les escaliers de la tour. Chacun de ses nerfs était excité par ce souvenir; la terreur de celui-ci égalisait presque celle de la réalité.	Group 5
Student 6.1, Student 6.2, Student 6.3 - Spanish Fernando escuchó esta narración sumido en un silencioso horror. Recordó la temeridad con la que se había atrevido a penetrar esos apartamentos - la luz y la silueta que había visto - y por encima de todo su situación en la escalinata de la torre. Cada nervio temblaba ante los recuerdos, y el terror de sus memorias prácticamente igualaba la realidad.	Group 6
Student 7.1, Student 7.2 - French Ferdinand écoutait cette histoire dans un silence horrifiant, il remémorait l'audacité avec laquelle il avait osé pénétrer ces appartements - la lumière et la silhouette qu'il avait vue - et surtout sa situation dans la cage d'escaliers de la tour. Chaque nerf s'excitait en y pensant et les horreurs du souvenir atteignaient presque celles de la réalité.	Group 7
Student 8.1 - Japanese フェルディナンドは怖い静けさの中その話を聞いた。彼は容赦なくその部屋の中へ入っていったことを思い出し一見た光と怪しい人物ーその上、彼が今いた塔の階段での状況。 フェルディナンドはその記憶にぞくぞくし、そして、思い出した怖さは現実のに近かった。	Group 8

Student 9.1 - Dutch Ferdinand luisterde met stille afschuw naar dit verhaal. Hij herinnerde zich de moed waarmee hij het had gewaagd die kamers binnen te dringen—het licht en de figuur die hij had gezien—en vooral zijn situatie op de trap van de toren. Elke zenuw trilde bij die herinnering; en de angsten van de herinnering waren bijna even sterk als die van de realiteit.	Group 9

4 CONCLUSIONS

Translanguaging in the classroom is not just a pedagogical tool; it reflects students' linguistic realities and a way to enhance their cognitive and communicative abilities. Moving from a side-by-side multilingual model to a plurilingual and translinguistic approach fosters deeper understanding, creativity, and inclusivity. Through activities such as translation exercises, interlanguaging discussions, and multilingual essay writing, students learn to navigate languages fluidly, leveraging their entire linguistic repertoire. By embracing translanguaging, we bridge the gap between theory and real-world communication, preparing students for a globalised world where linguistic flexibility is a key asset.

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