

Perceptions and Practices of Translanguaging in Chinese University EFL Classrooms

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Abstract: This study investigates teachers' perceptions of the use of L1 in EFL classrooms and examines how teachers apply translanguaging in the classrooms. Research on translanguaging as pedagogy has increased in recent years in different countries; however, there is limited studies on EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of translanguaging in China, especially at university level. Thus, this study highlights the need to explore this area by adopting mixed methods research. Findings revealed that nearly half of participants held a positive attitude towards L1 but there was a compromise between their perceptions and practices.

Keywords: Translanguaging; EFL; Perceptions; Practices

1. Introduction

English teaching is important in China's higher education system for both English major students and non-English major. Recently, the monolingual language teaching approach at university has encountered with challenges from other pedagogical approach such as translanguaging, and researchers believe the use of students' native language/L1 can facilitate the target language (English) learning in classrooms (Liu & Fang, 2020).

Recent years has saw an increasing body of research regarding translanguaging in Chinese context (e.g. Zhang, 2021; Tai & Li, 2020; Wang, 2019); and Fang & Liu, 2020). Although research on teachers' beliefs and practices on translanguaging in university context is not a completely new research area, there are some studies that have investigated such topic in different contexts (e.g. McMillan & Rivers, Nambisan, 2014; Yuvayapan, 2019). However, there is still a gap in the existing research regarding the use of translanguaging pedagogy in China, especially focusing on university EFL classrooms for English-major students and their teachers.

Thus, the study aims to provide insights into research on translanguaging in China's tertiary education, to investigate university English teachers' perceptions of translanguaging as well as to their pedagogical practices in EFL classrooms. The study mainly addresses the following two questions:

RQ1: What are teachers' perceptions of translanguaging in Chinese university EFL classrooms?

RQ2: How do teachers apply translanguaging pedagogical practices in Chinese university EFL classrooms?

2. Literature review

2.1 Translanguaging

The term translanguaging was firstly coined by the Welsh educator Cen Williams in 1994, referring to pedagogical practices in which language input and output (English and Welsh) are different within a lesson or task. García (2012) defined the term translanguaging as the way bilingual people fluidly used their linguistic resources to make meaning and communicate without regard to named language categories. Translanguaging as an umbrella term for various means of incorporating language learners' entire linguistic repertoire to achieve communicative goals in various communicative contexts (García, 2012). Translanguaging has been defined as a flexible way in which bilinguals draw upon their multiple languages to enhance communication in the classroom, or as a means of including several languages in education (Duarte, 2019). In a word, one of the main features is that translanguaging enables all learners including monolinguals, bilinguals or multilingual, to use their whole linguistic repertoire to make dynamic social interactions.

Regarding the type of translanguaging, it is worth highlighting the distinction between pedagogical translanguaging and spontaneous

translanguaging. Pedagogical translanguaging refers to “the use of different planned strategies based on activating students’ resources from their whole linguistic repertoire” inside the educational context (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022, p.1), while spontaneous translanguaging refers to bi/multilingual usage that happens naturally where boundaries between languages are fluid and constantly in and outside educational settings (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022). In this study, the researcher will mainly focus on pedagogical translanguaging that happens in the classroom.

2.2 The role of L1

Translanguaging pedagogy emerged under the background of improving language learning for bilingualism/multilingualism (García & Lin, 2017), and allows teachers to use L1 in language teaching. It challenges the traditional view influenced by monolingualism that language learners use languages separately. It also disrupts the traditional isolation of languages in language teaching and learning (García & Lin, 2017). Regarding the use of L1 in the classroom, there are three positions proposed by Macaro (1997), including the virtual, the maximal, and the optimal. The ‘virtual position’ is a monolingual perspective that requires exclusive use of the target language. The ‘maximal position’ aims to maximize L2 use; it also recognizes the value of using L1 frequently in classrooms, especially for insufficiently proficient students. Lastly, the ‘optimal position’ is a multilingual perspective that stands for using multiple languages including L1 for specific contexts can facilitate and optimize effective language learning.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study adopts mixed methods, using both quantitative and qualitative method approaches to address the research questions holistically. Mixed methods can not only make separate contributions to the findings of the study, but also take full advantage of an integration of the findings (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Dörnyei (2007) also points out “the strengths of one method can be utilized to overcome the weaknesses of another method used in the study” (p. 45).

3.2 Data collection method

An online questionnaire (Qualtrics) is adopted to collect data from participants, as it provides a fast and straightforward way to construct and process participants’ data, and it is efficient to collect a large amount of information within a short time (Dörnyei, 2007). The questionnaire in this study consists of 5 main questions, with 33 sub-questions. It mainly replicates an existing questionnaire of Nambisan’s (2014) study, given reliability and validity (Bryman, 2012). However, questionnaires cannot probe deeply into a specific issue and cannot collect in-depth information. That is why the interview method is also adopted.

Interview method can yield in-depth information from interviewees about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and perceptions of some phenomena (Patton, 2002). A semi-structured interview is adopted in this study which provides a list of pre-prepared questions and prompts to help researchers conduct the interview smoothly. It is also flexible so that researchers can change or add questions according to participants’ responses

3.3 Procedure and sample

The questionnaire was firstly piloted with two pre-service teachers. The questionnaire was administered in three stages. Convenience sampling was adopted in first stage on participant recruitment due to the accessibility of participants who were university teachers during the researcher’ undergraduate study. Then teacher recruitment was conducted through the social media platform (Weibo) via simple random sampling as well as snowball sampling. Finally, a total of 57 questionnaires were collected, of which 52 were valid and 5 were invalid.

The interview was piloted with one pre-service teacher to measure the time span. The five formal audio interviews were conducted through online platform (WeChat). Generic purposive sampling was chosen in collecting interview data. 7 participants agreed to participate in the follow-up interviews who had previously completed the questionnaire. The researcher finally selected 5 out of 7. All the audio-recordings of interviews were transcribed into transcripts and translated into English.

3.4 Data analysis method

The quantitative data in the Qualtrics questionnaire was processed and analysed by SPSS (version 24), presenting descriptive statistics, such as mean value, minimum values, maximum values, standard deviation, and frequency (%) or the number of participants. The qualitative data was analysed by thematic analysis following the 6-step framework of Braun and Clarke (2006), which could “identify, analyse and report pattern or themes within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79).

4. Results and discussion

4.1 RQ1: Perceptions

4.1.1 Quantitative

In terms of teachers' general view on whether the use of L1 by students is beneficial in EFL classrooms. 48.08% participants (n=25) believed the use of L1 was beneficial, while 46.16% participants (n=24) thought it was detrimental. The percentage of teachers who perceived the use of Chinese is beneficial nearly equals to those who considered it detrimental.

About teachers' perception on the importance of students' use of L1, the result showed the results that: firstly, teachers thought it was important for lower proficiency students to use L1 to ensure class participation (Mean=3.33); secondly, teachers considered it was also important for students to provide peer assistance in L1 (Mean=2.83); thirdly, teachers agreed students to use L1 in explaining problems not related to content (Mean=2.63).

Regarding teachers' perception of the importance of their own use of L1, the results indicated that all the participants (n=52) believed that it was important for teachers themselves to use L1 when low English proficiency students cannot understand L2 (Mean=3.42), among which 51.92% regarded it as "Very important" and "Extremely important". They also thought L1 was important for "quickly clarify during activities", followed by "build bonds with students".

4.1.2 Qualitative

Theme 1: Relatively negative attitude towards L1

All the five teacher interviewees held a relatively negative attitude towards the use of L1 in English class. They believed the ideal situation for English major students was that they could use English fully to improve their target language learning proficiency. Even if students did not know vocabulary in English, they could paraphrase it. For example, here is the excerpt:

"maybe there is not a certain English word for Chinese local food '凉皮儿'. But I would say it's okay for them to just express that word. Like, what it means, how it can be used, or in what occasion people eat it." (T 5)

Theme 2: Students' English language proficiency

Although all the five teachers mentioned they would like to implement the English-only policy in class, they had to use L1 occasionally, as in reality it was impossible for teachers to use 100% English in class, especially with students of lower English proficiency. Teacher 2, who has teaching experience both at a top university and at an ordinary university, stated:

"My experience in the current university has a really big difference from what I experienced previously in XXX, because, you know, for previous students, the top university students, I use 100% English. They also have a high expectation on themselves ... But for my current students, if I use 100% English, they just stare at me and say nothing." (T 2)

Theme 3: Confusion on appropriate amount of L1 use

Two teachers expressed their concern over the appropriate amount of L1 used in the classroom. They both believed L1 could be used by teachers or by freshmen in the first-year study. However, they were worried about if they gave students freedom to use L1, students would rely heavily on it. This is in line with Cook' (2001) and Turnbull' (2001) argument that there is a place for L1 in classrooms but how much means an appropriate amount.

"I have been puzzled by a problem in this semester, you know... I have given everyone the certain freedom to use Chinese, but now they become relying on Chinese to express themselves...the question now is whether I can achieve the balance." (T 1)

4.2 RQ2: Practices

4.2.1 Quantitative

Concerning teachers' practices regarding students' use of L1, from high frequency level ("Most of the time" and "Always"), teachers encouraged students to use L1 in three main aspects: to enable participation by lower proficiency students (46.15%, Mean=3.16); to explain problems not related to content (35.29%, Mean=2.86); to provide peer assistance during activities (23.08%, Mean=2.67).

In terms of teachers' practices regarding their own use of L1, similarly, the top three aspects: 45.1% of participants used L1 frequently in helping low proficiency students (Mean=3.35); 25.49% participants adopted L1 in class in providing quick clarification during activities (Mean=2.80); and 25% of teacher participants used L1 in building bonds with students (Mean=2.79).

4.2.2 Qualitative

Theme 1: L1 input and L2 output

Three teachers mentioned they allowed students to utilize L1 in group discussion but need to present in L2. Thus, with teachers' permission, students used L1 in discussion with peers.

"they can speak Chinese occasionally when discuss with partners but...present the question in pure English." (T 3)

Theme 2: Using L1 for concepts

Teacher 5 said that if students had difficulty in expressing certain Chinese terms in English, students are allowed to speak in L1.

But this teacher also argued students needed to find alternative ways to describe the term in L2 prior to L1.

“For example ‘one-child policy’, they didn’t know how to say it in proper English, so they just speak Chinese.” (T 5)

This is also in line with teachers’ actual practices, they used L1 to explain difficult concepts in content learning. As Teacher 1 stated:

“The concept of ‘utopia’, I just put such western concept in the context of China. I think this ‘utopia’ depicts a society that in China is like... what we call a paradise ‘世外桃源’. (T 1)

Theme 3: Classroom management

Three teachers used L1 to attract students’ attention for preventing students from feeling bored or falling asleep or maintaining class discipline. One study found teachers used L1 to create class rapport and bridge the distance by using L1 to tell jokes (Fang & Liu, 2020), which was not found in this study.

“Suddenly no one was responding, the students were quiet.” (T 1)

“...maintaining the class discipline or giving instructions in Chinese.” (T 3)

4.3 Discussion

This study found nearly half of participants held a positive attitude towards L1 in classroom according to the questionnaire, standing for ‘maximal’ position (Macaro, 1997), which means they agree to maximize L2 use and recognize the value of using L1 in classrooms. However, the interview results indicated participants were in the ‘virtual’ position (Macaro, 1997), holding a monolingual perspective that requires exclusive use of the target language. In addition, the quantitative findings indicated that what important aspects they percept would be in line with their teaching practices. However, the qualitative findings showed that there was a compromise between teachers’ perceptions and practices. That meant interviewees advocated the English-only policy, although they admitted the benefits of L1.

5. Conclusion

The study investigated teachers’ perceptions and practices of translanguaging in Chinese university EFL classrooms. This study gives more insight into translanguaging pedagogy in English classrooms by examining the research gap. However, it may still be challenging for teachers to use L1 in English classrooms due to the monolingual English-only belief. This study has limitations in sampling and sample size, so it is impossible to generalize the findings to other contexts for a broader population. Future study may overcome that problem and may explore how can translanguaging be used to support ethnic minority students’ learning in multilingual classrooms in China, to protect the minority local languages as well as their culture heritage.

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