

# Translanguaging in Adult Basic Education Worldwide

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There is an abundance of adult language learners worldwide, including an estimated 1.5 billion English language learners alone (British Council Statistics as cited in Beare, 2019). For adult immigrants in particular, acquisition of the language/s spoken in their host countries is expected for integration into the social and economic fabric of the country (Haznedar et al., 2018). For example, 37.5 million people living in the European Union (EU) were born outside of EU countries (European Commission, 2021) and at least 10 of these 41 member countries require that immigrants demonstrate a level of language proficiency of the host country before entering (Rocca et al., 2020). In the United States, adult English language learners (ELLs), most of whom are immigrants, make up 40% of learners in federally-funded adult basic education (ABE) programs (American Institutes for Research, 2016) and are expected to learn English “to be productive workers, family members, and citizens” (U.S. Department of Education, para. 1). Adult language policies worldwide propound the necessity of adults learning the language of the country in which they have resettled, and yet, this often comes “at the expense of these migrants’ home language or other languages they speak” (Haznedar et al., 2018, p. 156). Moreover, within policy and public discourse, the native languages of adult learners begin to become viewed as a barrier to their integration

into the country as opposed to an intellectual and personal strength (Polezzi et al., 2019). This inevitably leads adult language and literacy programs to view learners’ native languages from a similar deficit perspective (Haznedar et al., 2018).

As a response to global monolingual language policies, concepts have been developed to promote the importance, and even the necessity, of drawing on learners’ native languages to support the learning of an additional language. One concept that is particularly gaining notoriety in scholarship and practice within K-12 classrooms is the notion of “translanguaging.” This concept refers to the fluidity of language practices employed by multilingual speakers (García & Wei, 2014) and has grown significantly in recognition as it views one’s native language/s as an asset to their learning rather than a barrier (García & Leiva, 2014). This concept, however, remains largely unrecognized in educational policies and in instructional practices for adult language learners. It is similarly rare in scholarship exploring adult basic education and language classrooms globally. In the following review of research, I describe in more detail the concept of translanguaging and review the nascent literature connecting translanguaging to adult language and literacy learning worldwide. Additionally, I conclude by arguing for more work on translanguaging in adult language classrooms and policy globally.

## What Is Translanguaging?

Translanguaging, or “the act performed by bilinguals of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximize communicative potential” (García, 2009, p. 140) has become a vital concept in language and literacy theories and pedagogies. The term was originally coined by Welsh educator Cen Williams in the 1980s to promote the systematic use of two or more languages for teaching and learning (Lewis et al., 2012) and gained popularity in more recent books by Baker (2001) and García (2009). While “code switching,” a process where speakers go back and forth between languages, is a concept still used by numerous scholars and educators (Auere, 2010; Balam & de Prada Perez, 2017; Dobao, 2018), this connotes a monoglossic view of language in which each language has separate systems and uses in a multilingual person’s repertoire. Conversely, translanguaging suggests a heteroglossic notion of language speakers where multilingual speakers are concurrently drawing from numerous linguistic repertoires in a fluid fashion rather than switching from one linguistic “code” to another.

Translanguaging practices are more than a description of individual learner’s language practices, however. Translanguaging instructional practices can encourage learners to draw from their multiple linguistic backgrounds to legitimize these backgrounds and even serve as a form of decolonization of linguistic practices within and outside of the classroom (Hurst & Mona, 2017; Makalela, 2015). This focus on legitimization of adult learners’ linguistic repertoires is vital in deepening multilingual learners’ understanding of texts, fostering critical metalinguistic awareness, and expanding language learners’ confidence (García & Kleifgen, 2020). Even

more, multilingual abilities have become key in increasing human capital and earning potential for learners as knowing multiple languages has become an important asset in the global job market (Agirdag, 2014; Callahan & Gándara, 2014; Grin et al., 2011). Thus, multilingualism broadly, and translanguaging specifically, can and should be implemented into adult language programs to create spaces of democracy and social justice for all learners (Jurmo, 2021).

Translanguaging practices can be observed in numerous ways in ABE classrooms. In my own adult ELL classrooms, for example, when learning new vocabulary words, we compare the English translation of these words to those in the learners’ home languages to explore similarities in prefixes, suffixes and roots of multiple languages. I also recommend that learners who speak similar home languages discuss assignments in these languages to support the acquisition of English while also drawing on knowledge of their native languages. In another example, educators suggest encouraging online translation tools in class, promoting multilingual written and oral responses to class assignments, and supporting multilingual research on topics to gain information on the research topic while concurrently developing the language of focus (Hesson et al., 2014). These examples are fairly easy to implement but can lead to multiple linguistic, social, and individual benefits for learners.

And yet, although numerous scholars and practitioners agree on the importance of translanguaging practices in increasing learners’ literacy skills, empowerment, and language legitimation, almost all translanguaging research and practice centers on K-12 learners who are utilizing translanguaging in school (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; García et al., 2017; Reyes & Klein, 2010). The minimal translanguaging

research that goes beyond grade 12 is often situated in higher education contexts that center on the language practices of learners of “traditional” university ages (Canagarajah, 2011; Makalela, 2017; Mazak & Carroll, 2016

## Global Translanguaging Research

In a North American context, some scholars have explored the ways the translanguaging practices can be vital for supporting emerging readers and writers with their English literacy skills (Knowles, 2020), while others have reflected on instructors’ views and use of translanguaging practices in their adult language classrooms (Burton & Rajendram, 2019; DeMott-Quigley, 2018). DeMott-Quigley (2018), for example, argues that translanguaging practices within the classroom act as a cross-cultural exchange in which teachers and learners are learning from each other. Other U.S. scholarship on translanguaging in adult education spaces connects translanguaging to social justice and empowerment to reveal how translanguaging practices can be incorporated into culturally sustaining pedagogies for community-based ESL programs (Emerick, et al., 2020) and disrupt deficit views of multilingualism, particularly for older adults and refugees (Park & Valdez, 2018). These papers all support Auerbach’s (1993) contention that contemporary English Only political movements (as opposed to immersion models) impact adult English language classes and reinforce broader inequities linked to language and power. Moreover, they strengthen Flores’s (2014) contention that translanguaging can be a political act that directly pushes back against practices such as “English-only” policies enforcing language separatism.

Outside of North America, the majority of adult translanguaging scholarship is centered in

Europe, and particularly in Nordic countries. There is growing research, for example, situated in Swedish adult language and literacy programs that explores the use of translanguaging in both Swedish and English language instruction. Some of this research centers on the speech actions of Swedish immigrant language learners and argues that more explicit support for learners’ using their multiple linguistic repertoires would further strengthen their acquisition of Swedish (Wedin & Shaswar, 2022). Other research within a Swedish adult education context focuses explicitly on the translanguaging practices of teachers in the adult language classroom (Dahlburg, 2017; Rosén & Lungren, 2021; Shaswar, 2022). This research explores teachers’ various recognition and negotiation of translanguaging within their classrooms.

In a Norwegian adult education context, Dewilde’s (2019) and Beiler and Dewilde’s (2020) explore both Norwegian and English language learning within these adult language classroom spaces. Using the term “translingual” (often associated with Kellman, 2000, and Canagarajah, 2012) instead of translanguaging, authors examine the practices of translingualism in learners’ writing practices. Dewilde (2019) finds that the use of translingual approaches to writing and literacy “transcend individual languages and involve diverse semiotic resources in situated meaning construction” (p. 942). Beiler and Dewilde (2020) argue that by using translingual orientations to translate writing from one language to another, adult English language learners can leverage their linguistic repertoires in ways that teachers might not be able to support, thus leading to further learner agency.

Beyond a North American and European context, there is a scarcity of scholarship surrounding translanguaging in adult language and literacy within other global regions—particularly outside

of higher education institutions. Marino and Dolan's (2021) work on a language course for adult refugees in Uganda finds that by teachers enacting translanguaging pedagogies, adult language learners can develop both language skills and increased empowerment. Wimalasiri and Seals (2022) explore translanguaging in an online English language classroom in New Zealand and argue that although translanguaging is an effective teaching strategy, the instructor's use of this practice is not always aligned with social justice pedagogies. Turnbull (2019) looks at adult EFL learners' learning practices in Japan and finds that by removing notions of multilingualism as a barrier and enacting translanguaging practices, learners scored higher on language exams and produced more concise and well-formed essays. This research emphasizes the numerous ways in which translanguaging is and can be used in adult basic education and English language classrooms worldwide, while also highlighting the dearth of literature that still exists connecting adult language education and translanguaging practices globally.

## Moving Forward

As this review of literature emphasizes, the use of translanguaging in adult basic education and language classrooms can be a vital practice for numerous adult education outcomes.

Translanguaging within adult language classrooms can be used to support learners' speaking, reading, and writing practices; connect teachers and learners; and dismantle inequitable power dynamics between the teacher and learner. Further, translanguaging approaches to teaching and learning can empower adult learners to think of their diverse linguistic repertoires as assets to learning and even have the potential to contradict monolingual language policies reinforcing language separatism and language hierarchies. And yet, this review also highlights the need for more research on translanguaging practices worldwide.

Jurmo (2021), in a recent white paper on adult education and social justice, argues that adult education can and should be a tool to support democracy and social justice. Moreover, he contends that adult education classrooms should be a space where educators and learners alike can "mitigate the impacts of social injustices, navigate around those impacts, eliminate unjust policies and social practices, and create alternative ways of doing things that support social justice" (p. 6). By expanding research on the use of and possibilities for translanguaging practices in adult language classrooms worldwide, we as researchers, educators, administrators, and policy makers can potentially use this framework to further work toward these goals of democracy and social justice, both within adult language classrooms in the U.S. and language classrooms globally.



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