Beliefs of Students About Their Translanguaging Practices in a South African University M.H. Kepe

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Abstract

With the demise of apartheid following the advent of democracy in 1994, English language domination continues unabated in South African mainstream schools and institutions of higher learning. Consequently, the English language hegemony became a deficit to most students from less-affluent backgrounds who were required to learn the English language as the first additional. This situation follows as researchers agree that students learning English as First Additional Language (EFAL) battle with conceptualisation and struggle to classify added information at universities in South Africa. To help maximise the learners' and the teachers' linguistic resources in problem-solving and knowledge construction, this study explores the beliefs of students about their translanguaging practices during pre-writing at the University of Fort Hare, South Africa. The central question was: What are the students' beliefs about their translanguaging practices in a South African university? This case study focused on five thirdyear students from the Bachelor of Education Undergraduate Class. The participants range in age 18 to 35. The researcher is an insider, presenting English Methodology to these students. The study was conducted through the students' pre-writing process with the Gibbons Curriculum Cycle aid to collect data. Translatability theory as a theoretical framework informed the study. The study revealed that when translanguaging is adopted, it accommodates cultural and linguistic practices negotiation. It is informed by plurality to reflect a broad diversity of global settings, whilst accommodating successful communication, including in our language classrooms.

Keywords: Diversity, English hegemony, Gibbons Curriculum Cycle, pre-writing process, scaffolding, South African Language in Education Policy, translanguaging, translatability.

Introduction

Before the establishment of the 1948 system of apartheid in South Africa, there was a fierce recurring antagonism and competition between the two White (originally European) population groups, indicating the Dutch, Afrikaans L1 speakers (Afrikaner), and the English L1 speakers. From this feud of the 20th century derived an institutionalised education earmarked by either monolingualism or transitional bilingualism.

For White students, native language, instruction was universal. Students received all their education, including tertiary education, in either English or Afrikaans. In Black education, conversely, the "mother tongue principle" implied that children had to begin their schooling experience in their vernacular as the medium of instruction up to Standard 3 (Grade 5, the fifth year of schooling). From Standard 4 (Grade 6) to tertiary level, English became the medium of instruction (MoI) (Christie & Collins, 1982). Verwoerd, Minister of Native Affairs in 1953 and later Minister of Bantu Education, affirmed this notion when he said: "When I have control over native education, I will reform it so that Natives will be taught from childhood that equality with Europeans is not for them" (House of Assembly/ HoA 1953, p. 3585). Researchers agree that a move to English beyond Grade 4 corresponded with regular drop-in pass rates to a low 48.3% in 1982 and 44% in 1992 (Potgieter & Anthonissen, 2017). To this end, language became a political and social concern in South Africa. Recent studies confirm that non-English students do not achieve the same level of academic success as their native English peers. Consequently, many Grade 12 learners with reading or writing deficiencies possess the literacy levels of Grade 4 pupils (Horne, 2002). With the demise of apartheid following the advent of democracy in 1994, English language hegemony continues unabated in South African mainstream schools and institutions of higher learning. It has become a deficit to most students from less affluent backgrounds, learning the English language as a first additional language. This situation remains despite the status granted by the New Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act No. 200 of 1993) to provide official status – in the past granted only to English and Afrikaans - to the 11 major languages. The following are the 2011 percentage estimates of L1 speakers within the population: isiZulu (22%), isiXhosa (16%), Afrikaans (13.5%), Sepedi (9.1%), English (9.6%), Setswana (8%), Sesotho (7.6%), Xitsonga (4.5%), Siswati (2.6%), Tshivenda (2.4%), and isiNdebele (2.1%) (Census South Africa, 2012, p.24). The aforementioned linguistic deficit is aggravated because most teachers still rely on the traditional methods of teaching from primary level, secondary level and up to a tertiary level in South Africa, resulting

in students learning through a continuous process of rote memorisation (Sivasubramaniam, 2004). This paradox motivated this research.

Rationale

The chapter emerged because many students in the English methodology class of which I am teaching appeared to struggle with conceptualising their courses and added information, impacting negatively on their duly performed (DP) as they score low marks. Consequently, the institution marks most students as DP. This means they cannot write the exam for that course, even if they write the examination, their paper would not be marked. A duly performed refused (DPR) on the students' record counts as a fail. It contributes a zero towards their average in their year or degree. Even though some students in this class would have DPR due to missing tutorials or handing in work late, it appears the main cause for the DPR was a lack of philosophical interpretation and conceptualisation when research indicates that the action signalled the EFAL incompetence. For the aforementioned reasons, to discuss the target language impediments, this study explores the beliefs of students about their translanguaging practices at the University of Fort Hare, South Africa with the aid of Gibbons' scaffolding curriculum cycle (2002).

Several studies were conducted on translanguaging as a concept and its benefits to our language classroom practice. There appears to be a divergence concerning the beliefs of students about their translanguaging practices during pre-writing in this discipline. This study is an attempt to narrow that divergence. Addressing this would involve, amongst other things, depicting how translanguaging as a scaffolding theory and a teaching method was used by the study group aided or articulated by Gibbons' scaffolding curriculum cycle (2002). The central question directed is: What are the students' beliefs about their translanguaging practices in a South African university? This practice was evident in this study, comprising a diverse body of participants who migrated from various provinces in South Africa and across Africa to study at the University of Fort Hare (UFH).

Setting

The study location is the University of Fort Hare (UFH) in South Africa. The UFH was established in 1916. it is Africa's oldest traditionally Black African university (though now, it accepts students of all races). It is in Alice, a small town in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. It lies on the south-western bank of the Tyhume River, west-northwest of East London, at an

elevation of 1,720 feet (524 m). The participants are from multicultural backgrounds, resembling the diverse demographics of the population of the UFH. The targeted population participated in the study, comprising five Bachelor of Education Undergraduate first-year students. The participants range in age from 18 to 35. I am an insider, teaching them English Methodology. I sought to explore the beliefs of students or the study group about their translanguaging practices in class. The study group (participants) comprised a diverse body of students who speak all 11 South African official languages as aforementioned. I selected the participants based on their responses in classroom practice during the pre/initial stage of the writing process about translanguaging. This was achieved by scaffolding the participants' prewriting and language use employing Gibbons' scaffolding curriculum cycle. The significance of the curriculum cycle is discussed in the Methodology section. The pre-writing process involved bilingual discussions, sometimes direct corrective/remedial and metalinguistic feedback, employing a pyramid/mind-mapping, which assisted in brainstorming (Fig. 1, Fig. 2, Fig. 3, Fig. 4, & Fig. 5). I collected direct testimonies from these practices about translanguaging literacies from the participants to evaluate their interaction and my teaching practice. The permission to conduct the study was granted at the UFH. This manuscript depicts the participants' shared experiences, which they can use through their linguistic resources to initiate and decode new information and understandings. The sharing of experiences was evident in this study as the participants grappled with new content to realise effective language and literacy development by using their first languages as a basis of experience during classroom discourse.

Provided the aforementioned, I am proposing translanguaging as a scaffolding theory and a teaching method to help the participants decode new concepts and deeper understandings. I combined translanguaging and scaffolding since they are inextricably linked. The curriculum cycle, conversely, would aid articulate translanguaging and its application regarding the three phases of the activity cycle, such as a) building knowledge of the text, b) modelling text and c) joint construction. Since at the core of this manuscript is translanguaging practices by the participants, I employed Roald Dahl's short story, 'The Landlady' (1959/1991), as a stimulus to illustrate the strength of translanguaging during pre-writing of a narrative genre employing the Gibbons Curriculum Cycle. This is again discussed in the Methodology section. This study examined the beliefs of the study group (students) about their translanguaging practices as a teaching method in a South African university to create an interdependent learning environment where the first language of a student could be a strong outlet to build from and to decipher the

new information presented in the target language. I used the students' pre-writing with the aid of the Gibbons Curriculum Cycle to solicit students' beliefs about translanguaging and to examine data. My role as participant-observer and the significance of pre-writing is explained later. Next, I explain the Gibbons' Curriculum Cycle (2002):

Gibbons' Curriculum Cycle (2002)

Gibbon's Curriculum Cycle involves the following:

- Building the background knowledge of the text
- Modelling text
- Joint construction
- Independent writing

I employed this curriculum cycle to emphasise its interconnectedness with translanguaging. Similar to translanguaging, the curriculum cycle emphasises the importance of building background knowledge of the content in EFAL where the participants appeared to lack in vocabulary. Such a practice may help students, providing the ability to develop control of a spoken language, considering that knowledge before any systematic system focuses on specific genres (Edgar & Padgett, 1995). After perusing various case studies about translanguaging practices across South Africa and globally, I learnt that whilst no approach can be directly transferred from one local context to another, we can all establish something useful to learn from the various contexts. Nunn (2011) refers to this situation as 'translatability', contending that skills need reinforcement, reapplication, and reinvention within a framework that both requires and encourages their use. Having reviewed the literature on translanguaging practices in South African and international context, I am convinced that translatability is a relevant theoretical framework that can serve as a link in situating the research question for this study. The research question directed, "What are the beliefs of students about their translanguaging practices in a South African university?" Provided this central question, I define translanguaging, to show its relevance to the South African Language in Education Policy (LiEP).

Translanguaging

In line with Kepe (2017), Creese, and Blackledge (2010), observed that the term 'translanguaging' is a descriptive label for specific language practice, aiming to help maximise the learners', and the teachers' linguistic resources in problem-solving and knowledge

construction. The education department as an entity is tasked, amongst other things, to promote multilingualism, develop the official languages mentioned earlier, and respect for all languages used in the country (Department of Education/DoE, 1997). In the South African context, the LiEP is cascaded through the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS, 2012). This manuscript, therefore, focuses on the agency and identity of the first language as a device to learn a second or foreign language (EFAL in this case). Below, I define observation and prewriting as quintessential devices of collecting data in this study.

Observation

As a participant-observer in this study, I had to play various roles, employing various techniques, including my five senses, to collect data. Notwithstanding my involvement with the study group, I had to constantly bear in mind my primary role as a researcher and remain neutral and impartial when collecting and analysing data relevant to the phenomenon under investigation (P.A. Adler & P. Adler, 1994).

Pre-writing

Narrative genre provides teachers with an opportunity to focus on vocabulary, an oftenneglected area of grammar purposefully and with a provide context (Edgar & Padgett, 1995). Hammond (2001), emphasise scaffolding of pre-writing structure, language use and a cognizance of the importance of affording students a voice.

Methodology

The design was a qualitative ethnographic case study, whilst the paradigm was interpretive. The setting was the UFH, Alice Campus, in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 35. I was a participant-observer, therefore, an *insider*, teaching them English Methodology and Philosophy of Education. I observed the participants' translanguaging practices during our sessions from which I collected first-hand data (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1983). This study is attributable to many students in the Philosophy of Education and English Methodology classes, both of which I am also teaching, who struggled with conceptualising the new, philosophic, and often abstract pedagogical notions, impacting negatively on their DP as they scored low marks. Consequently, the institution marks most of the students as DPR, which means they cannot write the exam for that course; even if they do write the examination, their papers would not be marked. This situation motivated this study, which advocates a reexamination of translanguaging as a valid and essential component in this context. As a

participant-observer in the study group, I became aware of my role by remaining unbiased when collecting and analysing data pertinent to the problem under investigation (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1983). I selected the participants based on their concerning translanguaging practice in class. I conducted brief interviews with them, which were scaffold concerning their pre-writing and language use, aided by the Gibbons Curriculum Cycle through bilingual discussions, sometimes direct corrective/remedial and metalinguistic feedback, mind-mapping/brainstorming, practical guidance and co-construction. The methods employed to collect data included observation, pre-writing, and interviews. I believe that reflexivity should be included for the usage of diverse designs for data collection and for triangulation during knowledge generation to ascertain credibility and trustworthiness (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The ethical protocols were observed as I received ethical clearance from the UFH. The study group granted their consent to participate in the study. All participants were updated regularly on the research activities.

Results

I conducted this investigation to identify if, while translanguaging, the study group could benefit from using their stronger language to develop the weaker (EFAL in this case) and stimulate a deeper understanding of meaning, which may cause increased proficiency in the target language. The theme is divided into three: a) the beliefs of the study group about translanguaging, b) the translanguaging practices of the study group, and c) observation. I interviewed the five members of the study group about their beliefs on translanguaging as a theory and teaching method. They all consented to me using the interview data. There was no request for anonymity; instead, participants were keen to have their names and photographs included if needed, in any report or conference report. I, therefore, provide the names of the study group (also student teachers), as follows: Portia Lerato Jafter, Mlahleki Vuyokazi, Sephoko Siviwe, Mhlekude Asiphe, and Xhotyeni Luyolo. Each member devises their own strength.

The beliefs of the study group about translanguaging

Excerpt 1 (Jafter)

Jafter studied her primary school/elementary level and secondary school using English as L1. She only spoke the vernacular languages at home [Sesotho and isiXhosa]. She had to teach herself how to speak and write both in Sesotho and isiXhosa. She underscores her proficiency

in English as having helped her to learn other languages. Her mother also played a vital role in understanding the difference amongst the languages [English, isiXhosa and Sesotho]. Her mother helped her distinguish concerning how various alphabets sound in each of those languages. For example, the "C" in isiXhosa does not sound the same in English. Whilst the Sesotho Language does not use the 'C', instead, it uses 'K' with a different sound from 'C'. Jafter states that even though her mother encouraged multilingualism, she advocated for better proficiency in English concerning speaking, reading, and writing above her aforementioned vernacular languages.

To be honest, when I first heard about translanguaging I was a bit sceptical. I won't lie and I just thought it was similar to code-switching and did not want to accept that it was different and so I questioned its relevance, however, when I started reading more about it and saw how it was used in the past by different researchers, I realised that this is something I used my entire life and it is a simple concept really and naturally occurring. As quite often, we use the existing language to decode and understand the new language, so, it is a teaching strategy that I would encourage my learners to use because it has worked for me even though I did not know what it was then, it can work for others too who wish to try it.

Comments

The above observations signal the stereotypes about using the African languages as media of learning and teaching or as school subjects.

Excerpt 2 (Mlahleki)

Mlahleki spoke isiXhosa at home but she also speaks Setswana, isiZulu, and isiXhosa [vernaculars] eloquently. With friends, she speaks isiXhosa and English because they speak various languages, using English as lingua franca.

When I first heard about translanguaging, I thought it was about codeswitching, but as I learnt more about it, my attitude changed, resulting in a different perspective about it. Now, I understand that translanguaging is about using the mother language as a resource to learn a new language, English in my case. As a prospective teacher, I imagine a classroom situation where one's learners are allowed to engage in a classroom discourse not limited to English only but also using their mother languages to brainstorm through exploratory talk. However, the subject matter discussed whether in pair work or group should be presented in the target language [English].

Comments

It is possible in a monolingual teaching situation for students to answer questions or author an essay about a subject without fully understanding it (Baker, 2011).

Excerpt 3 (Sephoko)

I never thought that languages can coexist in the classroom situation concerning having the liberty to express your views where English domination is controlled. I never knew that learners mother languages can be used in the group discussions, through exploratory talk in English Class. The only way I knew was that learners should be taught in English as prescribed by the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS). But after I heard about translanguaging, I began to understand that learners' mother languages can be used through exploratory talk but presented in the target language (presentational talk).

Comments

The South African LiEP Act, 1996 recognises that cultural diversity is a valuable national asset (Doe, 1997). In the South African context, the LiEP is cascaded through a Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS, 2012).

Excerpt 4 (Xhotyeni)

As a prospective teacher, my problem with translanguaging is when learners will be writing tests and exams where there are no peers to discuss with, will they not be limited in unlocking new information in English as a result of being accustomed to their native languages?

Comments

The Department of Education (DoE, 1997), as an entity is tasked, amongst other things, to promote multilingualism, developing the official languages, and respect for all languages used in the country.

Excerpt 5 (Mhlekude)

Well, one thing I realised about translanguaging is that actually, we were unconsciously using this method. But now we are allowed to utilise it efficiently.

Comments

Students 'sneak in' their mother language during class discussions and this report should be observed as a way of recognising the learners' L1s through translanguaging.

Discussion

When I introduced translanguaging as a theory and a teaching method to the participants, they confused it with code-switching. Jafter had this to say:

To be honest, when I first heard about translanguaging I was a bit sceptical. I won't lie and I just thought it was similar to code-switching and did not want to accept that it was different and so I questioned its relevance, however, when I started reading more about it and saw how it was used in the past by different researchers, I realised that this is something I used my whole entire life and it's a simple concept really and naturally occurring.

Code-switching involves an assumption of separate systems languages: two monolinguals. Conversely, translanguaging involves one integrated linguistic system where both languages are used in a dynamic and functionally integrated manner to organise and mediate mental process in understanding, speaking, and literacy, with maximum learning (García & Sylvan, 2011)

I assigned each participant with a role during pre-writing aided by Gibbons' Curriculum Cycle. They were required to author a narrative (story) with a 'twist in the tail'. My focus was on building knowledge, as the first step of the cycle. Below, I list the four steps of the cycle:

- Building knowledge of the text
- Modelling a narrative
- Joint construction
- Independent composing a story with a 'twist in the tail'

I employed the pyramid illustrated below (Fig. 1), as a device for pre-writing of a narrative genre with a twist in the tail under the theme: the translanguaging practices of the study group. This practice was intended to help the study group to conceptualise and classify new information.

The translanguaging practices of the study group

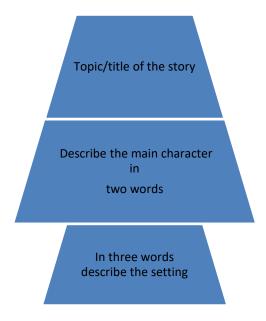
Working in groups of five, the participants had to plan a narrative genre with a 'twist in the tail' using a story pyramid illustrated below (Fig. 1), in which the study group named the main character; next described the main character in two words, then in three words described the setting. They stopped at this point because the purpose was to author their stories [the fourth stage in the Gibbons cycle]. For this report, I focus on building knowledge of the text only. To do this, and as a way of building knowledge, I presented the participant with Roald Dahl's 'The Landlady' (1959/1991). In groups, they were instructed to read the story and respond to the questions, based on it. The limited space provided for this report prevents me from presenting or attaching the story. This activity was provided to the English methodology class; however, the focus was on the study group. I draw the focus of the reader to only one activity planned by the study group under the theme: students' pre-writing. Even though my focus was on the prewriting process only, the pyramid below (Fig. 1) is a pre-writing/planning activity building towards writing a full story/narrative with a 'twist in the tail'. I will shelve the full story for the next paper. To begin their pre-writing, the participants name the main character; describe the character (s) in two words; and then in three words, describe the setting as can be observed in the example below.

Pyramids

Pyramid 1 (Fig. 1), as a guide, is constructed in the target language (English). This was to provide the participant with guidelines of the structure of a narrative (Edgar & Padgett, 1995). This provision assisted the participants to focus their planning or pre-writing in concert with the correct features of the required genre. Fig. 2, Fig. 3, Fig.4, Fig. 5, & Fig. 6 were employed for the participants' translanguaging as an arena to present their linguistic ideas with Fig. 1 serving as a premise. This report focuses on brainstorming during a pre-writing process.

Figure 1

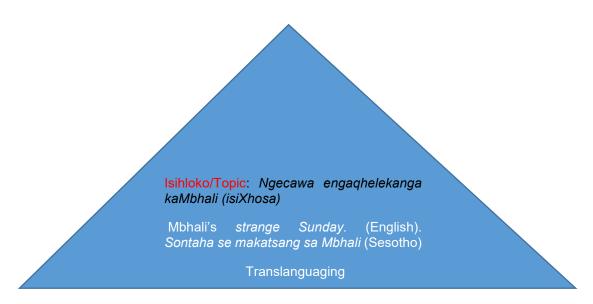
Pyramid 1 (P1)



Note. As explained, Fig.1 was used as a guide. Fig. 1 represents the first stage where the participants had to collect and build knowledge around the provided topic. Next follows the study group's translanguaging through pre-writing in IsiXhosa, Sesotho and English.

Figure 2

Pyramid 2 (P2)



Note: Fig. 2 depicts meaning interchange of the topic/title written in isiXhosa, Sesotho, and English (translanguaging).

Figure 1

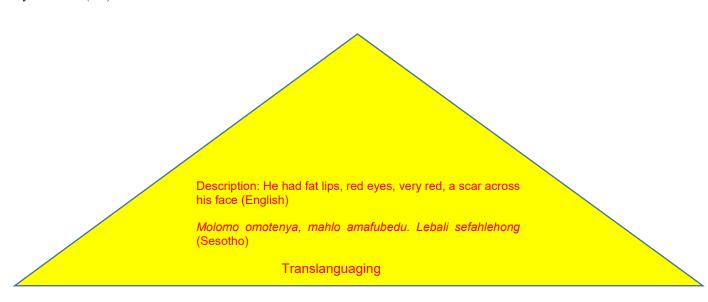
Pyramid 3 (P3)



Note. Fig. 3 represents the name of the main character, constructed in English & Sesotho, and in isiXhosa (translanguaging).

Figure 4.

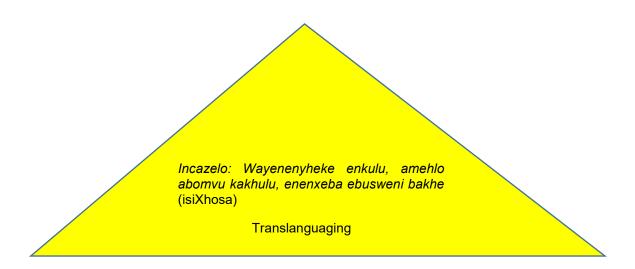
Pyramid 4 (P4)



Note. Fig. 4 represents the description of the main character, constructed in English and Sesotho.

Figure 5

Pyramid 5 (P5)



Note. Fig. 5 represents the description of the main character, constructed in isiXhosa.

Figure 6.

Pyramid 6 (P6).



Note. Fig. 6 depicts a setting description. Defining and describing characters or locations effectively and vividly are central features of narratives. Edgar and Padgett (1995) additionally concur that a narrative genre represents a terrific opportunity to teach grammar in context.

Conclusion

This report illustrates that monolingual ideologies and practices are ineffective. They do not provide a positive school experience and pedagogic with cognitive support needed for multilingual children (Lee & Canagarajah, 2018). Taglialatela (2012) affirms that classroom language practices of multilingual learners should be characterised by a discursive practice of 'languaging'. As in García and Sylvan (2011), translanguaging is not simply copying information from one language to another. According to this observation, the cognitive advantages of translanguaging were evident in this study as a feasible strategy to develop a weaker language through cross-transfer of skills amongst the linguistic repertoires that students possess (Cook, 1995). Notwithstanding prevalent negative attitudes and stereotypes associated with using African languages as media of learning and teaching or as school subjects, this study demonstrates that to take a more complex account of language use and match multilingual spaces, classroom language practices of multilingual learners should be characterised by a discursive practice of 'languaging'.

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