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"Our country has gained independence, but we haven't": Collaborative translanguaging to decolonize English language teaching

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Abstract

The colonial history of many English language teaching (ELT) contexts has shaped how the concept of language is understood, how language policies are constructed, and how language education is organized. Various aspects of ELT in countries that were colonized continue to promote the imperialism of English (Motha, 2014) through the naming (i.e., labeling of linguistic phenomena as distinct languages, dialects, and language varieties), separation and hierarchization of languages, and the dominance of monolingual policies and practices in the classroom. Translanguaging, a theory and pedagogy that challenges colonial understandings of language and monoglossic norms in language teaching, has the transformative potential to liberate language practices that have been rendered invisible by abyssal thinking in ELT (García et al., 2021). Translanguaging as a theory posits that multilingual learners do not possess two or more autonomous language systems but rather that they select and deploy linguistic features from a unitary linguistic repertoire (Vogel & García, 2017). Translanguaging as a pedagogy urges educators to leverage learners' entire linguistic and semiotic repertoires to support their learning instead of requiring them to keep certain languages outside the classroom. However, in educational contexts that respond to socially and politically imposed boundaries between languages, there are ideological and systemic challenges to the enactment of translanguaging as a pedagogy. This paper discusses these challenges with reference to the Malaysian language education context and draws on data from a *collaborative translanguaging pedagogy* designed through teacher-researcher collaboration and implemented in two Malaysian elementary English classrooms to offer recommendations for how ELT can be decolonized.

Keywords: translanguaging; decolonization; English as a foreign language; Malaysia

"Our country has gained independence, but we haven't": Collaborative translanguaging to decolonize English language teaching

English language teaching (ELT), against the backdrop of colonialism, has played an ongoing role in stigmatizing the language practices of minoritized and racialized learners. From official policies governing the choice of language in education, to unofficial classroom policies, practices, and procedures, many aspects of ELT in countries that were colonized continue to

promote the imperialism of English (Motha, 2014) while undermining the rich linguistic repertoires of learners. Translanguaging, as a pedagogy that leverages all the linguistic and semiotic resources of multilingual learners, has the transformative potential to liberate language practices that have been constrained by official and unofficial language policies, and to create more equitable classrooms. However, in school systems that respond to socially and politically imposed boundaries between languages, there are ideological and systemic barriers to the implementation of translanguaging as a pedagogy. Drawing on data from teacher-researcher collaborations in Malaysia, this paper describes the challenges of legitimizing translanguaging in ELT contexts with a colonial history and offers recommendations for how language researchers, teachers, and learners can play a transformative role in decolonizing language teaching through a *collaborative translanguaging pedagogy* (Rajendram, 2019).

Ideological and Systemic Challenges to Translanguaging in Malaysia

The colonial ideology of languages has shaped how language education is organized and implemented across the globe. For years, ELT has existed in a linguistic and cultural vacuum, removed from the multilingual realities of the learners in its classrooms and societies. Despite the fluid interweaving of language practices that occurs outside the classroom, languages are taught separately and hierarchically in schools. The separation and hierarchization of languages must be seen in the context of the colonial agenda. Makoni and Pennycook argue that *languages* are colonial inventions which emerged through "the mapping of European colonial and neocolonial constructs onto diverse contexts" (2005, p. 152). The process of naming languages (i.e., by creating categories that included the names of ethnic groups, languages, and how they were to be described) and demarcating boundaries between them legitimized the language practices and knowledges that served the colonizer's interests and excluded others that did not (Makoni & Pennycook, 2005). García et al. (2021) refer to what the Portuguese decolonial philosopher Santos calls "abyssal thinking" to describe the colonial ideologies and practices that established radical lines dividing social reality into two realms and declared as nonexistent language practices positioned on "the other side of the line" (2007, p. 2).

In Malaysia, abyssal thinking was first orchestrated through the creation of a "vernacular" education system which aimed to separate Malaysians through constructed categories of language and race and to situate them as docile and compliant subjects of the colonial government. During British occupation in Malaysia from 1874 to 1957, four types of schools were established with mediums of instruction in English, Malay, Chinese, and Tamil. Malay-medium education was provided for the Malay ethnic group in rural villages, and schooling was limited to four years to keep them in socioeconomic roles as farmers and fishermen (Shanmugavelu et al., 2020). Chinese-medium schools were set up for Chinese migrants in rural areas to maintain ties with the Manchu government. Indian indentured laborers were provided with basic Tamil-medium education in the plantations they were brought to work in. English-medium schools based on the British curriculum were established in the cities for a small group of Malays, Chinese, and Indians with the purpose of teaching them English so they could work for the new British colonial order (Shanmugavelu et al., 2020). Through the eliticizing of English-medium education, English "as an instrument of empire" (Motha, 2014, p. 46) became attached to socioeconomic and class privilege.

Makoni and Pennycook write that the invention of languages has had "very real and material effects, determining how languages have been understood, how language policies have been constructed, how education has been pursued, how people have come to identify with particular linguistic labels" (2005, p. 138). In Malaysia, not only did the

invention of the vernacular education system produce Malay, Tamil, and Chinese as racialized languages, it also functioned to produce race itself as part of the colonial project. The co-naturalization of race and language has affected how Malaysians identify themselves, how they relate interethnically, how education is structured, and how languages are taught. Almost sixty-five years after independence, official documents still require Malaysians to identify themselves according to narrowly defined categories of race. The hierarchical language-based colonial education system has also had a lingering impact on the school choices of Malaysians. English-medium international schools are the top choices for families from higher socioeconomic backgrounds as they offer direct pathways to English-medium universities abroad, which many parents tend to prefer over local universities (Free Malaysia Today, 2021). On the bottom of the school hierarchy are Tamil-medium schools that have seen a continuous decline in enrollment over the years. More than four hundred Tamil schools have been shut down in the past five decades, and over 63% of Tamil schools are currently underenrolled, with fewer than 150 students per school (Ibrahim, 2018).

The relegation of the Tamil language to the backwaters of vernacular education and English to the top of the language hierarchy has placed immense pressure on teachers in Tamil-medium schools to focus on improving their students' English learning outcomes. To compound this pressure, a pursuit of "native-like" and "standard English" proficiency among teachers is explicitly encouraged through various policies and programs targeting teachers in Tamil- as well as in Malay- and Chinese-medium schools. From 2011 to 2015, more than 360 English speakers from the United States, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and other Western English-speaking countries who identified as "native speakers" were hired by the Ministry of Education through the Native Speaker Mentoring Programme to "improve English proficiency among teachers and students" (The Star, 2015, para. 1). Beginning in 2015, the English proficiency of teachers has been evaluated through the Cambridge Proficiency Test (CPT) and Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in the Ministry of Education's attempt to "stick to Britain's standards of teaching the language in order to enhance the quality of teaching English in Malaysia" (Rajaendram, 2015, para. 10) and to ensure that teachers "achieve a level of fluency in the language to match those of native speakers" (The Sun Daily, 2016, para. 1). Teachers who engage in translanguaging pedagogical practices (e.g., by allowing or encouraging their students to use languages other than English in class or by using other languages in their own teaching) report feeling guilty and ashamed because of the deficit perspectives toward teachers and learners who do not communicate solely in English (Selamat, 2014). Consequently, rigid boundaries between languages are imposed in English language classrooms, and learners are required to use only English even though translanguaging is very much a lived reality for them outside the classroom.

This monolingual approach positions the language practices of racialized learners as continuously deficient and maintains the raciolinguistic ideologies (Rosa & Flores, 2017) tied to Malaysia's colonial history. During my interviews with learners in a Tamil-medium school in Malaysia, Amira (a pseudoym), an eleven-year-old learner expressed that the English-only policy enforced by her teachers made her feel like,

"I don't have freedom, சுதந்திரம் கிடைக்காத மாதிரி. நாட்டிற்கு சுதந்திரம் கிடைத்தது, ஆனால் நம்பளுக்கு கிடைக்கவில்லை (We don't have freedom, it's like we never got freedom. Our country has gained independence, but we haven't)."

Amira's sentiments were echoed by many of her peers. Her classmate, Malini (also a pseudonym), spoke about feeling restrained when she was not allowed to translanguage

and voiced that it made her feel "கைதி மாதிரி (like we're prisoners). If we don't have freedom, like a bird in one கூண்டு (cage)."

In spite of the frustration they felt, Amira, Malini, and their peers demonstrated their agency in creating a translanguaging space (Wei, 2011) during their collaborative interactions, where they could deploy their language practices creatively and innovatively to support each other's learning without regard to the constructed boundaries between the languages in their repertoire (Rajendram, 2021). In the following section, I draw on the data from teacher-researcher collaboration in Amira's and Malini's classrooms in a Tamil-medium school in Malaysia to exemplify how teachers, researchers, and learners can create a critical space to resist hegemonic abyssal thinking and colonial ideologies in the language classroom through a collaborative translanguaging pedagogy.

Decolonizing Language Teaching through a Collaborative Translanguaging Pedagogy

I first came to know Amira and Malini when I conducted a comparative case study (Rajendram, 2019) of two fifth grade (ages 10–11) English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms in a Tamil school in Malaysia. All of the learners and teachers in this school were Malaysians of South Indian descent who spoke Tamil, Malay, and English. This case study revealed the important role that learners played as agentic policy actors who challenged and resisted classroom English-only policies and English-centric practices through translanguaging in their ESL classes. The learners in both classrooms used translanguaging strategically and deliberately during their peer interactions for the purposes of supporting each other's multilingual learning, building rapport, and establishing trust, drawing on their disciplinary knowledge and affirming their cultural identities. Seeing the evidence of the various benefits of learners' translanguaging practices, the two English teachers began to develop an openness toward incorporating pedagogical translanguaging into their teaching. Thus, as an extension of the case study research, we engaged in teacher-researcher collaboration with the following goals:

1. Fostering a deeper understanding of translanguaging as a critical and decolonial pedagogy for ELT;
2. Developing a translanguaging co-stance, co-design, and co-shifts (García et al., 2017; Tian & Shepard-Carey, 2020); and
3. Engaging in critical reflections on how we could center learners' lived experiences, knowledge systems, and cultural and linguistic repertoires in our pedagogical practices.

The first and most important step in this process was to talk to the experts on translanguaging: the learners who were at the heart of the research. Listening to Amira speak about not being able to enjoy the independence her country had fought so hard to obtain and hearing Malini compare herself to a prisoner and a bird trapped in a cage gave the teachers a glimpse into the linguistic colonization their learners continued to experience as a result of English-only policies and practices. Speaking to other learners revealed how the racialized identification and demarcation of languages in Malaysia had impacted their language ideologies and identities. Although most learners used Malay while translanguaging, they referred to this language as "their [the Malay ethnic group's] language" and Malaysia as "their country," which suggested that they did not see themselves as

legitimate speakers of Malay or legitimate Malaysians. A *postcolonial shame* (Motha, 2014) could also be seen in the way that several learners tried to detach themselves from their linguistic and cultural identities or became complicit in the marginalization of Tamil. This was illustrated through one learner's admission that she longed to "talk like American" and "marry an American," and through another learner's suggestion that Malaysian Indians were looked down upon because "Tamil Indians [were] very poor, and we are fighting, shooting, murder for another people, very poor." Reading these quotes by their learners, the two teachers began to see how the same postcolonial shame had surreptitiously impacted their own sense of self. One teacher related that in a professional development course she had attended, teachers were shown videos of "native speakers" as models to emulate in their teaching. She confessed that this left her feeling dejected. "My English is not that powerful. I think they look down upon me. It hurt me also… I know a few of my students having this inferior feeling… I don't want them to be like that."

The next step in the teacher-researcher collaboration was to redesign and co-design lessons based on a collaborative translanguaging pedagogy. This process required the teachers to relinquish their roles of authority and "become an equal participant in the educational enterprise that should seek, above all else, to equalize power relations" (Flores & García, 2013, p. 256). The teachers began taking on roles of *learning facilitators* who organized collaborative groupings for learners to engage in collective meaning-making using their whole language repertoires, *scaffolders* who assessed what their students were learning and provided guided support to extend their knowledge, and *critical reflection enhancers* who engaged learners in meta-reflection on the learning process (Wei, 2014). The teachers and I co-designed various collaborative language learning activities such as debates, roleplays, dramas, storytelling, poetry, reader-response, and project-based learning. Opportunities to translanguage were intentionally embedded into each activity. Learners' collaborative use of translanguaging in their pairs, triads, and small groups created various linguistic, cognitive, sociocultural, and affective affordances that supported both their individual and collective learning.

Recognizing that the teaching of English was unavoidably ideological and political because of Malaysia's colonial history, we also engaged learners through a critical translingual approach (García et al., 2021) in identifying and critiquing the dominant language ideologies that depicted their language practices as deficient, and we turned the classroom into a space for language advocacy. Learners were encouraged to think about how their resistance to Malay was tied to the racialized framing of the language, and they became language activists by rejecting the postcolonial shame and abyssal thinking that were evident in the deficit portrayal of Tamil, Malay, and other Malaysian languages. In one activity, learners rewrote texts that portrayed Manglish as an adulterated form of English and advocated for its legitimacy as a national Malaysian language.

Although students' recognition of Manglish was a good first step toward embracing translanguaging, it was important to us that our learners understood translanguaging not from a sociopolitical perspective of "languages," (i.e., focusing on Malay, Tamil, English, Manglish, and other languages as discrete entities) but from the psycholinguistic and cognitive perspective of "languaging" (i.e., focusing on how they "did" language by combining linguistic and semiotic features from those languages). In other words, we wanted them to move from thinking about "national languages" to their "national ways of languaging" as Malaysians. As part of their ongoing learning in this direction, we facilitated activities and discussions to help students understand that when they used

The Case Against Manglish

Manglish is a Creole or pidgin language. It is English adulterated with Malay, Indian and Chinese colloquialism, and has evolved into a separate language from standard proper English.

Manglish is not English, and cannot substitute for proper use of the English language. Writing or speaking Manglish brands a person as illiterate or unschooled. Manglish is not accepted by English-speaking countries and cannot offer a level playing field for its users to compete with more articulate and fluent users of the language. Even if Manglish is accepted as suitable for spoken English, it is most certainly not appropriate for written application.

Unfortunately once you have habituated yourself to using Manglish, it is really difficult to employ proper English in both its spoken and written form.

Figure 1. Original Excerpt on Manglish From http://www.fogfactor.com/manglish.html.

The Case for Manglish

Manglish is a beautiful and unique language spoken by Malaysians. Unlike American, British or Australian English, Manglish can be understood by ALL Malaysians, no matter what their ethnicity, age group, or educational background is. Writing or speaking Manglish can brand someone as a creative language user who can mix Malay, Chinese and Tamil in an inventive way. Therefore, Manglish should be declared as one of the national languages in Malaysia.

Figure 2. Excerpt on Manglish Rewritten by a Group of Learners.

Tamil, Malay, English, and what they called "Manglish" and "Tanglish," they were not using these languages as separate cognitive and linguistic entities; rather, they were languaging in ways that transcended the socially constructed boundaries of languages. In a poem composed by the learners later on in the study (see Figure 3 below), they expressed a sophisticated, creative, and dynamic understanding of translanguaging by capturing their diverse language practices visually and describing their linguistic repertoires very simply and powerfully as "language" (*bahasa*, 语, மொழி).

As suggested in Figure 3, learners acted as empowered *translanguaging agents* who drew on their linguistic repertoires to support their peers' learning and to affirm their Tamil-Indian and Malaysian identities. The critical dialogues we had in the classroom about the role of colonization in creating racial and linguistic divisions also led to a greater appreciation for translanguaging as a vehicle for peace-building and social justice in the country. The poem in Figure 4, which was co-constructed by the teacher and learners in one class, was a particularly powerful illustration of the potential of translanguaging in promoting interethnic reconciliation.

The collaborative translanguaging pedagogy implemented in the two classrooms was a dynamic and participatory process that was both teacher- and learner-directed. While the two teachers became more intentional in designing strategic lessons based on the principles of translanguaging, they remained responsive to the ways that learners naturally and spontaneously used their translanguaging repertoires, and the *translanguaging corriente* (García et al., 2017) that was ever present in learners' interactions. A few months into the teacher-researcher collaboration, we spoke to the learners again to find out how they felt about the new translanguaging journey they had embarked on. Our conversations with learners revealed the decolonizing and transformative power of translanguaging. Malini, who had earlier admitted that the classroom English-only policy made her feel like a bird in a cage, said that when she and her classmates translanguaged, it felt like "when we open the birds' lock, the bird will fly like freedom."

Figure 3. What Do You See When You See Us Translanguaging?

Figure 4. What Do You See When You See our Negara (Country), Malaysia?

Conclusion

A translanguaging pedagogy has the potential to decolonize English language teaching by bringing together languages that have historically been divided, hierarchized, and racialized as a result of colonization. The collaborative translanguaging pedagogy developed through teacher-researcher collaboration in this study challenged both the dichotomization of languages brought about by English-only policies, as well as the separation of teacher, researcher, and learner roles in the classroom. A collaborative approach was

particularly responsive to the needs of the Malaysian context because it espoused the collectivist values held in high regard in Malaysian communities. There is still much more work to be done, however, for translanguaging to produce lasting social, political, and systemic change in Malaysia and other contexts. If we start with the premise that languages were named as part of colonial projects around the globe, then the goal of a translanguaging pedagogy must be not only to bring languages together but to disinvent and reconstitute (Makoni & Pennycook, 2005) language teaching entirely. The process of reconstituting language teaching will look different across contexts because it must be attuned to the contemporary effects of colonization in how languages are understood, organized, and taught in each context. In education systems where English is taught as a second, foreign, or additional language, we can begin the difficult but critical work of disinvesting, reconstituting, and decolonizing language teaching by recognizing that English cannot be taught as a single entity independently of other languages and by creating synergy between teachers of various languages so that a translanguaging pedagogy is implemented critically, collaboratively, and consistently across the curriculum.

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