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Translanguaging in Schools: Subiendo y Bajando, Bajando y Subiendo as Afterword

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ABSTRACT

Translanguaging pedagogies are considered here as mechanisms that work against the normalizing ideology of monolingual and monoglossic school language. In so doing, we consider how this restrictive view of school language and of language education policy has served to minoritize bilingual students and act as an instrument to exert “coloniality of power.” We start by describing the translanguaging theory that supports the translanguaging pedagogies to educate bilingual minoritized youth that this special issue highlights. We then focus on how translanguaging pedagogies liberate the students’ multilingualism and heteroglossic practices. Keeping with the title here of “subiendo y bajando, bajando y subiendo,” we consider the restrictions that are imposed by rigid language policies, as teachers who enact translanguaging pedagogies negotiate them. We also reflect on the potential and contestations of translanguaging in classrooms, both bilingual and not. We end by thinking about the work that still remains to be done.

KEYWORDS

Bilingual; critical pedagogy;
ESL; language education;
multilingualism;
translanguaging

Introduction

The subtitle of this Afterword echoes the title of one of the best-known songs of Puerto Rican singer, Danny Rivera. Life, and its expression in language is a going up and down (*subiendo y bajando*), and also a going down and up (*bajando y subiendo*). And yet, from a very young age, we are taught to see language only from one perspective: that of *subiendo*. Language is expected to develop and rise, from the linguistic practices of a young child’s *balbuco* and in *familia* and *comunidad* to standardized forms that are the only ones authorized in schools *y en la sociedad*. Those whose linguistic practices are evaluated as not *subiendo*, restricted through an imposed and constructed narrow linguistic standard, are then left behind. Their linguistic practices are said not to be *subiendo* to the level required to participate in society. This serves to restrict access and to keep these minoritized speakers as only *bajando*. In other words, language is used to mask the *clacismo*, *racialización* y *sexismo* that institutional structures perpetuate.

But language is really about *subiendo y bajando*, as well as *bajando y subiendo*, simultáneamente. And translanguaging is precisely a way of ensuring that we view language from the different perspectives that offer us a way to escape the linear upward and restrictive understandings of what language ought to be, opening up *espacios* for different people to act equitably in their worlds through their own languaging. Language, as A.L. Becker (1995) tells us, doesn’t just communicate our experiences, but “extends down into the very ways we shape our experiences, store them and retrieve them” (p. 8). We are human beings in language, but in language understood as a way of coordinating the actions of social individuals with the changes in social life that they generate

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(Maturana & Varela, 1987). This perspective on language, perhaps better named as *linguaging*, captures the simultaneous *subiendo y bajando* that language is all about.

In schools, however, language is perceived as only a neutral system of forms. Language in schools has been reduced to a single linguistic norm of conventions that is called academic language. In the ways that schools view language, there is a problem. Language is studied for its own sake in Language Arts classes, and its use of appropriate forms evaluated in standardized tests that serve as barriers to learn further. That is, language is not seen as a way of shaping experiences and knowledge, as a way of having students coordinate their actions in interaction. Instead, school language is only seen as a language regime (Kroskrity, 2000) whose main purpose is to study itself and to be itself. Language is thus disconnected from its role in historical formation and sociopolitical frameworks that minoritize some populations so that others can exert dominance. Language in schools is robbed of its ability to shape everyone's experiences and knowledge, for only those whose language practices can easily pass through the narrow linguistic passageway that schools construct, have then access to knowledge, knowledge of *ciencia*, *historia*, *literature*, *matemáticas*, and all other ways of understanding the world.

School language acts as the *barrera* that keeps the very few powerful, White speakers *subiendo*, while it ensures that those whose language practices are different are kept *bajando*. Our restricted view of language in schools has to be understood as part of a project of governmentality (Foucault, 1991) of anyone who is different, and as both a legacy of nation-building (Bauman & Briggs, 2003), as well as of the coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000). Views of language as simply standard linguistic forms act as a most effective sorter of people, giving advantage to those whose linguistic practices at home fall near the school standard, while keeping the others *bajando*. For educational sociolinguists, the important questions are then: How can we reclaim a perspective on school language that recognizes the simultaneous *subiendo y bajando* of the linguaging of all? How can a reconceptualization of language, and especially of the narrow definition of academic school language, promote education that would validate and shape the experiences of *all* students so that they can then retrieve them to construct knowledge for the future? How can schools help students reach into their linguistic past to build a linguistic future as educated human beings? How can we liberate language from the shackles in which it has been kept in schools?

This issue attempts to answer some of these questions. It does so by focusing on those students whom schools keep *bajando*, minoritized students who are considered the "other." Sometimes efforts to educate these minoritized speakers are said to be liberating simply because they are multilingual. But some programs that aim for students' multilingualism simply reproduce twice or thrice the narrow definition of language that then keeps minoritized students *bajando* even faster. This is where translinguaging comes in. Before we address the potential of translinguaging in schools and how it has been developed in the articles included herein, it is important to review the linguistic theory that supports it.

Translinguaging theory

Translinguaging starts by acknowledging language users' linguaging and the potential of coordinating their meaning-making actions in ways that successfully generate their *contexto social*. When applied to those considered bi/multilinguals, translinguaging posits that the two or more languages of speakers are not separate linguistic systems, but manifestations of acts of deployment and suppression of linguistic features (words, sounds, rules) that society assigns to one or another language (Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2015). Consequently, bilingualism is never just additive, but inherently *dinámico* (García, 2009). Translinguaging puts back the emphasis on what people *do* with language to produce and interpret their social worlds.

In this issue, Angel Lin and Peichang He draw on Jay Lemke's formulation (2016) to take translinguaging one-step further. What we conceptualize as languages (the named entities we call English, Chinese, Spanish, Russian, etc.) are, according to Lemke, second order phenomena that

have been rationalized, stabilized and codified as such by linguists and educational authorities. But first order language is much more complex, and includes multiple linguistic *and non-linguistic resources* that are *unevenly distributed* among participant, media and artifacts in the contexts in which speakers operate. Translanguaging, Lin and He tell us, is a *trans-semiotizing act*, a first order reality that acknowledges that speakers use their languaging, bodies, multimodal resources, tools and artifacts in dynamically entangled, interconnected and coordinated ways to make meaning. Translanguaging opens up spaces in our understandings of language that had been previously sealed off by grammarians and educational authorities. Thus, translanguaging offers possibilities for liberación y transformación social that simple understandings of bilingualism and multilingualism, as just the pluralization of monolingualism, neglect.

Translanguaging as liberating children's multilingualism in schools

Translanguaging does not obviate multilingualism. It liberates it. And it is in schools where it makes a huge difference, pushing the barreras of what are said to be two or three languages. Translanguaging recognizes that students come into school with a linguistic potential that keeps them bajando into their past and simultaneously subiendo not toward a dominant standard language or even two or three standard languages, but toward creative languaging that open up limitless possibilities of knowledge generation. Teachers who develop what García, Johnson, and Seltzer (2017) have called a *translanguaging stance* deeply agree with Bakhtin (1981) when he says “one’s own language is never a single language; in it there are always survivals of the past and a potential for other-languagedness” (p. 66). It is this potential for *other-languagedness* that translanguaging in schools, and especially in programs that aim to develop bilingualism, enables.

Many educational programs to promote multilingualism start with the definition of what two or more languages are supposed to sound and look like. Thus, children and youth whose language practices do not conform to this use are simply excluded from the learning experience. By acknowledging that to do away with the inequities propagated by educational systems a different view of language has to be considered, translanguaging focuses not on named languages, but on the languaging de los estudiantes.

The case studies in this issue take place en escuelas primarias y secundarias. They emphasize that bilingual and multilingual education has to be *for children and youth*, not simply for language. Of course, part of the role of schools is to move students to suppress certain linguistic features sometimes and activate others. But in so doing, schools must find ways of potentializing the students’ meaning-making by leveraging all the resources that, as Lin and He in this issue say, are distributed in bodies, artifacts and elements in the classroom context.

Education programs that provide students the possibility of bilingual development, whether developmental maintenance, revitalization, immersion or CLIL, need to take the local conditions into account because languaging is historically contingent, that is, it is inseparable from a community and place, and its history. Bilingual education needs to take into account the speakers and contexts in which languaging actions have taken place in its socially-charged life. It cannot simply start with the named languages that are said to be the medium of instruction.

Starting with the students’ strengths is the primary principle of all good education. Education for multilingualism must follow the same principle. Children’s strength relies on their own and their families’ and communities’ linguistic and cultural practices and histories. All good education must start there, recognizing who the students are, and valuing the very different practices and histories they bring.

By recognizing that named languages are social constructions and starting with the full linguistic and semiotic repertoire of the child, translanguaging in educational programs for multilingualism puts the emphasis back on *educating the child* bilingually, not just on teaching languages. This is a most important principle that needs to be kept at the forefront of all educational endeavors for multilingualism, and that translanguaging policies and pedagogies bring to the surface.

Translanguaging *subiendo y bajando* policies

Teachers who have a translanguaging stance are simultaneously dealing with *school language policies* that rely on a narrow definition of language as simply standardized conventions. Schools and programs that aim to develop the students' bilingualism or multilingualism often see their task as simply the development of two or more standard languages, without first considering who are their students, what are their histories, and what languaging resources they bring. Teachers in these programs are often subjected to observations and evaluations by school authorities that demand that only one standard language be used at a time, responding to what Creese and Blackledge (2010) have called separate bilingualism. Their students are evaluated with instruments that use only standard conventions of named languages and expect responses that match this language use. Thus, even though teachers with a translanguaging stance understand that it is important to leverage the students' full linguistic repertoire, with their own accents, and to potentialize their "other-languagedness," they also work to enable students to perform tasks using only the language features prescribed in schools.

Schools often require students to resort exclusively to features of their unitary repertoire that are considered as belonging to one language or another. What is important is to understand that although in these cases the students' translanguaging selves are less visible, they are always there. And so, educational programs must pay attention to languagings that *van subiendo y bajando* simultaneously.

García et al. (2017) speak of the translanguaging corriente to refer to the issue that sometimes one doesn't see translanguaging, although it is always present. Language policies in schools and pedagogical practices can make the students' translanguaging rise to the top so it is visible, or keep it hidden at the bottom. Good translanguaging policy and practice in schools do both, building the dynamism that ensures that students' complex bilingual practices are legitimated, while guaranteeing that students learn to suppress and activate features that are necessary for the specific context and task being performed.

As described in this issue by Jones for Wales, and Leonet, Cenoz, and Gorter for The Basque Autonomous Region of Spain, it is of utmost importance that a space for the use of the minoritized language be preserved and protected. Translanguaging does not in any way obliterate language allocation policies in schools that protect minoritized languages. Minoritized languages need to be protected, but they cannot be isolated, since in their socially-charged life they are inseparable from the conquest. Colonization and nation-building processes that have assigned them to the minoritized place. To open up that place so that these language minoritized speakers emerge as equal participants in the lives of a community demands that their linguistic mobility and interaction with other (and others') ways of languaging, including those of language majority communities, be acknowledged. Translanguaging works within the separate spaces assigned to each of the named languages in strategic ways, opening up spaces to document and truly assess bilingual students' use of language, to scaffold instruction for greater understanding, and to transform our traditional conceptualizations of separate bilingualism so as to legitimate the dynamic bilingual flows of bilingual students and communities.

Traditionally, schools, even bilingual or trilingual schools and programs, have operated only with one definition of what language is, as in [Figure 1](#).

Students are expected to come into school with a first language, to which a second or third language is added. But as the authors in this issue make clear, the situation is not so well-defined, for

L1	L2	L3
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Figure 1. Conception of languages in school.

In the mid-20th century, bilingual education programs for minoritized populations whose language practices had been almost eradicated emerged as a way of safeguarding those languages (Cenoz & Gorter, 2015; García, 2009). There is fear among some bilingual educators that translanguaging pedagogy may limit the use of the minoritized language. For example, Jones describes how he and his colleagues have regularly observed the use of English to develop the students' Welsh, but less use of Welsh to develop English. This results in less use of Welsh overall, with English creeping into the Welsh-producing space. Leonet et al. repeat the concern about reducing the use of Basque when using the translanguaging intervention that the researchers designed. It is important then to insist that translanguaging pedagogies be used strategically and that they be part of a well-planned instructional design.

García et al. (2017) lay out ways of designing translanguaging instruction that includes teaching and assessment in strategic ways and for specific purposes. Translanguaging cannot be used loosely, but must respond to the needs and wishes of the students and their comunidades. Not all communities need the same thing. According to Jones in this issue, for example, students in bilingual schools develop more use of Welsh for academic purposes, than Welsh for use in social interaction outside of schools. In contrast, in the case of the South Asian immigrants in Hong Kong described here by Lin and He, students have developed ways of using English and Cantonese for social interaction outside of school, but find it difficult to use English-only in the science class.

The articles in this issue also clarify the different purposes that translanguaging pedagogies fulfill, and thus the very different shapes that translanguaging takes. There are five different purposes for translanguaging pedagogies that can be gleaned from the articles here included:

- (1) Translanguaging to assist and motivate learning, and deepen meaning, understandings and knowledge
- (2) Translanguaging for greater metalinguistic awareness and linguistic consciousness, including critical sociolinguistic consciousness
- (3) Translanguaging to affirm bilingual identities
- (4) Translanguaging for greater social interaction and communication, including home-school cooperation
- (5) Translanguaging for empowerment

Pedagogical translanguaging is found in many classrooms of emergent bilingual students who fall along different points of the bilingual continuum. Because of the differences among students, translanguaging pedagogies can be used as scaffold with some students, and as a way to deepen the understandings of lessons by all students. Translanguaging pedagogies also enable language understandings to emerge not in isolation, but in functional interrelationship to the ways in which bilingual students use language. Thus, by putting different features, usos and historias of the named languages alongside each other, translanguaging is capable of developing students' greater metalinguistic awareness, including critical consciousness about the ways in which language is used to *diferenciar y excluir*. Bilingual students, and especially language minoritized students, are not members of one ethnolinguistic group and then another. Bilingual students simultaneously belong to what is seen externally as two worlds, two cultures, two histories, that are then integrated in their one body and mind. Translanguaging then enables the affirmation of bilingual identities and the production of subjectivities that are different from those perpetuated by nation-states and schools. Because translanguaging encompasses linguistic and semiotic practices that are said to belong narrowly to different comunidades y espacios, it enables greater social interaction, and especially it obliterates the distance between home and school that is often responsible for the failure of language minoritized students. Finally, and most importantly, translanguaging pedagogies can be used for the empowerment of bilingual communities, and especially for those that have been minoritized, enabling them to use and view as legitimate their complex and dynamic practices.

Translanguaging pedagogy has the potential to advance what García et al. (2017) have called the primary purpose of translanguaging, *justicia social*, “ensuring that bilingual students, especially those who come from language minority groups, are instructed and assessed in ways that provide them with equal educational opportunities” (p. ix).

What next?

It is clear from the articles in this issue that translanguaging work in schools is in its infancy. It is still highly contested in both monolingual education and educational programs that promote bilingualism. This has to do with the more expansive view of language that translanguaging theory requires, demanding that language be seen as *subiendo y bajando*, *bajando y subiendo*, simultaneously. And it has to do with the monoglossic ideology about language that teacher education preparation programs perpetuate, even when they educate bilingual teachers or teachers of additional languages.

All teachers, whether bilingual or monolingual, are capable of having a translanguaging stance and are able to design translanguaging instruction (see García et al., 2017). But to do this requires experiencing teaching as an art, and not simply as a series of mechanical strategies that address disarticulated standards that fill students’ minds. Translanguaging demands a view of language as *subiendo y bajando*, seeing it at times from the students’ perspective as their own practices, and other times from the educational authorities’ views on named languages. And translanguaging also requires that teachers’ pedagogies be continuously adjusted, as they keep *subiendo y bajando*, in response to students’ learning needs. The horizontal, separate and static spaces in which named languages are taught separately are pierced by the dynamic verticality of the *subiendo y bajando* of translanguaging pedagogy, giving teachers agency to act creatively and critically.

Translanguaging pedagogy holds much promise, but it cannot simply be interpreted as a going across named languages, but as a going *beyond* named languages (García & Li Wei, 2015; Li Wei, 2011). Translanguaging has to be recognized as disruptive of monoglossic ideologies about language and liberating for language minoritized speakers. Translanguaging, as Flores (2014) has said, is a political act, and as such, teachers who engage in translanguaging are transforming, through their pedagogies and actions, the normalizing image of a world of standards—standards for language, for learning, for assessments, for people—which act to exclude and build social inequities.

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