

How can translanguaging in classrooms support children's recovery from refugee trauma?

- By Dr Sue Ollerhead and Dr Nicole Loehr



Around the world, about 23 per cent of children with refugee experience develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Additionally, 16 per cent experience anxiety and 14 per cent suffer from depression (Dangmann et al., 2022). These rates are even higher for children who have gone through immigration detention or received temporary protection visas.

Research has consistently shown strong links between language learning, cognitive growth, mental health, and socio-emotional well-being (see Bialystok, 2001; Cummins, 2000; Knapp, 2004; Zhou & Kagan, 2016). Children's first language significantly influences their academic, social and emotional development throughout their life. Children bring their family's unique communication styles to school making it crucial to recognise and validate these linguistic backgrounds. Encouraging students to use and maintain their home languages alongside learning English in school helps them feel that their cultural experiences and knowledge are valued. This approach can enhance their well-being by fostering feelings of appreciation, developing a strong sense of identity, promoting empathy for others, and creating an environment of trust, security and awareness of their rights.

In this context, the theory and practice of translanguaging provides a flexible way for children with refugee backgrounds to use their language skills in the classroom. This approach allows them to draw upon all of the language abilities they bring to the classroom instead of having to rely solely on English.

What is translanguaging?

The term "translanguaging" was first coined by Cen Williams in the 1980s to describe a pedagogical strategy used in bilingual education, particularly within Welsh and English settings. Williams advocated for using both languages interchangeably to facilitate learning and comprehension. The concept was further developed by researchers like Ofelia García and Li Wei (2013; 2014; 2016; 2020), who expanded its application beyond Wales to encompass broader contexts of multilingualism and the dynamic practices of language-use among bilingual individuals. This evolution of the term has influenced language education worldwide.

Put simply, translanguaging is both a theoretical and a teaching approach designed to enhance learners' language skills and subject knowledge by using all of the languages they know, collectively referred to as

their linguistic repertoire, in classroom learning. This approach contrasts with more traditional approaches that treat different languages as being separate and distinct from each other. Teachers who enact a pedagogical translanguaging focus on the learner first and foremost and support the use and growth of all of their languages in their classroom learning, creating opportunities for using home languages alongside the language of instruction.

What is it not?

Translanguaging is not simply code-switching, where speakers alternate between different languages without integrating them meaningfully. Rather, it is the fluid use and integration of languages for navigating and constructing meaning in the context of communication.

Nor is it the same as translation: while translanguaging consists in the fluid use of all of the language resources in one's repertoire, translation is a more formal process that involves converting text or speech from one language to another while preserving its meaning. Unlike translanguaging, translation often requires a clear separation between languages and adherence to grammatical rules, focusing on accurate and precise language transfer.

What are the academic/cognitive benefits of translanguaging for students who speak English as an additional language?

As children navigate between languages, they become more aware of the similarities and differences between them. For instance, they might notice how certain grammatical structures in their home language differ from those in the target language. This comparative analysis deepens their knowledge of how language functions, not only in terms of grammar and syntax but also in terms of meaning-making and communication.

Translanguaging also facilitates children's learning by allowing them to draw on familiar linguistic resources. When they encounter challenging concepts in the target language, they can express their understanding or seek clarification in their home language. This strategy helps them to identify patterns and strategies that transfer across languages, bolstering their overall language proficiency. Such experiences cultivate an awareness of language as a dynamic system, enhancing their metalinguistic insights.

Here is an example from Mathematics: A teacher introduces a lesson on fractions using a visual aid, like

a pie chart, and presents a word problem in English. “If you have a pizza and you cut it into 8 equal slices, and you eat 3 slices, what fraction of the pizza is left?” Students are put into small groups where they can discuss the problem in their home languages as well as in English. A student who speaks Arabic might explain their thinking in Arabic first:

“جئارش 3 ان لكال أو، جئارش 8 لى لى عطقم از تي ب ان ي دل ناك اذإ، “ة. ي قى ب ت م ل جئارش لاد د ع با س ح لى لى جات ح ن ان نإف.” (“If we have a pizza cut into 8 slices and we ate 3 slices, we need to calculate how many slices are left.”)

As they work through the problem, the student might then use both Arabic and English to share their findings with the group:

“5 ي واس ي ام وه و، 3 صقان 8 ان ي دل، نذا. That means 5 out of 8 (slices are) left.

“So, we have 8 minus 3, which is 5. That means 5 out of 8 slices are left.”

When it’s time to present to the entire class, the student might say:

“In Arabic, I explained that if you have 8 slices and eat 3, you have 5 left. This means 5/8 of the pizza is left over.”

In this activity, the student seamlessly transitions between Arabic and English, using both languages to enhance their understanding and effectively communicate their mathematical reasoning. This not only supports their learning but also encourages collaboration and validation of diverse linguistic backgrounds within the classroom.

Engaging with multiple languages helps students to cultivate critical thinking skills. It prompts them to reflect on how meaning is constructed differently not only in different contexts but across different language systems. For example, why do we refer to the sky as being “blue” in English, yet “green” in Kyrgyz? (Hulick, 2022). These types of reflections help students to recognise language as a tool for communication, requiring them to think deeply about aspects such as word choices, tone and audience. Children’s ability to analyse their own language use expands their understanding of linguistic nuances and contextual language application.

Culturally, translanguaging allows multilingual children to bring their backgrounds and experiences into the learning space, enriching discussions with diverse perspectives. For example, studying greetings from different languages can provide learners with important cultural information. The traditional Zulu greeting “Sawubona” literally means “I see you, and I also see your family and your ancestors”, reinforcing the crucial role of family and heritage to Zulu people.

In the same way, the traditional Mandarin greeting 你吃了嗎? *chī le ma?* translated as “Have you eaten yet?” shows consideration and care for a person’s wellbeing. Helping learners to notice these interesting connections between language and culture reinforces their metalinguistic knowledge by helping them to develop a more comprehensive view of communication as a multifaceted exchange.

Finally, translanguaging fosters problem-solving skills. When learners encounter obstacles in conveying their thoughts in one language, they learn to navigate those challenges by utilising their complete linguistic repertoire. This flexibility in thinking not only aids their language development but also helps them to develop a more profound understanding of the nature of language itself.

What are the academic benefits of translanguaging for monolingual English-speaking students?

Translanguaging in the classroom can significantly benefit monolingual children by fostering an inclusive learning environment that embraces linguistic diversity. As monolingual children interact with peers who speak multiple languages, they develop greater cultural awareness and empathy, which can enrich their social interactions and collaborative skills. Additionally, translanguaging can help them improve their understanding of their own language by comparing and contrasting it with others, ultimately leading to deeper language skills and greater overall engagement in the learning process.

How can translanguaging support students’ recovery from refugee trauma?

Because of translanguaging’s links to cultural identity development, classroom bonding and enhanced academic performance, there has been a growing interest in the therapeutic benefits of translanguaging for students affected by refugee trauma.

In Australia, FASSTT (The Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma) member agencies work towards four core recovery goals (Kaplan, 2020) alongside their clients. The recovery goals are: 1. To restore secure attachments, promote connections to others and enhance a sense of belonging. 2. To restore meaning and purpose to life, rebuild identity and promote justice and 3. To restore dignity and value and reduce shame and guilt.

Table 1 shows how these goals are linked to recovery from common experiences associated with persecution, war and human rights violations.

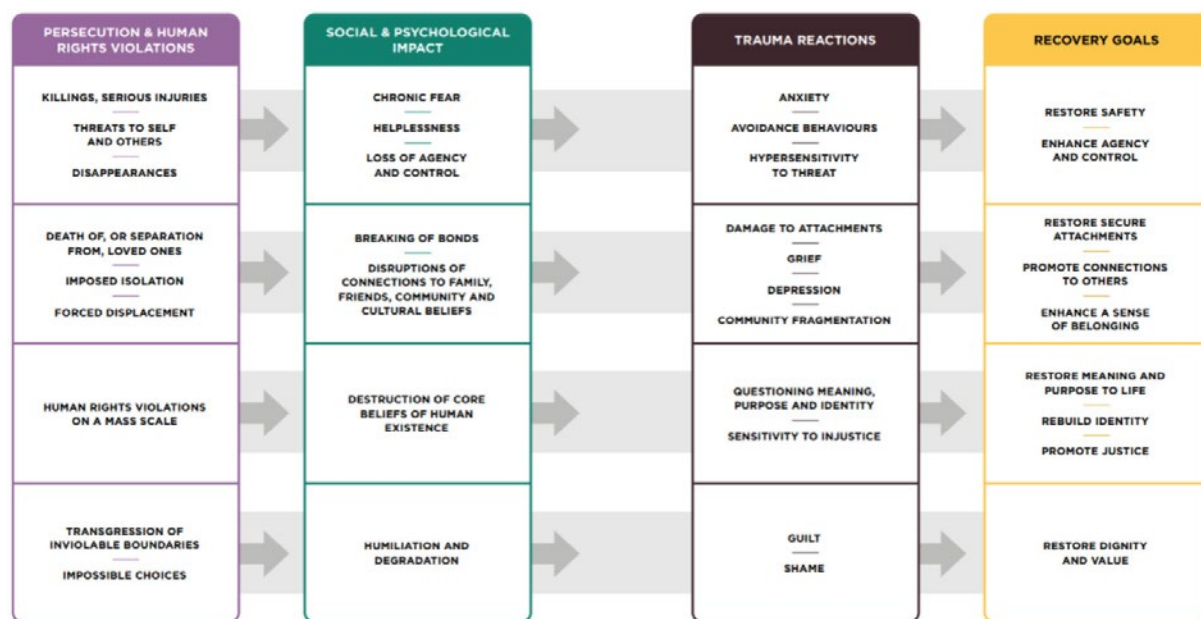


Table 1. How recovery goals are linked to persecution and human rights violations. Image taken from QPASTT, 2024, which was based on the work of Kaplan, 2020.

Recovery Goal One: To restore safety and enhance control

For many students, home languages are a source of comfort and safety for them, associated with familiarity, predictability and security. By encouraging the use of home language/s in the classroom, students have the opportunity to seek reassurance from peers who speak those languages and can express themselves more fully. This may contribute to a greater sense of cultural and linguistic safety at school and in the wider Australian community.

Translanguaging also necessitates that teachers hand over some control to their students as they entrust them with learning tasks that are, in many cases, linguistically inaccessible to teachers. The experience of having age-appropriate control, combined with the trust and support of their teacher, gives students an opportunity to build their confidence as they utilise their agency to work toward goals.

Recovery Goal Two: To restore secure attachments, promote connections to others and enhance a sense of belonging

The languages we use (spoken or signed) typically form a core part of our identities. Translanguaging allows that core aspect of identity to be expressed, valued and fostered at school, contributing to a sense of belonging and supporting the development of students' positive, multicultural identities in a multicultural society.

Relatedly, students who sense that their home languages and/or those of their ancestors are explicitly valued and encouraged by their teachers, are likely to receive a powerful message of welcome, belonging and interest in their cultural and linguistic identity. Through translanguaging, students can see their multilingualism valued by people in authority (i.e., teachers) despite teachers not necessarily being able to comprehend the students' home languages. This experience likely stands in sharp contrast to students' refugee experiences



where they may have encountered periods of significant danger associated with exposure of their “otherness”.

Translanguaging also helps students to get to know each other in deeper and more multifaceted ways while fostering all students’ respect for alternative ways of understanding the world. These benefits of translanguaging help promote connections with peers with different linguistic backgrounds while also creating opportunities for developing a deeper sense of community among students from similar linguistic backgrounds.

Recovery Goal Three: To restore meaning and purpose to life, rebuild identity and promote justice

Students with refugee experience often struggle with feelings of anger, resentment, grief and impatience about the years they feel were wasted while they were unable to participate in formal education. Translanguaging, however, places high value on the verbal and culturally-embedded linguistic skills that students have acquired regardless of whether they were able to attend school or acquire literacy skills in their home languages. In this way, students are able to reconceptualise the time they spent without formal education, as a time where they nevertheless acquired skills and knowledge that are valued by teachers, peers and, ultimately, themselves.

Distinguished Professor of Literacy Bonny Norton

(2000) highlights the transformative and identity-affirming power of translanguaging, stating that “teaching practices that draw on students’ diverse cultural and linguistic resources, reflect their identity back to them in a positive light”. This perspective is echoed by Wei (2011), who explains that translanguaging “creates a social space for multilingual individuals by integrating various aspects of their personal history, experiences, and environment, as well as their attitudes, beliefs, ideologies, and cognitive and physical abilities into a cohesive and meaningful expression, making it a lived experience”.

Survivors of refugee trauma have often had their core beliefs challenged due to their experiences and witnessing of gross human rights violations. These experiences often lead survivors to develop a keen sensitivity to injustice and, in many cases, an interest in social justice issues. Translanguaging provides ample opportunities for justice issues in language use to be explored by students as they are guided in uncovering “the ways in which linguistic resources are deployed in our societies and how this deployment of resources reproduces, negotiates and contests social difference and social inequality” (Blackledge et al., 2014). Such discussions may play a role in students’ perceived ability to promote linguistic justice in their classrooms, school, families and communities.

Recovery Goal Four: To restore dignity and value and reduce shame and guilt

By definition, pedagogical translanguaging relies on the unique linguistic repertoire, learning practices and language-using experience of students. Therefore, in translanguaging settings, students with refugee backgrounds, multilingual or not, are cast as expert “users and managers of language in family, community and educational settings” (Choi et al., 2020). By raising the status of culturally diverse students in this way, translanguaging has the potential to help restore students’ dignity and self-value while reducing feelings of shame associated with experiences of poverty, degradation, racism and lack of access to education.

Students with refugee backgrounds often experience intense feelings of embarrassment and shame at their perceived lack of fluency in English. Translanguaging can help address this source of shame, in that it challenges the implied hierarchy of languages that permeates monolingual classroom settings where a “target” language is valued above all others (Conteh, 2018).

Moreover, translanguaging provides opportunities for teachers to emphasise the multiple known benefits of multilingualism and highlight how these traits benefit the entire class and the community more broadly. On the other hand, when translanguaging is avoided, and monolingual classrooms are valued, learners of the dominant language are more at risk of experiencing a “sense of failure and lack of self-confidence...because the level to be reached in the target language is seen as an impossible goal” (Cook, 2010).

What are the barriers or risks and how can they be overcome?

Teachers may encounter some risks and challenges when attempting to introduce translanguaging practices into their classrooms. In most cases, these can be overcome with careful planning. Teachers may encounter resistance from students, parents and guardians of monolingual and multilingual students alike, who may hold strong reservations about how useful translanguaging will be to their child’s academic and personal development. For instance, parents or guardians of multilingual students may worry that by using a home language at school, their child’s acquisition of English will be delayed. On the other hand, parents or guardians of monolingual students may worry that translanguaging holds little to no learning benefit for their monolingual child and will be a waste of their time.

Before introducing translanguaging, teachers may consider hosting an information session (with multiple

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interpreters present, as required) for parents/guardians and students and provide them with an opportunity to have their questions about translanguaging answered. A written summary should also be made available with links/QR codes to audio recordings in community languages, as required. In addition, parents/guardians and students should be encouraged to talk to the teacher regarding any questions or concerns they may have.

There may be concerns about how teachers can respond to the use of offensive language in the classroom, when the teacher cannot understand all the languages being used by the students. In preparation for the introduction of translanguaging, teachers should consider the pre-existing relational dynamics in the class, including the relationship that the teacher has with their students. The development of a certain level of trust and mutual respect between class members should be prioritised before translanguaging is introduced. Once sufficient trust is established, teachers should clearly outline the boundaries of how translanguaging can and cannot be used in the classroom and seek agreement from the group on these

boundaries. The teacher may outline why they feel they can hand over additional trust and control to the students and give students the opportunity to nurture that trust and the responsibility for additional control. Teachers should plan for how a breakdown of trust will be handled and what the opportunities for repair and “trying again” will be.

For some survivors of refugee trauma, particular languages are intimately associated with the trauma they have experienced. For instance, a language may be associated with a perpetrator of human rights violations, and therefore, hearing the language spoken can trigger trauma reactions, making it impossible to learn, socialise and feel calm in the classroom. Therefore, some students, parents and guardians, may place exceptionally high value on classrooms being a place where only English is spoken. This is another reason why it is important to discuss translanguaging with students, parents, and guardians before it is implemented in the classroom. Doing so, allows time for any concerns to be addressed. If such concerns arise, teachers have the opportunity to modify how

translanguaging is applied to fit the specific context. For example, a teacher might choose to keep the classroom primarily monolingual but allow students to use translanguaging in their homework and assessment tasks.

Conclusion

Translanguaging practices align closely with all four FASSTT Recovery Goals and present an opportunity for educators to further contribute to students’ psychological recovery and academic progress. By validating and incorporating multiple languages in the classroom, teachers can create an inclusive environment that affirms students’ identities and cultural backgrounds. This practice not only enhances academic engagement but also fosters a sense of belonging, as students feel valued for their diverse languages and experiences. Ultimately, translanguaging nurtures both the well-being and identity of multilingual learners by recognising their complex identities and promoting their linguistic strengths as assets in their educational journey. $\mathbb{R}$

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