

Translanguaging Pedagogies in PreK-12 Theatre Instruction: The Family Theatre History Project

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Abstract

Implementing translanguaging strategies in theatre education honors the whole child while allowing creative learning to reflect all the languages learners live in. Translanguaging is a natural process by which a speaker chooses the best language to communicate meaning. By implementing translanguaging pedagogy in a theatre classroom, the arts can be a tool for bilingual students to develop their ability to express their full humanity and their growing biliteracy. This paper will introduce and offer a brief history of translanguaging, share basic instructional strategies for implementing translanguaging pedagogy, and detail a translanguaging strategy for theatre instruction—the Family Theatre History Project. Through this project, family and community generational knowledge can be passed down in the classroom space. Implications for practice and approaches to calls for action will be discussed.

Key Words

multicultural education, multicultural theatre education, translanguaging, translanguaging in theatre instruction, theatre education

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“They need to speak English,” my administrator replied sternly. I was awarded a prestigious grant to purchase literature in my students’ home languages. Though my vision of a theatre classroom filled with scripts representative of the languages my students lived in was finally funded, I was still meeting opposition. This administrator’s statement represents a long-held deficit view of bilingualism and multilingual learners, well-documented in the scholarship (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Jacobson & Faltis, 1990). Concerns over language cross-pollination are myths perpetuated by misunderstanding and limited knowledge of

research, exacerbated by overfocus on English-only testing outcomes.

In the years since this reprimand, and it was a reprimand, I have endeavored to understand how PreK-12 theatre instruction is situated at the junction of language and power. Theatre instruction can be a transformative, emancipatory pedagogy or used as a linguistic weapon for reproducing power structures. Young multilingual artists must develop their craft in their languages to access their full imaginations. Fractioning and syphoning aesthetics into English-only contexts arrests young artists’ creative and multiliteracy journeys. Not only is this emotionally and psychologically harmful, but it is also an act of cultural

and linguistic violence perpetrated in the classroom space.

Sadly, these myths permeate our current sociopolitical context and education policies as well. District-wide scripted curriculums (DeGuzman, 2025), state policies restricting teaching and classroom discussions around race and racism (S. B. 3, 2021), restraints on DEI efforts in schools (S. B. 12, 2025), decades of English-only standardized testing as graduation requirements (Texas Education Agency, n. d.; Texas Education Code, 2025), and the designation of English as the official language (Trump, 2025) have led to a cultural narrowing of the learning that PreK-12 school children can access.

Statement of Purpose

As a pedagogical redirection, theatre educators must continue, or learn, to design instruction that integrates learners' languages and literacies as the locus of speaking, reading, writing, listening, and performance aesthetics. As a didactic ideology, translanguage drama pedagogy (Dutton & Rushton, 2022) uses learners' linguistic repertoire for creative learning in a theatre classroom. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to articulate three theatre teaching approaches that implement translanguage: exploratory inquiry into family and community literacies, multilingual texts and language play, and playwriting.

Literature Review

Ethnographic approaches to instructional design support and interact with community knowledge, positioning learners' languages, lived experiences, and communities at the center of learning (Duncan-Andrade, 2022; Freire, 1970; Moll et. al., 1992; Paris, 2012). Implementing, adapting, and ultimately designing curriculum that situates educators and learners as active co-investigators of their school and individual communities promotes the passing down of generational knowledge (Duncan-Andrade, 2022; Ladson-Billings, 2014). As community practices and literacies are dynamic, teachers must embrace a flexible stance toward a reflexive and reciprocal

process of instructional design (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012). Lessons must activate learners' exploration of community and family knowledge, aptitudes, and abilities (Moll et. al., 1992) and evolve with the ever-changing landscape of historical and immediate community and family knowledge (Paris, 2012). In this way, community and family literacies, practices, aptitudes, abilities, and knowledge form content that cultivates academic achievement (McGee Banks & Banks, 1995; Duncan-Andrade, 2022; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Moll et. al., 1992). As a content area and creative medium, theatre embodies specific and authentic literacy skills, providing a strong foundation for translanguage pedagogies in the creative PreK-12 learning space.

Literacy and Language in Theatre Instruction

In a theatrical production, literacy functions as a participatory sociocultural phenomenon (Gee, 2010) where actors perform by speaking with expression (Linguistic/Delivery), with movement (Gestural/Behavior, Bodily Physicality, Feeling and Affect, etc.); using sets, costumes, and lights (Visual/Color, Perspective, etc. and, Spatial/Architectonic Meanings) and sound (Audio/Music, Sound Effects, etc.) to create an imagined world; in an ephemeral, multimodal literacy event (New London Group, 1996). As a situated practice (Li, 2001), theatre and theatre instruction promote literacy development in an aesthetic context that activates all forms of language—speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Adapting an ethnographic approach to learning and understanding the community literacies of PreK-12 students positions teachers as learners, allowing them to design community-responsive lessons that situate students' linguistic assets and lived experiences at the heart of the curriculum (Duncan-Andrade, 2022; Moll et. al., 1992).

Translanguage Pedagogies

Implementing translanguage pedagogies within and through theatre instruction supports bilingual and biliteracy development. Translanguage

is the organic process of a bilingual speaker using all their language resources for negotiating information and using the best language, often both in one sentence or phrase, to communicate ideas (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Vogel & García, 2017). In an instructional setting, translanguage centers the learner, allowing them to use two or more languages to process information and express their ideas in their language choice (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Lewis et al., 2012; Vogel & García, 2017). Born of teaching practices developed in support of Welsh-language revitalization, translanguage pedagogies have always created emancipatory learning processes (Lewis et al., 2012; Williams, 1996).

In a theatre classroom, translanguage is a two-way heuristic for building understanding, text interpretation, and meaning-making between teachers and students. Ontologically, the colocation of languages in bilingualism, biliteracy, and multilingualism mediates cognition in the emergent/bilingual learner (Cummins, 1992; Vogel & García, 2017). The arts, and specifically theatre instruction, create a third space for language elaboration in multilingual students (Dutton & Rushton, 2022; Gutiérrez et al., 1999).

Translanguage Pedagogies in Theatre Instruction

Implementation of translanguage pedagogies in theatre approaches such as drama-based pedagogies, rehearsals of scripted materials, and creation of devised scripts, encourages language and literacy development, and individual and group-level prosocial behaviors (Campbell & Tigan, 2021; Dutton & Rushton, 2022; Pfeiffer et al., 2020). Translanguage mediates text analysis and comprehension in rehearsals because learners can use their full linguistic repertoire (Campbell & Tigan, 2021; Dutton & Rushton, 2022; Pfeiffer et al., 2020; Vogel & García, 2017). Prioritizing home language promotes emotional security and literacy confidence in young theatre artists (Dutton & Rushton, 2022). In essence, the symbiosis of the dialogic and lexical nature of theatre and translanguage supports bilingual and biliteracy development (Pfeiffer et al., 2020).

Methods

As an American English-only proficient K-12 theatre teacher, my work focused on empowering student voices and their languages. Limited by my inability to deliver explicit teaching of students' home language, I sought to support their developing bilingualism and biliteracy. Embracing translanguage pedagogies, I adapted a layered approach exemplified in three instructional units: *Community Literacy Investigations*, *Multilingual Texts and Language Play with Translated Texts*, and *Playwriting*. In each of these approaches, students' languages are tools for inquiry and discovery. Students' communities, lived experiences, and imaginations are centered in their work products.

Community Literacy Investigations

Theatre is a content area of storytelling, and young artists need authentic stories for their creative growth. Positioning students as active investigators of their friends' and families' favorite stories, folktales, plays, books, movies, and television shows ensures community literacies are represented in their theatre classroom. In this social inquiry project, students' home languages naturally emerged. The following multilingual student responses represent organic translanguage resulting from student interviews with friends and family members.

Question: *What are some of your favorite books and stories from childhood?*

- "El de la mujer arana"
- "El cucue, La llorona, Captain underpants, La chupacabra, El scooby doo"
- "Three Little Pigs and La Llorona"
- "El censo and La verdad sospechosa"
- "La Rata Vieja"
- "Pedro Infante"
- "The stories my grandma and grandpa told"
- "Romeo and Juliet and la Chupacabra"

Multilingual Texts and Language Play with Translated Texts

Through our *Family and Community Investigation* projects, students identified multilingual theatrical scripts and texts they wanted for our classroom play library. Multilingual texts ensure representation of home languages in the theatre classroom. Research supports cross-linguistic transfer of first language (L1) and second language (L2) skills in secondary students (Sparks et. al., 2019; Sparks et. al., 2023). Structured opportunities for students to read in their home language strengthen their home language skills and allow their literature experiences to reflect their authentic use of language outside of school (Lewis et al., 2012). Plus, children love reading in their home language!

Three types of multilingual theatre texts specific to theatre instruction are: scripts originally written in students' first or home language, play translations, and bilingual plays. It is important to find plays originally written in a students' home language. When possible, students also benefit from side-by-side translated texts (ex., Spanish/English). Though rarer, bilingual plays where characters speak in multiple languages are preferred to dialogue that is simply translated exchanges. Multilingual students need to reach scripts where translanguaging is found in the characters' dialogue. This reflects the language(s) of the community, where translanguaging is a common practice.

Side-by-side translations offer all students the opportunity to play with language. In this context, teachers and students with proficiency in only one language can learn from exposure to multiple languages. Providing students with the translated texts during read-alouds allows students to negotiate meaning in two languages. Translanguaging will naturally emerge in speaking and writing when students select their favorite phrases of dialogue in their language choice. When students share their favorite phrases of dialogue, a bilingual version of the text will surface. An exemplar of language selection from Federico García Lorca's *Blood Wedding* (García Lorca et al., 1955) follows.

Act I, Scene 1

A room painted yellow.

Bridegroom: (entering) Madre

Mother: ¿Qué?

Bridegroom: I'm off.

Mother: ¿Adónde?

Bridegroom: To the vineyard (*He makes as if to leave*)

Mother: Espera.

Bridegroom: What is it?

Mother: Hijo, el almuerzo.

Bridegroom: Déjalo. I'll eat grapes. Dame the knife.

Playwriting

Creative writing in students' home language can promote original ideas while supporting students' language choice. Derived texts can promote students' self-perceptions as a literate person (Ivey & Broaddus, 2007; Gallagher & Ntelioglou, 2011). Playwriting and creative dialogue writing place topics relevant to students, their lived experiences, and their languages at the center of the curriculum.

New young playwrights often benefit from "chunking" instruction. Students are first asked to list their favorite lines of dialogue from books, plays, movies, and TV. They then select a line of dialogue and engage in generative writing of dialogue responses. By allowing students to pull from their personal story repertoire, lines and phrases will emerge in different languages. The follow excerpt is from a bilingual play high school students wrote as part of a collective playwriting process (Stubbs, 2022).

Excerpt from *Lupita*

CONSUELA

I don't care. I'll do anything to make sure my daughter is okay. Not doing anything is worse! So I'll go whether you go with me or not.

(She leaves and he follows her outside)

DAD

Consuela please!

(Consuela gets in the car, her husband follows her.)

Consuela! Podrias POR FAVOR escucharme por una ves en tu vida.

CONSUELA

Ay Dios Mio Carlos, please, estamos hablando de nuestra Unica Hija.

DAD

Okay, esta bien, iremos a la policia.

Through these three theatre education transanguaging strategies, students' home languages emerge in their community literacies study, multilingual text study, and creative writings. Affording multilingual students opportunities to negotiate and construct meaning through their language choice supports their L1/L2 development and positions them for academic achievement in English *and* their home language(s).

Recommendations/Implications for Practice

In learning spaces, theatre teachers must recognize their role in supporting or arresting young artists' language journeys. Welcoming students' languages and lived experiences into theatre content responds to the unique creative and educational needs of multilingual learners. Transanguaging theatre pedagogies can support bi- and multiliteracy development in diverse learners.

Transanguaging Theatre Pedagogies

To implement theatre transanguaging pedagogies, teachers must remember and respect that one's language is deeply personal and individual. By observing students' comfort levels with their languages and responding sensitively, theatre teachers can create a third space of linguistic and creative safety. Students

are often conditioned to English-only learning, especially by the secondary levels. Therefore, teachers may need to invite students' languages into learning processes and explicitly tell students that their languages are welcome in the classroom.

Theatre Education Preparation Programs

Theatre educator preparation programs should include studies of bilingual education theory as part of general and specialization training. Theatre teacher education candidates (TECs) who are proficient in English only often do not know, or are not familiar with, the tenets of bilingual instruction. Training in bilingual and dual language instruction can disrupt the passing down of false beliefs in the overemphasis on English instruction and the underemphasis on home language instruction. This is particularly important in theatre education training, as speaking and speaking with expression are integral to this content area.

Theatre education preparation programs should train TECs in transanguaging pedagogies as they relate to theatre as a content area. In addition, theatre TECs should have access to learning and studying developmentally appropriate multilingual texts and scripts. Finally, future theatre teachers will benefit from learning ethnographic approaches to learning about the communities and the languages of families in the school where they teach.

Call to Action

As fine arts educators, we must recognize multicultural fine arts education and capitalize on opportunities for supporting home language development in PreK-12 theatre programs. We must continue implementing transanguaging pedagogies in the arts, taking advantage of our position outside of high-stakes English-only testing to support our multilingual, bilingual, and emergent bilingual students. As members of the greater education community, it is critical at this sociopolitical moment that we seek out and maximize opportunities to teach and promote understanding of transanguaging to circumvent the spread of misunderstandings of multilingual learners' literacy learning needs.

In solidarity with our bilingual students and colleagues, and with truth, we educators who are English-only proficient should consider identifying as such. As far back as 2011, Canagarajah questioned if “being monolingual is an ontological reality” (2011, p. 4) as many of us can count to ten in more than one language. In our endeavor to ally, we English (only) speaking teachers can do the internal work of shifting our perspective and thinking of ourselves as having ‘English-only proficiency’ among students and colleagues who have multiple language proficiencies.

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