Translanguaging in L2 Writing: A Critical Analysis of Current Research and Emerging Directions

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Abstract: This paper critically reviews current research on translanguaging in second language (L2) writing, focusing on how multilingual learners use their full linguistic repertoire during the writing process. It explores key strategies, such as back translation, rehearsing, and drafting in L1, that support idea generation, vocabulary development, and problem-solving across writing stages. While translanguaging fosters metalinguistic awareness and inclusivity, it also faces challenges from institutional norms favoring monolingualism. The paper identifies research gaps in areas such as advanced academic writing, digital tool integration, student agency, and long-term outcomes. It calls for further studies that reconcile theory with practice and support translanguaging as a legitimate and effective approach to L2 writing in diverse educational contexts.

1. Introduction

Since the term translanguaging was first introduced in Wales, it gained widespread recognition among scholars to define the language practices of bilingual and multilingual individuals (Otheguy et al., 2015) [1]. Translanguaging blurs traditional language boundaries rather than treating languages as separate systems, which allows multilingual individuals to flexibly use their linguistic resources based on context and communicative needs (Kubota, 2020) [2]. It enables second language (L2) writers to enhance comprehension, foster metalinguistic awareness, bridge linguistic gaps and express ideas effectively (García & Kleifgen, 2020) [3]. Current research on translanguaging in L2 writing primarily focuses on two key areas. The first is translanguaging pedagogy, which investigates its application as a teaching strategy to enhance L2 learning (e.g., Parmegiani, 2022[4]; Velasco & García, 2014[5]). The second area explores how translanguaging is employed during the L2 writing process, especially in stages like pre-writing, where learners utilize their entire linguistic repertoire to generate ideas and structure writings (e.g., Kim & Chang, 2022[6]; Adamson & Coulson, 2015[7]). While translanguaging pedagogy has gained significant attention, this paper will focus on L2 learners' usage and practices of translanguaging in the writing procedure, including the stages of planning, drafting, and revising written work. Although current literature is extensive, gaps exist in understanding translanguaging as a natural, learner-driven strategy in L2 writing, particularly regarding its role in advanced academic tasks, integration with technology, institutional challenges, student-driven practices, long-term impact, and diverse applications across contexts.

2. Translanguaging and Strategic Problem-Solving in Writing

Over the past decade, research into translanguaging's strategic benefits to bilingual and multilingual students in writing has increased significantly. Firstly, bilingual writers employ specific cognitive strategies during the writing process, such as back translation, where they translate words or phrases into their first language (L1) to verify meaning (Wolfersberger, 2003[8]). Griva and Chostelidou (2013) [9] studied 32 bilingual students aged 10 to 12 from Albania, Russia, and Georgia to examine their difficulties and corresponding strategies while writing in Greek (L2) and English (foreign language). Research findings revealed that experienced bilingual writers demonstrated a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of their writing processes, adopting both cognitive and metacognitive strategies more flexibly (Griva & Chostelidou, 2013). Among these strategies, back translation is employed to overcome writing weaknesses, select appropriate vocabulary and organize ideas effectively (Griva & Chostelidou, 2013).

Another common strategy is rehearsing, where writers experiment with multiple linguistic options to find the most appropriate expression (Velasco & García, 2014). Pap (2016) [10] examined multilingual Transylvanian-Hungarians' strategies for writing narrative texts in English as their third language. The research found that participants relied on their first language (Hungarian) for task management, while their second language (Romanian) supported linguistic generation in their third language, English (Pap, 2016). These results underscore the active interaction of different languages in the writing process of multilinguals. Similarly, the strategy of postponing allows writers to temporarily use a placeholder word from one language and revisit it later to refine their choice (Porte, 1996) [11]. Tullock and Fernández-Villanueva (2013) [12] explored how multilingual speakers of German, Spanish, and Catalan at a German language school in Barcelona employed their entire linguistic repertoires to overcome lexical challenges while writing in English, their fourth language. The study revealed that participants frequently activated lexical items across languages and used cognate forms to find suitable words (Tullock & Fernández-Villanueva, 2013). Wang and Wen (2002) [13] emphasize that the use of these strategies varies by proficiency level, as lower-proficiency writers rely on translanguaging to overcome linguistic gaps, while more advanced writers use it less frequently as their L2 proficiency increases. These strategies support how translanguaging is a powerful tool for problem-solving and self-regulation in multilingual writing and how it enables writers to create coherent and effective texts.

3. Writing Process Enhancement through Translanguaging

Since writing is a recursive process that includes continuous movement between pre-writing, planning, drafting, revising and editing stages, translanguaging enhances this process by allowing multilingual writers to utilize their entire linguistic repertoire to address challenges in writing and create meaning (Velasco & García, 2014). The application of translanguaging in the pre-writing stage attracted the most attention from scholars as it allows students to utilize their familiar languages, which can enhance their planning and idea generation. For instance, Sano's (2018) [14] study explored how translanguaging impacts prewriting discussions in L2 English writing among Japanese university students. Four conditions were compared in the study: no prewriting discussion, discussion in English, discussion in Japanese, and translanguaging discussions (mixing both languages) (Sano, 2018). The findings revealed that translanguaging discussions were particularly effective, helping students generate more ideas, enhance vocabulary recall, support topic exploration and overcome communication breakdowns compared to English-only discussions (Sano, 2018). Likewise, Adamson and Coulson's (2015) research examined the use of translanguaging in English academic writing preparation. Findings highlighted that translanguaging supported lower-proficiency students in understanding complex academic tasks, completing writing assignments, and managing multilingual

references (Adamson & Coulson, 2015). The study also noted that, despite teacher encouragement, students' reliance on L1 references decreased over time, suggesting growing student autonomy and strategic use of linguistic resources (Adamson & Coulson, 2015).

In the drafting phase, translanguaging enables students to draft in their home language before translating into the target language. In a study by Chen et al. (2019) [15], college students in Chinese, China used translanguaging to draft in Chinese before translating into English, which helped them convey more information and express deeper ideas. Zhang and Hadjioannou (2021) [16] also observed the writing performance of Chinese graduate students, who used their native language to support thinking and drafting. However, the research noted that while translanguaging facilitated students' writing, it could also result in contradictory bilingual identities, perceptual difficulties, and conflicts regarding the goals of academic communication (Zhang & Hadjioannou, 2021). The findings emphasize the need to create supportive translanguaging spaces and provide targeted academic writing instruction to enhance students' writing performance in higher education (Zhang & Hadjioannou, 2021).

Additionally, current research examines the role and impact of translanguaging in providing feedback on L2 writing. On the one hand, translanguaging facilitates meaning negotiation in peer feedback sessions, allowing students to scaffold each other's learning. For example, Li and Wang (2024) [17] collected data from a 16-week tutorial program in Central China and revealed how translanguaging functioned as a mediational tool to facilitate feedback, deepen content understanding, encourage learner engagement, boost comprehension, and offer emotional support. The study also highlighted the potential of translanguaging to decolonize English-dominant curricula and promote equity in educational environments for students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Li & Wang, 2024). On the other hand, the effectiveness of applying translanguaging in giving feedback can vary based on the context, learner attitudes, and the stage of feedback. Sun and Zhang (2022) [18] analyzed the role of translanguaging in online peer feedback for L2 writing by comparing an experimental group (N=40) using translanguaging with a control group (N=39) limited to English-only feedback. Quantitative results showed that translanguaging critically improved L2 writing outcomes during the initial round of peer feedback, but this effect diminished in subsequent rounds. Qualitative findings revealed that both feedback approaches had benefits and argued that variables, including motivation, self-discipline, agency, and translanguaging awareness, play crucial roles in maximizing the effectiveness of translanguaging practices in L2 writing. Similarly, Wang and East (2023) [19] analyzed compositions and survey responses of 163 Mandarin learners in New Zealand and found that students' perceptions of translanguaging in feedback can vary. While some students supported the creative, multimodal feedback design, others were skeptical, viewing translanguaging as unnecessary or inauthentic, potentially limiting its effectiveness in enhancing learning outcomes.

4. Cognitive and Communicative Benefits of Translanguaging in Writing

Translanguaging in writing tasks is also a powerful approach that enhances communicative effectiveness, challenges language hierarchies, and fosters authentic voices and inclusive learning environments. For instance, Rafi and Morgan (2022) [20] investigated its impact on bilingual students in an English-medium academic writing class in Bangladesh. Their findings revealed that the English-only policy hindered student participation while translanguaging strategies improved metalinguistic and sociolinguistic awareness and engagement in writing tasks (Rafi & Morgan, 2022). Similarly, Machura (2020) [21] compared two groups of German undergraduates studying English Linguistics and found that translanguaging helps reduce the cognitive burden of L2 writing by permitting students to use their full linguistic repertoire. Although this approach can initially feel cognitively demanding due to mental switching between languages, it facilitates deeper comprehension and more thorough

processing of source material, ultimately leading to better academic outcomes (Machura, 2020). Furthermore, Kiramba (2017) [22] explored translanguaging in the writing practices of multilingual fourth-grade classrooms in Kenya. Translanguaging was shown to reduce linguistic constraints, allowing students to express ideas authentically and enhance their communicative goals (Kiramba, 2017). However, Kenya's rigid language separation policies often penalized these practices and created tensions between student agency and institutional expectations (Kiramba, 2017). The study advocated for integrating multilingual resources as cognitive tools to support authentic expression and promote inclusive teaching practices (Kiramba, 2017).

5. Problematizing the translanguaging practice in Writing

Despite the potential advantages of employing translanguaging in the writing process, there is an ongoing debate about the gap between the theoretical implications and practical considerations of translanguaging in fostering the L2 writing process, particularly in contexts with entrenched language norms and ideologies. While translanguaging fosters inclusivity and supports cognitive and linguistic development, it often clashes with institutional practices prioritizing monolingual or standardized language use (Kubota, 2020). As Rafi and Morgan (2022) pointed out in their research in Bangladesh, the rigid language separation and monolingual policies created tensions between student agency and institutional expectations, which hindered student engagement in the translanguaging practice in writing. As an instructor, Kubota (2020) argued that it is challenging to introduce translanguaging into class because of the "gap between the powerful monolingual, monocultural, and white supremacist ideology…and renewed perspectives that question fixed categorical boundaries between languages and valorize fluidity and contingency" (p. 310). Furthermore, having been trained only in academic writing in English, many scholars who promote translanguaging writing are reluctant to write and publish in their L1, calling into question the need to promote academic biliteracy and translanguaging practices for minoritized students (Kubota, 2020). Another concern is about the professional training and skill-building of writing instructors. Unlike their counterparts in K-12 education, university writing instructors are often not mandated to take formal training in teaching writing courses (Kubota, 2020). Ferris (2014) [23] questions how instructors can effectively adopt translingual approaches when supporters of translanguaging fail to offer comprehensive pedagogical frameworks to guide implementation. These concerns represent a disconnect between idealized theories and the practical limitations in the real world.

6. Current Research Gaps and Future Research Directions

Despite the developing body of research on translanguaging in L2 writing, gaps remain in understanding its role in advanced academic tasks, integration with technology, institutional challenges, student-driven practices, long-term impact, and diverse applications across contexts. First, most research on translanguaging focuses on basic or intermediate writing tasks, such as pre-writing discussions (e.g. Turnbull, 2019) [24] or classroom assignments (e.g. Adamson & Coulson, 2015). However, its role in more complicated writing tasks, such as research papers and dissertations, remains unexplored. Future studies could evaluate how translanguaging supports complex cognitive processes like criticizing literature, constructing arguments, or academic discourse. A possible research question is to discuss how multilingual graduate students utilize translanguaging when drafting literature reviews or discussing their findings in a research paper.

Secondly, the intersection of translanguaging and digital tools remains to be discussed despite the growing role of technology in education. Chen et al. (2019) demonstrated how online translation tools enabled Chinese students to use different linguistic resources during academic writing tasks and improve their ability to express ideas and use advanced vocabulary. However, few studies have

considered the implications of utilizing such tools in translanguaging practices. A potential research topic is to investigate how emerging technologies, such as AI-powered writing assistants, can support translanguaging. Additionally, studies could address potential challenges, such as overreliance on machine translation or the reinforcement of linguistic hierarchies through algorithmic biases. Numerous studies suggest that algorithmic biases in machine translation and AI writing generators can amplify existing linguistic hierarchies and reduce linguistic richness (e.g. Lee, 2023[25]; Vanmassenhove et al., 2021[26]). It is worth analyzing the paradox between translanguaging practices that promote linguistic variety and inclusivity and the use of digital tools that may inadvertently reinforce linguistic hierarchies and limit diversity through algorithmic biases.

Moreover, institutional policies, language ideologies, and sociocultural contexts often conflict with translanguaging practices, which have been discussed before. However, there is a lack of studies offering solutions to reconcile institutional expectations with implementing translanguaging in writing practices. Breaking down deeply rooted language hierarchies and ideologies also requires considering the views of those who benefit from them (Poza, 2017[27]). Future research could explore the perceptions of local administrations and figure out how institutional frameworks can be adapted to fit translanguaging and how teacher training programs address the linguistic norms or the broad sociocultural context that might limit multilingual practices. Also, the research could examine how curriculum designs might integrate translanguaging without compromising the development of academic writing conventions in the target language.

Another potential gap is to explore how students independently utilize translanguaging in their writing process, as most existing research analyzes translanguaging from an instructional perspective rather than exploring learners' agency in employing these strategies. In fact, Velasco and García (2014) emphasized translanguaging's role in helping students self-regulate their writing processes by bridging linguistic gaps and generating ideas. Based on this point, future research should investigate how students apply translanguaging autonomously to manage challenges during various stages of the writing process. For instance, students may strategically switch between languages to scaffold complex ideas and verify meaning and vocabulary options. Furthermore, scholars could conduct longitudinal research to study the long-term effects of translanguaging on writing fluency and multilingual development and expand its scope to diverse sociolinguistic contexts to better understand its global applicability and unique challenges across different educational systems.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, translanguaging has the potential to enhance communicative effectiveness, challenge language hierarchies, and foster inclusive learning environments in the L2 writing process. However, as Mazak and Carroll (2016) [28] argue, translanguaging is an ideology that requires continuous and critical examination, particularly in academic writing contexts governed by rigid linguistic norms. These norms are deeply embedded within broader social structures and reinforced by institutional gatekeeping, where professors and academic bureaucracy uphold standards that define success based on monolingual or standardized conventions (Rafi & Morgan, 2022). Such practices often marginalize multilingual learners and promote linguistic nationalism, creating tensions between translanguaging's theoretical benefits and real-world limitations. To bridge these gaps, future research should reconcile institutional expectations with translanguaging practices, explore learners' autonomous use of translanguaging, and expand studies to diverse sociolinguistic contexts, which are essential to addressing practical and theoretical challenges. Addressing these gaps will allow translanguaging practices to effectively support multilingual writers and challenge traditional linguistic hierarchies in academic writing contexts.

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