

BRIEFING SHEET

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MULTILINGUALISM, TRANSLANGUAGING AND LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT

This Briefing Sheet is written by UKALTA, the UK Association for Language Testing and Assessment, to answer the following questions.

- What view of language traditionally underpins teaching, learning and assessment?
- What does the term *multilingualism* usually refer to?
- What is meant by the term *translanguaging*?
- Why are the concepts of *multilingualism* and *translanguaging* important today?
- What are the implications of both concepts for language assessment?

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NOTE: The content of this briefing sheet reflects the author's perspective as an English as an additional/second language education professional working in a UK context. For reasons of brevity and space, referencing is kept to a minimum, but the author is happy to supply a full set of references on request.

WHAT VIEW OF LANGUAGE TRADITIONALLY UNDERPINS TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT?

For the best part of a century many language professionals (especially those working in the Global North) have worked with a set of assumptions about 'language' in monolingual terms. For instance, we have tended to think of language in the singular – teaching English (as a 'first language' school subject and as an additional/second/foreign language), setting an English or French curriculum (as a school subject), testing English internationally (via large-scale tests such as IELTS or TOEFLⁱ), examining French, Mandarin, Spanish, Welsh (as school subjectsⁱⁱ).

Many of these 'singularity' assumptions are still firmly embedded in our public education and professional training infrastructures and practices, so much so that they continue to underpin a good deal of routinized work activities. However, developing research and theorizing in the field of *multilingualism* (including *translanguaging* and *plurilingualism*) have pointed to the need to move beyond this type of singularity thinking and to take account of conceptual shifts and changing perspectives.

This Briefing Sheet provides a summary exposition of the key lines of thinking in the past twenty years or so. Some of these are beginning to reframe many key issues in language education such as 'what counts as effective language use in communication?' The final section raises some possible implications of this body of scholarship for language assessment. 'Language assessment' is used as a superordinate term to cover different approaches and forms including summatively oriented examinations and tests, and formatively oriented classroom-based teacher assessment.

WHAT DOES THE TERM MULTILINGUALISM REFER TO?

Most applied linguists and language educators would now see that language teaching and learning are acts of *multilingualism*, and that all learners, and most teachers (other than those who are monolingual speakers of the target language), are themselves multilinguals. Yet,

multilingualism has not always been a visible part of the pedagogic concerns in language teaching in recent times, particularly in relation to English language teaching (ELT). It is helpful to understand, therefore, how *monolingualism* and *multilingualism* in language teaching and language communication more broadly have been construed.

Multilingualism has not always been a visible part of the pedagogic concerns in language teaching

Some early research that gained prominence within ELT regarded languages as separate and bounded entities; successful multilinguals would generally not alternate between their languages. According to this language separation view, a successful language learner is someone who has gained native-like or near-native-like competence in an additional language/s. A multilingual speaker is regarded as someone who has acquired two or more distinct languages, so a successful multilingual speaker is, so to speak, two or more monolinguals in one. This linguistic separation has been described as 'two solitudes' in relation to language pedagogy (Cummins, 2007).

It is interesting to note that even in a teaching approach that is monolingually oriented, students' and teachers' own language/s do in fact enter into the classroom. The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach that has been widely promoted in ELT worldwide in the past forty years has been predominantly monolingual in orientation. However, the monolingual orientation in CLT is more often in the breach than the observance, particularly where teachers and students share a common first language background (other than English). Although it is difficult to be accurate about the extent of first language use in ELT classrooms in different world locations, some research suggests that exclusive use of English is rare, and that it is not unusual for students' own language to account for 60–70% of the words used in classroom activities. It would seem that, by most accounts, *multilingualism* is an inextricable dimension of language teaching and learning, and that, in practice, the use of students' and teachers' own language/s is never very far away from classroom activities.

Multilingualism is an inextricable dimension of language teaching and learning

A linguistic separationist view, as described above, would suggest that when learners make use of their own language/s in learning activities (or indeed in any instance of language use), they are seen to be switching from one language system/code into another, a phenomenon which is generally labelled as *code-switching*. A good deal of *code-switching* research in language education, however, has been concerned with its pedagogic value in terms of helping the learners to learn an additional language/s. And it was this concern for pedagogic facilitation that foreshadowed the emergence of the multifaceted and still evolving meanings of *translanguaging* in more recent times.

WHAT IS MEANT BY THE TERM TRANSLANGUAGING?

The term *translanguaging* was translated from the Welsh ‘trawsieithu’ and attributed to Cen Williams, a Welsh educator who developed the pedagogical practice of using two languages for teaching and learning in Welsh classrooms in the 1980s.

It is important to recognize the political backdrop for this pedagogic move. Welsh language revitalization was part of Welsh nationalist activism, leading to phrases such as ‘language struggle’, ‘fighting for survival’ and ‘language battleground’ being used to describe this type of linguistic struggle within an English-dominant educational context. *Translanguaging* was understood as a natural way of simultaneously developing and extending a child’s bilingualism within a curriculum context while also deepening understanding of the subject content in school education. In addition to pedagogic considerations, the idea that Welsh and English together should be seen as holistic and advantageous clearly made sense in the struggle of national recognition within a UK context.

Translanguaging - ‘the deployment of a speaker’s full linguistic repertoire...’

More recently, *translanguaging* has been described as ‘the deployment of a speaker’s full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages’ (Otheguy et al, 2015:281). It recognises that speakers draw on their previous experiences of communication in similar circumstances, on similar topics, and with similar interlocutors.

The following images provide a vivid example of *translanguaging*:



I took the above photograph of a wall display at an underground train station in Stockholm in 2014. The juxtaposing of Swedish and English words reflected the urban youth language usage in the city. I was informed that these posters were designed to 'encourage' some young people to buy a ticket (rather than to avoid paying by jumping over the turnstiles at station entrances).

In language teaching, some scholars have used the term *linguaging* to describe the cognitive process of negotiating and producing meaningful, comprehensible output as part of language learning, i.e., 'a process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language' (Swain, 2006:97).

WHY ARE THE CONCEPTS OF TRANS-LINGUAGING, MULTILINGUALISM, AND PLURILINGUALISM IMPORTANT?

The concept of *translanguaging* has energized discussions on the nature of language in its many guises (including *multilingualism* and *plurilingualism*), linguistic rights in relation to social equity and justice, and models of language use for pedagogy and assessment.

We now understand that the politics of social justice forms a part of the *translanguaging* scholarship, particularly in linguistically diverse societies. Some researchers highlight a concern to disrupt traditional language ideologies and norms and thus counter established relations of power. Other scholars explicitly engage with *translanguaging* as a means of 'leveraging' minoritized multilingual students' learning in school systems where there exists educational inequality between ethnolinguistic groups. The use and value of flexible uses of languages (e.g., English and Spanish in some areas in the USA) have been proposed as an alternative to a

monoglossic standard language-based approach to educational policy and practice (e.g., standard English in linguistically diverse schools and colleges in the UK). A *translanguaging* perspective can also be adopted to help discuss the need to reject harmful coloniality and racialized language norms in education.

Translanguaging as a dynamic and always emergent practice is reflected in the expanded conceptualisation of language proficiency in the [CEFR 2001](#) and its [Companion Volume \(CV\) 2020](#), particularly in relation to *plurilingualism* and *mediation*. *Mediation* is ‘... a social and cultural process of creating conditions for communication and cooperation, facing and hopefully defusing any delicate situations and tensions that may arise. Particularly with regard to cross-lingual mediation, users should remember that this inevitably also involves social and cultural competence as well as plurilingual competence’ (Council of Europe, 2020:91). Thus a plurilingual speaker-mediator does not keep their languages in separate mental compartments but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact. In actual language use a plurilingual ‘can call flexibly upon different parts of this competence to achieve effective communication with a particular interlocutor’ (Council of Europe, 2001:4). This gives user/learners licence ‘to use all their linguistic resources when necessary, encouraging them to see similarities and regularities as well as differences between languages and cultures’ (Council of Europe, 2020:30).

Translanguaging ... is reflected in the expanded conceptualisation of language proficiency in the CEFR

It is worth re-emphasizing here that *translanguaging*, and *plurilingual mediation* as conceptualised in the CEFR, are not merely neologisms for *code-switching*. A good deal of *code-switching* scholarship has been premised on the linguistic separationist view – *code-switching* as instances of drawing words/phrases from a ‘guest’ language to express meaning in the ‘host’ language whose grammatical conventions would prevail (cf Auer, 1999). As seen in the earlier Swedish-English example, *translanguaging* does not necessarily respect language boundaries grammatically or structurally. In one way or another the concept of *translanguaging* has stretched our understanding of language and language communication, with potential implications for language assessment.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THESE CONCEPTS FOR LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT?

The current conceptualisations of flexible *multilingualism* and *translanguaging* point to an opening up of linguistic boundaries between different languages. So, in communities and situations (e.g., English language classrooms) where *translanguaging* is routine but not acknowledged, there is now a principled argument for greater recognition of such practice. In terms of language assessment this argument can help make conceptual and operational moves in a number of ways, all of which would undoubtedly benefit from further research and theorising.

In educational and social contexts where *translanguaging* is part of routine communicative practices, it would now be possible to conceive of the possibility of assessing it as language practice, e.g., translanguaging practices in Wales (Welsh-English-other languages) and in Hong Kong (Cantonese-English-other languages). In such scenarios the focus of language assessment is not necessarily on knowledge and use of particular sets of vocabulary and grammar; the focus of attention is likely to be communicative accomplishment. This shift of focus will raise questions such as: 'What counts as successful communication?' and 'Can the criterial considerations for success be rendered for rating purposes?'. A related area of possible action is the provision of written or spoken translingual rubrics (instructions for students/test-takers and teachers/invigilators) and accommodations where formal tests and examinations are encoded in a single language. This could be extended to students' responding in translingual spoken and/or written expressions (i.e., all linguistic resources used flexibly, as seen in the Swedish-English example above). This kind of provision would be particularly relevant to the assessment of subject knowledge in contexts where some students from diverse linguistic communities are still learning the (single) language of schooling. All of this would suggest a need for greater situated locally developed rating criteria to deal with contingencies of language use.

Another potentially generative idea is assessing language creativity. If *translanguaging* is a process of dynamic and fluid meaning and knowledge construction, then there is an opportunity to tap into speakers'/writers' neologisms and creative rendering of ideas and expressions associated with their knowledge and skills in their total linguistic and cultural repertoires. These are just some of the immediately conceivable ways of exploring the affordances of *translanguaging* in relation to language

assessment. There will be undoubtedly many other ideas as the field opens up.

The expansion in the horizon for language assessment brought about by the concept of *translanguaging* also poses some fundamental epistemological challenges. Hitherto, language assessment, particularly in standardised testing, has tended to be founded on a sense of epistemic stability in terms of fabrics of language (e.g., lexicogrammar, pronunciation), models of social rules of use, describable target language use and so on. If *translanguaging*, as has been suggested, is a 'practice that involves dynamic and functionally integrated use of different languages and language varieties ... [and is] a process of knowledge construction that goes beyond language(s)' (Li and Lin, 2019:211), then any sense of linguistic and pragmatic stability is a chimera.

If *translanguaging* is inherently fluid and always emergent, then there is a need to re-think what counts as construct, particularly in psychometric terms. In situations where the outcome of language use in *mediation* is contingent on interlocutors' competent use of linguacultural knowledge in context, we will need to find ways of formulating rating scales and descriptors that are capable of working with interlocutor linguacultural sensibilities and other highly variable situated factors, such as the range of acceptable translingual pragmatics. If in *plurilingual mediation* interlocutors are expected to call on their multilingual knowledge and skills flexibly, then we need to develop a clearer sense of how this flexibility is operationalized in rating scales, and how much multi-linguacultural knowledge and skills are needed at different proficiency levels. (For more detailed discussion of the above issues, see Leung 2022a, 2022b; Saville and Seed, 2022).

The concept of *translanguaging* has captured the attention of language education professionals and researchers. It has brought a different perspective on language and language use that can offer additional theoretical and empirical insights in *multilingualism* in society. At the same time, it has also opened up a plethora of issues for linguistics, applied linguistics, language education and language assessment. The inherently dynamic, fluid and open-ended nature of this perspective disrupts many of the established assumptions underpinning language assessment. As the concept of *translanguaging* itself is still evolving, we find ourselves at a moment of flux. At this time there are more questions than answers.

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ⁱ International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)

ⁱⁱ General Certificate of Secondary Education (in England and Wales) at the age of 16