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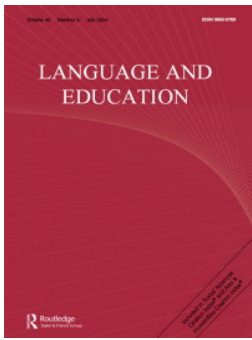
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'It helps bridge gaps': translanguaging as a pedagogy for inclusion at a community language school

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ABSTRACT

Translanguaging is increasingly used to describe how multilingual users make meaning by drawing across languages and modalities, and has been advanced as a socially-just pedagogy. Yet, recent criticisms around conceptual clarity and originality raise concerns about how it is understood and enacted. To explore whether and, if so, how (1) teachers' understandings of translanguaging inform their pedagogy, and (2) translanguaging practices shape participation, one Italian and two Spanish language teachers at a university-hosted community language school in York, UK, were invited to complete a questionnaire, and their lessons were audio-recorded over two months. Thematic analysis of teacher accounts and interactional episodes shows broad endorsement of translanguaging, both in principle (as a stance valuing multilingual meaning-making) and in practice (where planned instructional strategies blend with co-learning and responsive shifts). Teacher-led translanguaging enhanced target-language comprehension and engagement, while learners across varying proficiency levels treated translanguaging as the classroom norm, drawing on different languages and semiotic resources while pursuing language-specific goals. Breaking away from the target-language-only dogma, this community language school offers a compelling example of how translanguaging can serve as a context-responsive pedagogy for inclusion.

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Translanguaging pedagogy; pedagogical translanguaging; community language schools; complementary schools; heritage languages; inclusion

1. Introduction

Translanguaging has increasingly gained traction in language education as a socially-just pedagogy legitimising learners' flexible use of languages and modes, linking classroom work to lived experience, and opening participation for minoritised students (e.g. Li 2024; García and Leiva 2014; Poza 2017). Alongside this uptake, however, criticisms have questioned definitional clarity, the distinction from related notions such as code-switching, and the theoretical claim that multilinguals draw from a single, integrated linguistic system rather than discrete-but-interacting components (e.g. Treffers-Daller 2025a; MacSwan 2017).

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Against this backdrop, fine-grained accounts that connect educators' and scholars' understandings of translanguaging to classroom data seem needed.

Moreover, although substantial work addresses translanguaging in community/heritage language contexts (Duarte 2019), much focuses on settings where 'target-language-only' norms remain influential (e.g. Creese and Blackledge 2010; Li 2015). What remains under-specified is how teachers' understandings of translanguaging may inform their pedagogy in contexts that explicitly encourage translanguaging. York St John University's Community Language School in York, UK, is one such site: translanguaging is not merely endorsed but integrated into professional development, and the school distinctively serves both heritage language learners who bring existing, if variable, proficiencies and cultural ties to the target language, and language learners from non-heritage backgrounds (York St John University, n.d.). With these learner groups differing in their linguistic profiles, motivations and instructional needs (see Valdés 2005), this context also offers a particularly interesting site for examining how any translanguaging practices emerging in interaction may shape participation.

In the present article, we therefore focus on Italian and Spanish classes at this community language school to address the above points empirically. Using teacher questionnaires, transcriptions of audio-recorded lessons and fieldnotes collected over two months, we examine elements of 'translanguaging pedagogy' (García et al. 2017; Li 2024) and 'pedagogical translanguaging' (Cenoz and Gorter 2017, 2020, 2021) as they become visible in practice. The article proceeds through a literature review situating translanguaging in language pedagogy and community language contexts, followed by the methodology, a thematic analysis of questionnaire and classroom data, and a discussion of findings and their implications for research and pedagogy.

2. Literature review

2.1. Language teaching approaches and the emergence of translanguaging

For decades, language pedagogy has been heavily influenced by monolingual ideologies, which have manifested most prominently in the target-language-only approach. This approach goes back to the 1970s, with the advent of Communicative Language Teaching (Widdowson 1978) which placed emphasis on language as a means to make meaning, thus prioritising the development of so-called 'communicative competence' (Hymes 1972; Canale and Swain 1980). The main belief was that classroom practice should replicate the conditions of first-language (L1) immersion; target-language-only policies prohibit the use of students' home languages, framing them as a source of interference rather than a resource for learning, to rather increase target-language exposure (Littlewood and Yu 2011).

In practice, however, such an approach is difficult to implement if students have different L1s or they share the same L1 as their teacher (Cook 2001). What is more, a growing body of research has challenged the efficacy of this approach, demonstrating that strict language separation can create anxiety, inhibit comprehension, and devalue multilingual learners' linguistic identities (Cook 2001; Turnbull and Dailey-O'Cain 2009).

In response, scholars have long argued that a principled, systematic use of the L1 can be a powerful pedagogical tool, serving as a cognitive scaffold and an affective bridge to support learning in the target language (e.g. Riordan 2018; Swain and Lapkin 2000). As Turnbull

and Dailey-O’Cain (2009, p.183) put it, the L1 acts as ‘a cognitive and meta-cognitive tool, as a strategic organiser, and as a scaffold for language development... help[ing] learners navigate a bilingual identity and thereby learn to function as a bilingual’.

Building on this foundation, recent years have seen a significant ‘paradigm shift’ towards translanguaging, considered to be a more holistic and socially-just pedagogy (see Anderson 2024). The term has evolved significantly since its initial coinage (as *trowsieithu*) in Wales, when Williams (1994) remarked on the benefits that allowing students to read in one language and discuss in another seemed to yield both for comprehension and literacy skills. As Li (2018) reminds us, while the word ‘linguaging’ places the focus on the ongoing practice of ‘doing’ language (a notion predating translanguaging scholarship, taken up differently across scholarly traditions), the prefix ‘trans-’ has further been extended, over the years, from moving *across* socially-constructed languages to going *beyond* linguistic structures, systems and modalities. As Lewis et al. (2012, p. 647) remark, ‘the term [translanguaging] has been generalised from school to street’ and, with it, its understanding has also mutated in time.

Extending translanguaging from classroom practice to a ‘theory of language’ (Li 2018) has sharpened debate. One of the main points of contention is the ‘strong’ proposal, on which recent translanguaging conceptualisations rely, that multilingual users draw freely from a single, largely integrated system: a ‘unitary linguistic *repertoire*’ (García and Otheguy 2020; Otheguy et al. 2019). A range of psycholinguistic evidence challenges the existence of a fully unitary system in bi/multilinguals (see Treffers-Daller 2025a), which lends support to models where bi/multilinguals’ *repertoire* is made up of discrete components that can still influence each other (e.g. MacSwan 2017), running contrary to the idea that this may be ‘anchored in sociocultural beliefs, not in psycholinguistic properties’ (Otheguy et al. 2019, p. 628). Several authors have thus sought greater precision, including recent proposals for psycholinguistically-grounded refinements for a unitary model (see Treffers-Daller 2025b).

While the debate on the architecture of multilingual competence is ongoing, it need not preclude pedagogical inquiry into how teachers and learners deploy their linguistic and meaning-making resources in the classroom. Indeed, a parallel evolution has unfolded in pedagogy, where two distinct yet complementary frames organise practice.

‘Translanguaging pedagogy’ (García et al. 2017) refers to a broad educational orientation comprising: ‘stance’ (i.e. teachers’ principled commitment to valuing multilinguals’ everyday practices and identities); ‘design’ (i.e. the prior planning of tasks, materials and assessments that braid multilingual meaning-making resources); and responsive ‘shifts’ (i.e. the in-the-moment moves that adjust to learners’ needs in real time). Recent formulations (Li 2024) amplify two processual elements: ‘co-learning’, where teachers and students move beyond dispenser/receptacle roles to become joint problem-solvers, and ‘transpositioning’, where teachers and students consciously step out of preset identities and perspectives, often through multimodality, to reframe relations and possibilities (Li 2011, 2018, 2024).

‘Pedagogical translanguaging’ (Cenoz and Gorter 2017, 2020, 2021), in turn, emerges as a useful framework of reference in planned instruction and assessment, and, as such, overlaps with the concept of ‘design’ outlined above (Cenoz and Gorter 2021, p. 21). Namely, through the incorporation of translanguaging from the planning and designing stages of lessons in immersed, minority-language or CLIL programmes, teachers allow multilinguals and emergent multilinguals alike to draw from the multiple languages at their disposal to

develop language and academic subjects (Cenoz and Gorter 2020). Activities can be designed at phonological, lexical, morpho-syntactic, pragmatic and discourse levels, and implemented in both language and content classes (e.g. Leonet et al. 2017; Cenoz and Santos 2020). Through the analysis and reflection on languages cross-linguistically, students can benefit from their (emergent) multilingualism, ultimately enhancing their metalinguistic awareness (García et al. 2017; Cenoz and Gorter 2021).

In Bonacina-Pugh et al.'s (2021) terms, this strand aligns with a more 'fixed' (rather than 'fluid') 'linguaging approach': it legitimises flexible meaning-making while retaining the pedagogical salience of 'named' languages for analysis, goal setting and assessment. In minority/heritage language contexts, this work is paired with 'sustainable translanguaging' (Cenoz and Gorter 2017) principles to prevent stronger societal languages from eclipsing minority languages: namely, planned 'breathing spaces' for minority languages, explicit metalinguistic and socio-linguistic work on language and power dynamics, as well as linking pedagogical translanguaging to spontaneous translanguaging (in and outside of the classroom).

Moreover, translanguaging has been explicitly linked to inclusion and social-justice agendas. Li (2024) argues that translanguaging pedagogy, rather than merely pedagogical translanguaging, requires a change of mindset oriented towards inclusion, achieved through co-learning and transpositioning. Anderson (2026, p. 3) goes further, suggesting that 'translanguaging is inclusion for multilingual learners', while also creating opportunities for monolingual learners to engage meaningfully with multilingualism. At the same time, scholars caution against uncritical celebration: Sah and Li (2024) note that without attention to power dynamics and intentional teacher development, translanguaging risks selective rather than inclusive enactment. Thus, translanguaging's inclusive potential is not automatic but rather seems to depend on how it is understood and operationalised in practice: a question we address empirically in the present study.

Taken together, the evidence reviewed here marks a move beyond target-language-only ideologies and practices. Yet, monolingual ideals and norms still influence some settings where translanguaging is common, including community language schools, which we now turn to review.

2.2. Translanguaging in community/heritage language learning contexts

A community language school (hereafter 'CLS'; also called 'heritage', 'complementary', 'supplementary', 'Saturday' school, among others) is typically a community-run, volunteer-staffed programme that operates outside mainstream hours to sustain heritage languages and cultures, offering social safe spaces for children and families worldwide (Li 2006; Blackledge and Creese 2010; Nordstrom et al. 2024). CLS teaching ecologies are distinctive, as they usually entail limited weekly contact time, mixed age/proficiency groups, uneven resources and curricula that often draw on homeland textbooks or exam syllabi (Nordstrom 2015).

In this context, target-language-only (or 'heritage/minority-language-only') policies and underlying ideologies remain common (Zakharia and Bishop 2013), especially where teachers worry that use of the dominant societal language will erode already fragile minority-language input, as echoed in Cenoz and Gorter's (2017) reasons behind 'sustainable translanguaging' practices. However, the implementation of monolingual approaches to teaching often comes, as a result, with tensions 'between the flexible heteroglossic practices

exhibited in the teaching and learning process, and the inflexible monoglossic policies and deeply engrained beliefs about the development of separate languages' (Zakharia and Bishop 2013, p. 184).

Indeed, said disconnect has been documented in various studies on translanguaging in CLS contexts around the world (Nordstrom 2015). In the UK, Creese and Blackledge (2010) observe a Gujarati heritage language class, where Gujarati suffixes are added to English words by the teacher, and both teachers and students draw from both Gujarati and English in their joint meaning-making process. In Li (2014), too, translanguaging (seen here as moving between languages and modalities, such as speaking and writing) emerges as common practice among pupils and teachers in a complementary school class in England, acting as a resource for learning, problem-solving and linguistic/identity development (such as through a discussion on the legitimacy of different Chinese varieties). In other work on Chinese complementary schools in Birmingham, Huang (2018, 2021) highlights the co-existence of very distinct ideologies, including beliefs that bilingualism involves knowing and using two fixed and separate languages, a monolingual preference within the school, *as well as* translanguaging practices. In fact, while some teachers have monolingual mindsets and adopt Chinese-only pedagogies, others embrace translanguaging as a standard practice within their classes. Most recently, Silvestri (2025), in ethnographic research in an Italian complementary school in London, highlights how critical pedagogies characterised by participatory lesson planning, dialogical teaching and flattened teacher-student hierarchies, combined with translanguaging practices, enabled the creation of a 'breathing space' where multilingual/cultural identities could be discovered, explored and experimented with.

CLSs are therefore pivotal sites where macro-level monolingual ideologies collide with the heteroglossic realities of day-to-day teaching and learning. Top-down target-language-only expectations can narrow teacher agency, with educators often reporting guilt or self-censure when drawing on the societal language to scaffold learning (García 2009; Blackledge and Creese 2010), and students (as well as their parents) are equally affected by the same ideologies which de-legitimise their bi/multilingual resources by treating them as inappropriate (García and Leiva 2014) leading to resistance and limited investment in learning (Li 2011).

2.3. Summary and research aims

Altogether, the studies reviewed here indicate that translanguaging can be a productive, inclusive and socially-just pedagogy, enabling learners to draw from different languages and meaning-making resources, heightening metalinguistic awareness and supporting participation and confidence (e.g. García and Leiva 2014; García et al. 2017; Cenoz and Gorter 2021; Li 2024). Yet target-language-only ideologies remain influential, particularly in community/heritage language programmes, where classes are often delivered by volunteers without linguistic or pedagogical training, many of whom are therefore unaware of multilingual language teaching approaches and their benefits. This constrains translanguaging uptake and narrows legitimate classroom practices, with possibly negative consequences for both teachers and learners (e.g. Creese and Blackledge 2010; Zakharia and Bishop 2013; Nordstrom 2015). At the same time, work in complementary schools documents routine heteroglossic practices and the pedagogical potential of flexible language use (e.g. Li 2014; Huang 2018, 2021; Silvestri 2025).

What remains underexplored is how teachers in settings that explicitly endorse translanguaging understand and, possibly, operationalise it, whether as planned instructional strategies ('pedagogical translanguaging'; Cenoz and Gorter 2017, 2020, 2021), as a broader pedagogical orientation ('translanguaging pedagogy'; García et al. 2017; Li 2024) or otherwise. Also underexplored is how any translanguaging practices that emerge in interaction may shape participation in classrooms where heritage and non-heritage learners, with diverse linguistic profiles, motivations and instructional needs, come together (see Valdés 2005). Against this backdrop, we examine a university-hosted CLS in York, UK, where translanguaging is welcome and encouraged, and where heritage and non-heritage learners share language classes. Specifically, we address the following research questions (RQs):

1. How do teachers at the CLS understand translanguaging and, if at all, how does their understanding inform their pedagogy?
2. What interactional patterns emerge in teacher-learner and learner-learner exchanges and, if at all, in what ways do any translanguaging practices shape participation among heritage and non-heritage learners?

3. Methodology

3.1. *The community language school and participants*

York St John University's CLS was established in 2022 in York, UK, and is hosted by the York St John Communities Centre. It follows a common CLS remit of sustaining home/heritage languages, offering multiple languages in response to community demands. The school welcomes both children from heritage language backgrounds and others learning without such ties. Volunteer language teachers include students from York St John University and other universities in Yorkshire (enrolled on various Bachelor's/Master's degree programmes in languages and linguistics) and members of the public (York St John University, n.d.). Specifically, the volunteers do *not* need to be 'native speakers'² of the language they teach, but they are required to hold at least upper-intermediate-level proficiency in the language (i.e. B2 CEFR level). Many student volunteers study modules where translanguaging is explicitly discussed, and all volunteers receive induction, mentoring, observation feedback and ongoing training from the academic team.

CLS classes adopt a creative, activity-led format (Kohl et al. 2020) with arts/crafts, games, storytelling, song/dance and occasional cooking, encouraging volunteers to draw on their 'funds of knowledge' (González et al. 2009). The school's pedagogy actively encourages translanguaging: children and teachers may draw on any of their linguistic and semiotic resources (see Section 2.1). This stance is grounded in the expertise of the academic committee of the school (lecturers in applied linguistics, language education and initial teacher education who teach and research multilingual pedagogies), and reinforced because several volunteers are their students; translanguaging is thus explicitly modelled, planned for, and endorsed in mentoring and feedback. This contrasts with target-language-only norms still common in many CLS settings (see Section 2.2). In 2023/24 the CLS ran Spanish, Italian and Japanese classes for children aged 6–13 from October to May; here, we focus on Spanish and Italian, which had the largest enrolments that year.

Teacher and student profiles appear in [Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#), respectively (all names are pseudonyms). The Spanish classes were led by two teachers (Marta and Lola), while the Italian class was led by one teacher (Anushika). Only Marta had prior language teaching experience (as a teacher of Spanish in a local primary school), and was completing a Bachelor's degree in TESOL with Japanese. Lola had professional expertise as a translator, and was pursuing a Master's degree in TESOL with Korean. Anushika had completed a Bachelor's degree in Spanish and French, and was preparing to apply for a Postgraduate Certificate in Education.

The cohort comprised six Spanish learners (ages 7–13) and five Italian learners (ages 9–13). In the Spanish class, siblings Fernando (7) and Nicole (12) primarily spoke Spanish at home; neither parent was fluent in English, as was evident when Marta assisted with the enrolment form and acted as interpreter. Similarly, Monica and Valeria, sisters from Spanish-speaking parents, had Spanish as their dominant home language. In contrast, Julia and Celia came from British English-speaking families. Both sets of parents had picked up Spanish during time in Spain for work, though Julia's parents were observed to be more fluent than Celia's. The Italian learners included four Sri Lankan-Italian children and one Italian child.

Table 1. Volunteer teacher profiles for Spanish and Italian classes at York St John University's community language school (2023–2024).

Language class	Volunteer teacher	Educational background	Home language(s)
Spanish	Marta	BA TESOL with Japanese	Spanish, English
	Lola	MA TESOL with Korean	Galician
Italian	Anushika	BA Spanish and French	Sinhala, English, Italian

Table 2. Child participant profiles for Spanish and Italian classes at York St John University's community language school (2023–2024).

Language class	Child	Age	Background	Time at CLS	Home language(s)
Spanish	Fernando	7	Salvadoran family; moved to UK from El Salvador 2 years prior; Nicole's brother	<1 year	Spanish
	Nicole	12	Salvadoran family; moved to UK from El Salvador 2 years prior; Fernando's sister	<1 year	Spanish
	Monica	13	Spanish family; born in Spain; Valeria's sister	1 year	Spanish
	Valeria	10	Spanish family; born in Spain; Monica's sister	1 year	Spanish
	Julia	10	British family; born in Spain; spent 7 years in Spain	1 year	English, Spanish
	Celia	9	British family; spent 2 years in Spain	1 year	English, Spanish
Italian	Sanduni	11	Sri Lankan-Italian family; born in Italy	1 year	Sinhala, English, Italian
	Tashini	9	Sri Lankan-Italian family; born in Italy	1 year	Sinhala, English, Italian
	Francesca	11	Italian family	1 year	Italian, English
	Nadeesha	13	Sri Lankan-Italian family; born in Italy	1 year	Sinhala, English, Italian
	Sandeepa	10	Sri Lankan-Italian family; born in Italy	1 year	Sinhala, English, Italian

The Sri Lankan-Italian children were born in Italy to Sri Lankan parents who later relocated to the UK. At home, these parents used primarily Sinhala alongside some English to accommodate their children's language preferences; since moving to England, Italian featured minimally, which parents attributed to the children's shift towards English. The parents were nonetheless able to converse in Italian with author M.Z. and another Italian speaker from the school's academic committee, describing themselves as able to 'get by' in the language. The Italian child's parents were both Italian, and Italian was a prominent home language.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

Ethical approval was obtained from the York St John University Research Ethics Committee on 15 March 2024 (ETH2324-0233); written teacher, parental and child consent was secured prior to data collection. Data were gathered during five observations: three Spanish sessions and two Italian sessions (one was cancelled) from late April to May 2024. Each session lasted approximately one hour. We audio-recorded classroom interactions, produced fieldnotes on pedagogical choices and salient translanguaging events, and collected teachers' views via a short open-format Qualtrics questionnaire on understandings and enactments of translanguaging (designed *ad hoc* for this study; see [supplemental material](#)). Questionnaires were chosen over interviews for pragmatic reasons: one teacher commuted from outside York only on Saturdays, while the other two were full-time students with part-time work and family commitments. This format allowed responses at participants' convenience. Drawing from the translanguaging literature (see [Section 2.1](#)) and in line with our RQs (see [Section 2.3](#)), the questionnaire elicited teachers' stated understandings of translanguaging, their reported practices and their perceptions of learner needs.

An ethnographically-informed approach guided the analysis, characterised by attention to context and detailed fieldnotes (see Copland and Creese 2015). Findings are thus situated and context-specific; the episodes and teacher accounts presented are illustrative rather than exhaustive, offering a window into how translanguaging is understood and enacted at this site.

Questionnaire responses and transcripts were analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework: (1) *verbatim* transcription and translation into English (preliminary observations were recorded, attending to participant-specific interactions, purposes of language choices and noteworthy exchanges), undertaken by Italian-English bilingual author M.Z. and a Spanish-English bilingual translator formerly volunteering at the CLS; (2) initial codes linked to illustrative quotes (questionnaire responses and transcripts were coded separately, then cross-referenced to examine alignment between teachers' understanding and enacted practice); (3) broader themes generated by reviewing codes for relevance, alignment and connections; (4) themes reviewed for data support; (5) themes named; (6) themes integrated into the analysis. An example of code and theme development is provided as [supplemental material](#).

Interactional episodes were selected from full transcripts based on relevance to the RQs, prioritising exchanges where translanguaging practices were visible: moments where language choice was negotiated, where teachers scaffolded multilingually, or where participation patterns were salient across the diverse cohort.

Coding was inductive but sensitised by constructs from the translanguaging literature (e.g. García et al. 2017; Li 2024; Cenoz and Gorter 2017, 2020, 2021), conducted jointly by both authors through iterative cycles. Convergence across data sources enhanced the trustworthiness of findings. In line with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021), we treat themes as analytic constructions shaped by researcher interpretation. Our interpretations are shaped by our subject positions: M.Z. has taught Italian in heritage- and foreign-language contexts and English to speakers of other languages in the UK; I.V.M. has taught French in foreign-language contexts and English in Sri Lanka, where multilingual *repertoires* are a classroom reality. These experiences afforded firsthand insight into translanguaging's pedagogical potential. We maintained a reflexive stance throughout the analysis to mitigate confirmation bias.

Before presenting the findings, we clarify our analytical stance considering ongoing debates within translanguaging scholarship. Recent concerns have been raised over the absence of 'diagnostic criteria specifying what it is' (Treffers-Daller 2025a, p. 1), and translanguaging has been questioned as analytically distinct from code-switching. However, as Li (2014, p. 163) notes, translanguaging captures 'the dynamic nature of multilingual practices of various kinds, such as code-switching, code-mixing and language crossing.' Translanguaging resists fixed boundaries and is contextually enacted through social relationships, pedagogical goals and learner needs. We use it to characterise the situated, dynamic orchestration of linguistic and semiotic resources, of which code-switching and code-mixing can be viewed as manifestations.

Accordingly, we work bottom-up, analysing transcripts and fieldnotes alongside questionnaire responses to see how participants mobilise and interpret multilingual practices *in situ*. Given the diverse learner profiles (i.e. heritage and non-heritage learners with varying proficiencies), we remained attentive to whether translanguaging shaped participation across the cohort. Short illustrative episodes are paired with teacher accounts to show how translanguaging is understood and enacted in this context.

4. Findings

4.1. Teacher-led translanguaging attuned to learner needs

In both Italian and Spanish classes, teachers tuned their language choices to learners' backgrounds and proficiencies, using English and, in some cases, French, as purposeful scaffolds while re-voicing key forms in the target/heritage language. As explained in Section 3.1, the CLS under investigation here not only caters to heritage language speakers/learners, but also to children learning a target language not spoken at home (see Section 3.1), making English often the most accessible shared language in classroom interaction.

In the Italian class, the volunteer teacher, Anushika, employed bilingual PowerPoint slides (see Figure 1 and Figure 2), and clearly scaffolded explanations throughout. Her pedagogical choices reflected an awareness of her learners' limited exposure to Italian beyond the classroom and, consequently, a conscious decision to incorporate both the heritage/target language (Italian) as well as the dominant language (English) of the learners from the planning stage. Her own reflection in response to Q6 ('Could you describe your approach to language teaching?') highlighted this intention:



Figure 1. Example of bilingual PowerPoint slide from the Italian class (memory game).



Figure 2. Example of bilingual scaffold on PowerPoint slide for expressing preferences from the Italian class ('I like'/'I don't like' activity).

I adopted a balanced approach, using a mix of both English and the target language. My primary goal was to create a supportive and engaging learning environment. Given that most of my students felt more confident speaking English and struggled with Italian due to limited use at home.

The Sri Lankan-Italian children's parents had acquired Italian while working in Italy, but were not confident users of the language; since relocating to the UK, Italian had featured minimally at home as the children shifted towards English (see [Section 3.1](#)). This awareness shaped Anushika's instruction. For instance, Italian phrases were introduced through repetition and modelling, followed by English-mediated questioning to guide comprehension. For example, during the introduction of the sentence *quanti anni hai?* ('how old are you?'), the teacher had students repeat the sentence, then prompted:

Anushika: ‘This one again was a question... what do you think we’re asking here?’

Tashini: ‘How...’

Anushika: ‘The “how” part is right...’

Tashini: ‘How old are you?’

Anushika: ‘Yes, “how old are you”? *Quanti anni hai?* How old are you?’

By cycling between choral repetition in Italian and brief English glosses, Anushika staged input in manageable steps, providing a scaffold that supported noticing and recall (see Swain and Lapkin 2000; Cenoz and Gorter 2021). English prompts also lowered processing demands and anxiety, keeping participation low-stakes while comprehension was regularly checked (see Turnbull and Dailey-O’Cain 2009).

This scaffolding sometimes drew on other languages. For instance, in another class, when Tashini struggled to recall the Italian word for ‘swimming’ and initially guessed *nuovo* (‘new’), the teacher acknowledged the attempt and then prompted another learner, Nadeesha, who she knew had had some exposure to French:

Anushika: ‘It’s kind of the same in French! Nadeesha, how do you say it in French?’

Nadeesha: ‘*La natation*.’

Anushika: “*La natation*”. So it’s quite similar! There’s that “t”: *nu...o...?*

Tashini: ‘...to!’

Anushika: ‘Yes, *nuoto*! Let’s repeat it together: *nu... o... to*.’

Here, Anushika facilitated peer-assisted learning by drawing on Nadeesha’s knowledge of French to scaffold Italian vocabulary, which ultimately helped Tashini arrive at the Italian form. In this case, peers supported each other to achieve outcomes they could not reach individually (i.e. ‘collective scaffolding’; Donato 1994), leveraging cross-language linkages (or ‘connected growers’, where development in one language can support another; Cenoz and Gorter 2021). Rather than policing boundaries, this move built connections, boosted participation, and sustained engagement. In her response to Q12 (‘Can you discuss any specific instances where using translanguaging strategies has significantly impacted your students’ learning or engagement?’), Anushika explicitly reflected on this strategy:

Since many of my students have studied French, I used similar French and Italian words to help them remember Italian vocabulary. For example, comparing ‘rose’ (French) with ‘rosa’ (Italian) makes it easier for students to learn and recall the Italian term. I believe linking Italian vocabulary to French helped enhance the students’ memory and accelerated their progress in learning Italian.

Translanguaging in Anushika’s classroom also served an important instructional function during moments of clarification and scaffolding. While praise was often delivered in Italian (e.g. *brava*), English was used to guide learners through tasks and reinforce comprehension, such as through prompting (‘give me a number!’; ‘should we make the sentence?’) and confirmation (‘yes, “how old are you”?’).

In the Spanish class, similar strategies emerged, although they varied with learner proficiency and teacher approach. On the one hand, Marta, one of the Spanish teachers, who

predominantly used Spanish during instruction, occasionally switched to English to support learners' comprehension. This reflected her own linguistic profile: Spanish was Marta's dominant language, and she drew on it naturally in the classroom. In one instance, while teaching vocabulary for body parts, Marta asked:

Marta: '¿Sabemos lo que es rizado, Julia? [...] Dímelo en inglés, how's the hair?'

Julia: 'Curly.'

Marta: "'Curly"! Rizado.'

By eliciting the English term and then linking it to the Spanish equivalent, the teacher leveraged stronger links between English and concepts to anchor the new form-meaning pairing, supporting uptake (in line with models of bilingual lexical access; Kroll and Stewart 1994). A more targeted use of English for learners with lower Spanish proficiency occurred earlier in the session when Marta introduced the term *pestaña* ('eyelash'), directing her clarification to Celia by saying: 'Look, Celia, *pestañas*, eyelashes, *pestañas*, and it's written with the "ñ". A similar scaffolding strategy was visible in her presentation of clothing vocabulary (see Figure 3), where direct Spanish-English correspondences were provided (e.g. '*falda* = skirt'), and less familiar items were modelled with additional pronunciation support (e.g. *calzoncillos*, i.e. 'briefs'). In some cases, broader categories were listed in English with

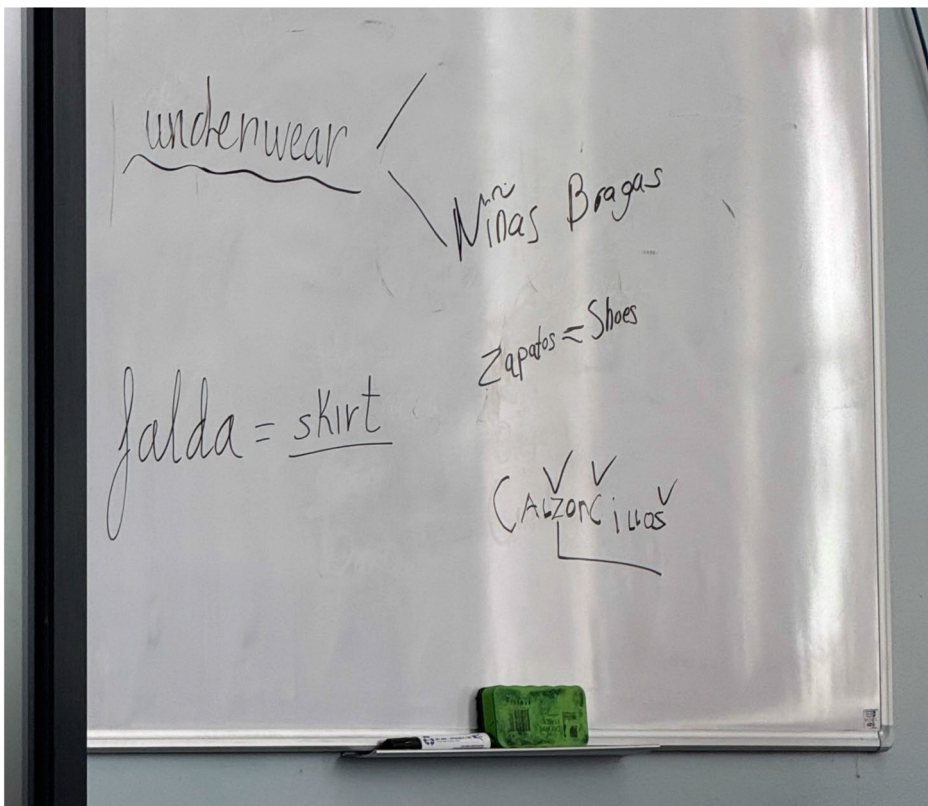


Figure 3. Example of bilingual scaffold for introducing clothing vocabulary, written on the whiteboard in the Spanish class.

examples in Spanish underneath, encouraging students to link individual target-language items to an overarching concept in English (e.g. ‘underwear’ → *niñas bragas*, i.e. ‘girls’ underwear’).

Here, Marta pre-empted difficulty and used English selectively for a specific learner: an in-the-moment ‘shift’ typical of translanguaging pedagogy (García et al. 2017). Her response to Q9 (‘How well do you feel you know the children’s language abilities and backgrounds? Can you provide an example of how this knowledge influences your teaching strategies to cater to these varying language proficiencies and backgrounds?’) similarly foregrounded adapting to students’ backgrounds and improvising as needed:

The background of the children’s language is a fundamental part of how I prepare the lessons. Although it varies depending on the students in the classroom, and sometimes I must improvise accordingly.

Marta also noted that some students were ‘a bit timid and hence their confidence [was] lacking when asked directly to answer with the L2 [second language; Spanish] (especially by the teacher)’ (Q12), highlighting her flexible use of English as a tool to lower anxiety and promote participation (see Riordan 2018).

Lola, the other Spanish volunteer, also tailored her use of Spanish and English according to her learners’ linguistic profiles, but appeared to use English more frequently during interaction, especially when supporting vocabulary development and participation. Although Galician was her home language, her professional background in translation meant she used English with considerable ease. Her more frequent use of English appeared purposeful. In her response to Q6 (on her approach to language teaching), Lola explained:

I would say that when teaching at the Community Language School I tried to balance out both languages in order to promote bilingual communication in the classroom. This was done in order to make the children feel comfortable and not left out, as they had different levels of both Spanish and English language.

This orientation was further reflected in her understanding of translanguaging: in her own words, ‘[...] It helps bridge gaps between languages and cultures and fosters an understanding of both languages. What one may not know in English, they may know it in Spanish, and it is through translanguaging that they get to discover the term in the other language’ (Q4). Notably, Lola’s use of translanguaging was responsive to learner profiles: in one instance, when teaching a child highly proficient in Spanish, she reported that she ‘did not need to use English at all throughout the lesson other than to translate a few words’ (Q9). This reflected her view that translanguaging serves to ‘bridge gaps’: where no gap existed, the bridge was not required. In group settings with more varied proficiency, however, Lola’s translanguaging practices were more visible. For instance, while introducing vocabulary for birthday decorations, a student hesitated:

Valeria: *‘Es que no sé decirlo en español.’*

Lola: ‘Say it in English.’

Valeria: ‘Flags.’

Lola: *‘Banderines, with a “b”! Ban... de... ri... nes.’*

Rather than viewing English as an interruption, Lola treated it as a legitimate part of the learning process: she validated the learner's contribution, lowered stakes for speaking, and immediately modelled the equivalent Spanish term. Later in the same lesson, during a birthday card activity, learners were invited to offer suggestions in English, which Lola translated or expanded into Spanish:

Lola: 'You can say it in English, guys, I'll write it in Spanish.'

Valeria: 'I hope you have a great birthday?'

Lola: 'We would say something a little bit different: "*que cumplas muchos más*".'

Lola went on to explain: 'I hope that you have a great birthday and that you grow much more, or you keep on gaining years, you keep on being alive'. This illustrated collaborative translanguaging in action: learners initiated ideas using the language they were most comfortable with, and Lola supported them in rephrasing these ideas in (culturally-appropriate) Spanish. English thus acted as a bridge for expression and not as a barrier (see Creese and Blackledge 2010; García and Li 2014).

Together, these examples highlight how teacher-led translanguaging was not only pedagogically strategic but relationally attuned, reflecting an acute awareness of learners' linguistic profiles and an effort to create an inclusive, confidence-building learning space. English was used as a deliberate resource to scaffold understanding, lower affective filters, and foster participation, particularly (though not exclusively) for children without target/heritage language exposure beyond the classroom, functioning as a vehicle for inclusion.

4.2. Peer-led translanguaging for mutual accommodation

In the Italian language class, most children came from Sri Lankan-Italian families. Parents were originally from Sri Lanka and spoke Sinhala (their first language) at home; they had previously lived and worked in Italy before moving to the UK, and self-identified as Sri Lankan-Italian. The children were born in Italy: they had therefore had some exposure to Italian before relocating to the UK as toddlers. Despite their multilingual background, they were never heard using Sinhala or Italian outside of class, nor during spontaneous peer interactions. English dominated even during language-focused activities.

The absence of Sinhala is notable. Although Anushika speaks Sinhala, and converses in it outside of class, she did not draw on it during instruction, appearing to accommodate children's preferences (as the children understood Sinhala, but were not heard speaking it). While we lack data to probe further here, this pattern may reflect broader sociolinguistic dynamics within Sri Lankan diasporic communities, where the positive valuation of English since British colonisation, alongside pressure to integrate into the social mainstream, often leads families to deprioritise heritage language maintenance (Canagarajah 2008).

With English as the dominant peer-to-peer language, illustrative moments of learner-led translanguaging emerged throughout the observed sessions. During a vocabulary task on pets, the teacher asked Tashini about her pet fish. Although the prompt was in Italian, Tashini responded in English:

Anushika: 'Come si chiama il tuo pesce? What's their name?'

Tashini: 'Gold... fish.'

Anushika: 'Come si chia... "goldfish"?'

Tashini: (inaudible)

Anushika: (laughter)

Anushika: 'Do you remember?'

Tashini: 'Nah, he's just called fish...'

Anushika: 'Just "fish"? Just "fish"!'

A few turns later, the teacher turned to Francesca (a child from an Italian family who was fluent in Italian) and asked her to name a pet:

Anushika: 'What would you call your *gatto*, Francesca?'

Francesca: 'Eddie...'

Anushika: 'Sorry?'

Francesca: 'Eddie!'

Anushika: "'Eddie"?'

Francesca: 'Because there's a cat who I know who's called Eddie who's so cute and...'

Anushika: 'Aw, okay, that's so cute! I have one *gatto che si chiama* Sana [...]'

Francesca's use of English, despite her Italian fluency, appeared shaped by group dynamics and the preceding conversation. Learners' use of English was not corrected or marked as inappropriate; instead, exchanges shifted fluidly between Italian and English. This flexibility was unproblematic in this context: the CLS under discussion operates without curriculum pressures or exam preparation, creating a space in which multilingual interaction can emerge organically rather than one in which target-language-only exposure is enforced. Moreover, in mixed-proficiency groups, this low-pressure environment helped keep learning achievable and sustained engagement.

Another example of learner-led translanguaging emerged when Tashini attempted to produce a full sentence in Italian following a prompt from the teacher. While Anushika praised and encouraged her, it was Sanduni who noticed a potential mismatch, stepping in to check using English:

Anushika: 'Brava! Should we make the sentence?'

Tashini: 'Ho sette anni.'

Anushika: "'Ho sette anni"?'

Sanduni: 'Wait, isn't "sette" seven?'

Anushika: 'Yes, how old are you?'

Sanduni: 'She's eight!'

Anushika: 'She's eight, isn't she...' (laughter)

Tashini: 'Otto.'

In the exchange above, Sanduni spontaneously used English to mediate understanding, gently correcting her peer through a question rather than deferring to the teacher. Anushika affirmed this contribution and used it to clarify for the whole group, but the moment itself was initiated and co-constructed by the learners. This illustrated how translanguaging could emerge as a learner-led practice of meaning-making, grounded in peer awareness and collaboration.

A similar instance of clarification was observed in the Spanish class, where a Salvadoran child, Fernando, whose home language was Spanish, turned to his peer Celia and said 'no, I mean five!', in English. While this utterance was not captured in the audio transcript due to noise, it was noted in fieldnotes and reflected his effort to ensure comprehension, likely recognising that his peer had had trouble understanding him due to her lower Spanish proficiency. Celia, who came from a British, English-dominant background, had spent some time in Spain but was nevertheless observed to struggle often in class, particularly as many of the other children were fluent in the language.

Rather than reflecting a lack of proficiency or disengagement from the heritage/target language, these shifts highlighted the children's awareness of each other's linguistic abilities and their willingness to accommodate one another. In this case, translanguaging operated as an inclusive practice emerging from group dynamics rather than top-down direction, aligning with work that centres learner agency and equitable participation in translanguaging classrooms (García and Kleyn 2016; Hornberger and Link 2012).

It is interesting to note that the children's drawings from the 'I like/I don't like' activity also revealed strategic use of their semiotic resources. Some represented preferences visually, for example by filling hearts with red to mean 'I like' or crossing them out to mean 'I don't like', with additional cultural symbols such as an Italian flag indexing the target language (see Figure 4), while others wrote exclusively in the target language without recourse to English (see Figure 5). While English frequently surfaced in peer-to-peer talk as a resource for inclusion and accommodation, as explained above, it did not feature in these individual products. This contrast suggested that English was mobilised primarily as a social tool in interaction, serving to maintain peer solidarity, lower the affective stakes of participation, and ensure mutual comprehension. On the other hand, independent work, free from the social pressure of real-time communication, allowed children to draw confidently on their heritage/target language and other semiotic resources. In other words, English appeared to function as an emotional scaffold in collaborative moments, reducing anxiety and facilitating connection, while the target language remained the preferred medium for individual expression when social contingencies were absent. Such moments highlighted that translanguaging in this context entailed the purposeful deployment of different resources according to communicative purpose, audience and affective need.



Figure 4. Child's drawing showing use of hearts and crosses to represent preferences.

4.3. Knowledge co-construction through translanguaging

At times, translanguaging did not emerge strictly as a pedagogical strategy, but as a collaborative means of shared meaning-making between teachers and learners. This was particularly noticeable in Lola's Spanish class, where learners actively contributed linguistic knowledge, and the teacher modelled curiosity, humility and openness to learning. For instance, when discussing the word *chapa* (badge), Lola admitted uncertainty:

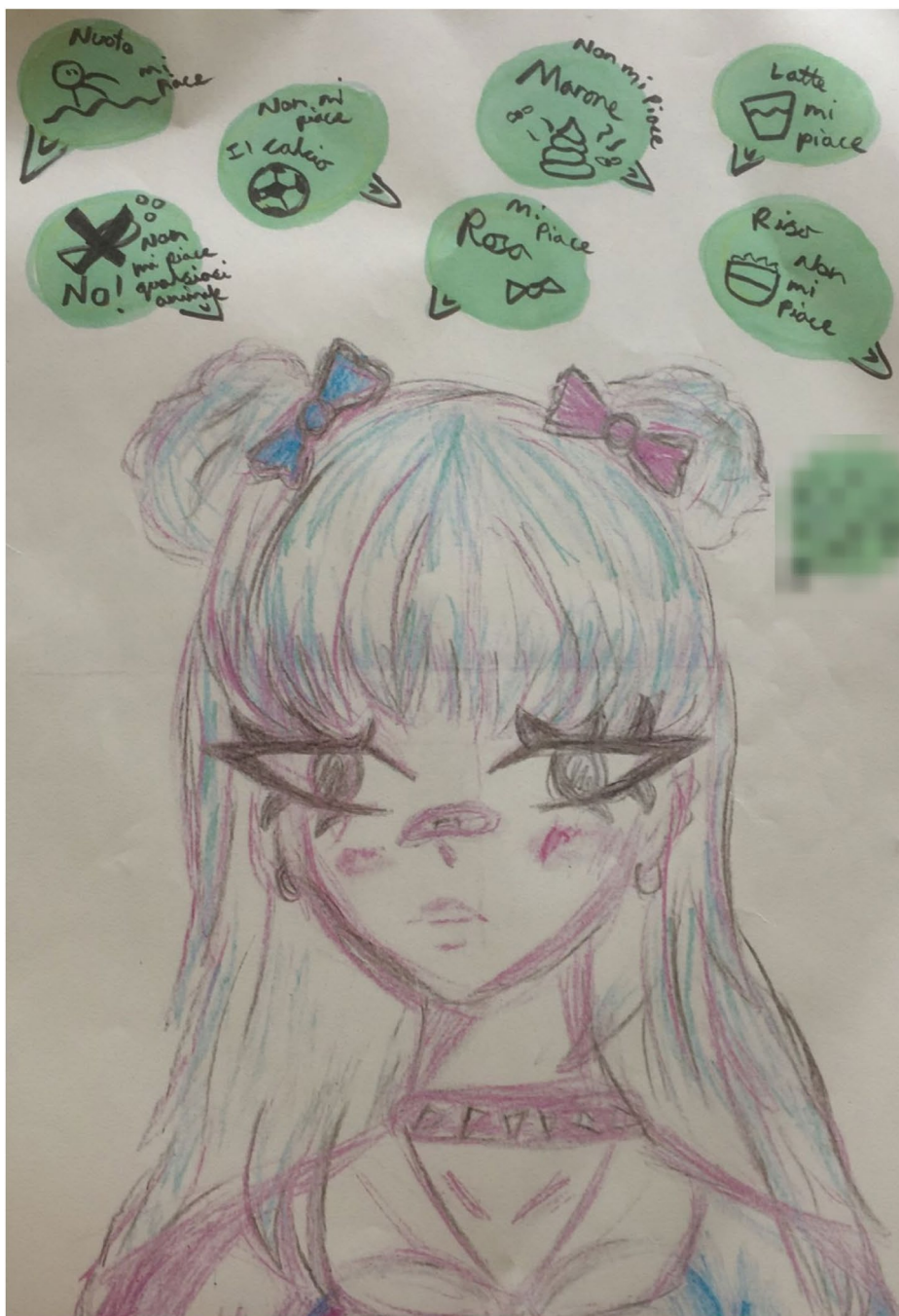


Figure 5. Child's drawing showing written preferences in the target language (Italian).

Lola: 'Creo que una chapa no es lo mismo en España que en El Salvador, así que voy a buscar una foto porque tampoco sé cómo se dice en inglés.'

Monica: 'Badge.'

Lola: ‘¿Sí?’

Monica: ‘Sí, se le llama “badge”’.

Lola: ‘Pues nosotros lo llamamos “chapa”’.

By inviting help and ratifying student input, Lola adopted a co-learning stance, distributing expertise and positioning students as knowledgeable participants (see Li 2024; García et al. 2017). When she realised her earlier use of *carta* was inaccurate and self-corrected to *tarjeta de cumpleaños*, she joked: ‘I completely forgot... and no one corrected me!’. Such episodes cultivated a culture where translanguaging validated learner knowledge and enabled mutual support (Creese and Blackledge 2010; Poza 2017).

This dynamic echoed two earlier examples: learners providing input in English and Lola translating into Spanish, and Sanduni noticing an error in Tashini’s Italian output, which resulted in a peer-led clarification. In both cases, translanguaging appeared to function not only as a pedagogical technique but as a collaborative practice through which teachers and learners built knowledge together (Li 2024; García et al. 2017).

While Anushika (Italian) and Marta (Spanish) also used translanguaging responsively, their roles remained more directive, with fewer invitations to negotiate meaning. The co-learning orientation was most salient in Lola’s teaching. As a postgraduate student exposed to translanguaging theory, alongside her expertise as a professional translator, her background likely informed her more collaborative stance.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study examined how teachers at a university-hosted community language school understood translanguaging, how their understanding informed their pedagogy, and how translanguaging practices shaped participation among heritage and non-heritage learners. We address each research question in turn before considering contributions to existing knowledge.

Regarding RQ1, the teachers in our study described translanguaging as a purposeful and flexible tool to support learners’ understanding and language development. Crucially, this was made visible in practice: teachers enacted translanguaging through principled commitment to valuing multilingual resources (*stance*), pre-planned bi/multilingual materials (*design*) and in-the-moment adjustments calibrated to learner need (*shifts*). These patterns align with the ‘stance-design-shifts’ heuristic of translanguaging pedagogy (García et al. 2017; Li 2024). The planned, cross-linguistic nature of many activities, including bilingual slides and contrastive vocabulary work, reflects pedagogical translanguaging as deliberate instructional design (Cenoz and Gorter 2021). In practice, teachers blended both orientations: pedagogical translanguaging provided the planned scaffolding, while translanguaging pedagogy informed the responsive, relational dimensions of their work.

Notably, translanguaging enactment differed across volunteers. One might expect ‘native-speaker’ status to explain such differences, but the data suggests otherwise: both Spanish volunteers identified as ‘native speakers’, yet Marta maintained Spanish as the main medium while Lola used English more frequently. Lola’s questionnaire reflections framed her switching as purposeful and calibrated to learner profiles, and her concurrent Master’s degree, with explicit work on translanguaging, likely informed that stance. Thus, variation is better

explained by teacher beliefs, knowledge of learners, and professional background than by native-speaker status, consistent with arguments that translanguaging's inclusive potential depends on how it is understood and operationalised (e.g. Sah and Li 2024).

Turning to RQ2, three patterns were evident. First, teacher-led translanguaging served to scaffold comprehension and lower affective barriers, particularly for learners with limited target-language exposure (see Riordan 2018). Second, peer-led translanguaging emerged as learners accommodated each other's proficiencies: switching to English to check, querying vocabulary and helping peers reach target-language forms, in collaborative ways noted in classroom interaction research (see Creese and Blackledge 2010). Third, knowledge co-construction occurred when teachers and learners negotiated meanings together, positioning learners as knowledgeable contributors (see García et al. 2017; Li 2024). Across these patterns, English functioned as a social and emotional scaffold in collaborative moments, while independent work saw learners drawing confidently on the target language alone. Thus, in this context, translanguaging was purposefully deployed according to communicative purpose, audience and affective need.

These findings speak to each other. Teachers' explicit stance, visible in both questionnaire responses and enacted practice, appeared to create conditions in which learners felt licensed to translanguaging. The peer accommodation and co-learning observed were enabled by the pedagogical environment: when teachers model translanguaging as legitimate, learners use it as a norm for sustaining joint activity and mutual understanding.

Overall, our findings connect with and extend existing work. First, while much research documents translanguaging occurring despite monolingual norms and ideologies (e.g. Creese and Blackledge 2010; Zakharia and Bishop 2013; Huang 2018, 2021), the site investigated here explicitly endorsed translanguaging. This allowed us to examine what translanguaging looks like when ideological tension is reduced, and to show that enactment still varies according to teacher beliefs and training, not institutional permission alone. Second, by triangulating questionnaire data with interactional episodes, we provide empirical evidence that teachers' stated understandings surfaced in moment-by-moment pedagogy through design, stance and shifts (see García et al. 2017; Li 2024), demonstrating alignment between understanding and practice. Third, our findings show that learner agency emerges through peer-led accommodation shaped by group dynamics, not teacher direction alone. Learners strategically mobilised English to support less proficient peers, while independent work was often carried out in the target language. This contrast highlights the situational, relational nature of learner agency, extending accounts of learner agency primarily in terms of participation and voice in the face of monolingual norms (e.g. Creese and Blackledge 2010; Li 2014), as well as co-learning and redistributed expertise (García et al. 2017; Li 2024). Fourth, the CLS investigated here serves both heritage and non-heritage learners, and our findings suggest that translanguaging supports participation across these profiles. This extends existing work by showing how inclusive practices can operate in mixed cohorts where learners differ in their linguistic backgrounds, motivations and relationships to the target language (see Valdés 2005).

Conceptually, practices at this site align with a 'fixed' languaging approach (Bonacina-Pugh et al. 2021): across classes, boundaries between named languages were softened rather than erased. Flexible multilingual resources were legitimised for sense-making and participation while language-specific goals in Italian and Spanish were preserved through planned bi/multilingual design, explicit modelling and targeted re-voicing. This resonates with

‘sustainable translanguaging’ principles in minority and heritage language contexts (Cenoz and Gorter 2017, 2021), illustrating empirically how inclusive practices can coexist with intentional safeguarding of the target/heritage language.

These findings have practical implications for CLSs. First, making translanguaging stance explicit to families and volunteers (e.g. through accessible materials and training, respectively) can create the conditions in which both feel licensed to draw on all their linguistic and semiotic resources. Second, bi/multilingual design should be woven into planning templates from the outset, as pre-planned scaffolding proved effective across proficiency levels. Third, professional development should model not only planned strategies but also responsive shifts and co-learning orientations, encouraging volunteers to position themselves as learners alongside their students. Finally, volunteers working with mixed cohorts should be aware that low-pressure translanguaging-positive environments enable learners to become resources for each other, as evidenced by the peer accommodation patterns observed here.

This study is subject to some limitations: (1) the dataset drew on a small number of classes over a short observation window, offering a snapshot rather than longitudinal insight; (2) audio-only recordings may have under-represented multimodal detail (e.g. gesture, gaze, materials handling), though fieldnotes captured salient moments; (3) teacher questionnaires elicited concise reflections rather than extended accounts, mitigated through triangulation with interactional data; (4) the single-site focus on a CLS that explicitly endorses translanguaging means findings should be interpreted accordingly. Thus, future research might pursue longitudinal, video-based studies, richer teacher elicitation and comparative work across differently-oriented CLSs.

In sum, translanguaging at this CLS was understood and enacted as a pedagogy for inclusion: modelled by teachers, used by learners and deployed purposefully to sustain participation across proficiencies and linguistic backgrounds, while enabling focused work in the target/heritage language. As seen here, translanguaging challenges monolingual, target-language-only assumptions by legitimising learners’ multilingual resources for participation and learning, aligning with the ‘multilingual turn’ in language education (May 2013).

Notes

1. Terms such as ‘first language’ (L1) and ‘second language’ (L2) may be understood as presupposing discrete, hierarchically-ordered language systems, thus being at odds with ‘fluid’ languaging approaches (e.g. Li 2018; see Bonacina-Pugh et al. 2021). This tension resonates with the complex and varied linguistic profiles of the learners in this study (see Section 3.1). Therefore, in this article, ‘L1’ and ‘L2’ are only retained when they appear in cited literature or in participants’ own words.
2. The term ‘native speaker’ has been widely problematised for implying monolingual norms and privileging birthright over proficiency (e.g. Davies, 2003; Holliday, 2006). We use it precisely to highlight that the CLS under discussion does not require such idealised status of its volunteers.

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