

# Exploring translanguaging: a case study of a madrasah in Tower Hamlets

Nasima Hassan and Kamal Ahmed, University of East London

## ABSTRACT

This paper is motivated by the empowering experience of one of the authors in a madrasah (private Islamic secondary school) setting where translanguaging was applied as a teaching and learning tool during analytical exegesis of historical sources. This positive experience subsequently provided the stimuli for the authors to explore the wider mainstream potential of translanguaging as a strategy to engage and extend bilingual and multilingual learners. This case study aims to investigate how multilingual competencies in a madrasah in Tower Hamlets, an east London borough, are utilised through translanguaging to teach the core content of the curriculum. Research has demonstrated the positive impacts of bi/multilingual learning in England (Kenner et al. 2008) and America (Thomas & Collier 2002); this case study will aim to expand on previous research by demonstrating how a variety of languages can be and are being employed effectively within classroom environments in the supplementary sector by observing how teachers and students combine and alternate between Arabic, Urdu, Sylheti and English to engage with the curriculum content.

## INTRODUCTION

This case study aims to investigate how multilingual competencies in a madrasah (private Islamic secondary school) in Tower Hamlets are utilised through translanguaging to teach the core content of the curriculum. Research has demonstrated the positive impacts of bi/multilingual learning in England (Kenner et al., 2008) and America (Thomas and Collier, 2002); this case study will aim to expand on previous research by demonstrating how a variety of languages can be and are being employed effectively within classroom

environments in the supplementary sector by observing how teachers and students combine and alternate between Arabic, Urdu, Sylheti and English to engage with the curriculum content. This paper is motivated by the positive experience of one of the authors in the madrasah setting where translanguaging was applied. This empowering experience has provided the stimulus for the authors to explore the wider mainstream potential of translanguaging. It is hoped that schools and teachers with bi/multilingual learners in their classrooms can also gain a better

understanding of what strategies to use in order to engage and teach their multilingual learners effectively.

Translanguaging can be defined as the multicompetence of bi/multilingual speakers who possess the ability to switch between languages while integrating them within a single linguistic system (García and Wei 2014). Several studies have identified the use of translanguaging by bi/multilingual speakers for effective communication outside the classroom (eg Wei 2005; García 2009a; Baker 2011). A growing trend reflects how educationalists are now eager to

## KEYWORDS

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explore how bi/multilingual competencies can be employed within the mainstream classroom in order to enhance learning (Creese and Blackledge 2010). This case study will focus on Tower Hamlets as a setting, the philosophy of madrasah education, and language pedagogy before considering the methods of analysis and overall findings. This paper will consider the potential advantages of using translanguaging as classroom pedagogy as well as how translanguaging is employed in the context of the madrasah setting. The analysis will also reflect on how effectively students use translanguaging in aspects of their learning.

### THE RESEARCH SETTING

A consideration of the research setting is integral to this paper as this provides context to the popularity and growth of the madrasah as a source of supplementary and increasingly mainstream education for some communities.

Tower Hamlets, an inner city London borough in the heart of east London, holds the third largest South Asian settlement in Britain (Hoque 2011). Many of the inhabitants originate from Sylhet, a northeast region of Bangladesh (Kenner et al., 2008) from which servicemen working for the British Navy began to settle in Tower Hamlets after World War II (Lewis 2011). The major increase in migration into Britain from Sylhet began during the late 1970s and 80s (Deakin 1970) through 'chain migration', a system in which primary settlers brought over their families and dependants (Desai 1963; Begum and Eade 2005). By the late 20th Century, Tower Hamlets accounted for almost a quarter of the total Bangladeshi population in Britain numbering approximately 35,000 (Adams 1987). With the arrival of families and dependants, the growing community developed concerns about how family life would be pursued in a non-Muslim and secular country and their focus turned towards building and establishing foundations in Britain (Alexander et al. 2010). As a result of this movement, the Bengali

community (who were predominantly of Muslim faith) faced the challenge of living in a society where there existed a split between the secular socio-cultural norms of Britain and their own religious values. As a result of residing within this conflicting cultural sphere, Zine (2007) asserts that the new generation started to identify themselves and engage with the cultural norms of Britain, negotiating their inherited cultural and religious values in the process. In response, the Muslim community then sought to protect their children from being acculturated into British culture through the establishment of masjids (an Arabic word meaning place of worship) and supplementary Islamic classes (Hoque 2011). The masjid was used to provide a range of activities for the community by establishing close links with local youth groups. The masjid also collaborated with local government organisations on initiatives such as drug addiction and gang culture (Alexander et al., 2010) and ultimately provided a safe haven for local youth who were identified as being 'at risk' from societal challenges (Husain 2007). However, the masjid alone proved to be insufficient to cater for the diverse demands of the community. The elder generation feared that the assimilative forces within public spaces such as schools and clubs would threaten to 'de-Islamise' (Sarwar 1996) their children, putting to risk their Islamic lifestyle and identity (Zine 2007). It was within this sphere that a new demand emerged to establish madrasahs (an Arabic word meaning Islamic schools) and provide adequate Islamic education to the younger generation in order to build resistances against such societal pressures (Hammad 2012). Consequently, the first official masjid operating as a madrasah opened in 1985 (Glynn 2002).

### PHILOSOPHY OF MADRASAHS

Islamic scholarship has a rich tradition in education, leading the world in almost every known academic discipline for hundreds of years (Halstead 2004).

The initial setting for Islamic education was the masjid, a formal place of religious worship in Islam. However, as the branches of Islamic sciences developed and matured, there emerged a need for a separate institution to accommodate a lengthier and more intensive period of study required to qualify as an Islamic scholar (Afsaruddin 2005). Accordingly, madrasahs were developed and proliferated as a formal teaching institution for the dissemination of knowledge and also became the principal venue for the transmission of religious education in a systematised manner (Khan 2011). With the advent of Islamic education in a systematised form, Western educationalists began to litigate concerns of indoctrination in the philosophy of Islamic education. Islamic education was regarded as favouring the uncritical acceptance of authority in terms of Qur'aanic revelation and Prophetic traditions (Halstead 2004). Additionally, many liberal educationalists criticised Islam's apparent nurturing and favouring of spirituality over reason (Cook 1999). Islamic educational theory, however, envisages a comprehensive and integrated approach to education which involves the complete individual, providing equal provision for the holistic development of the spiritual, social and rational dimensions of a person (Cook 1999; Kabir 2009;). This is in contrast to Western educational ideology which seemingly advocates solely for the development of the rational intellect of an individual (Afsaruddin 2005). The pedagogy applied in madrasahs varies and is determined by the subject and sciences being taught. At a primary level, the curriculum focuses on Arabic and, more significantly, the Qur'aan (Günther 2006). During these initial stages, students are taught to read the Qur'aan, and throughout this particular phase emphasis is placed upon word recognition, developing fluency, memorisation and rote learning – a technique used to memorise information through repetition without fully understanding its content

(Wagner 1984; Ginsburg 2006). However, as students progress, they move into advanced concepts of application and the information acquired by rote; in this case the Qur'aan becomes the foundation of higher-level learning ie understanding and comprehending (Afsaruddin 2005). The curriculum of the madrasah in this case study consists of a split between the secondary school National Curriculum, subject to Ofsted inspection, and the Dars-e-Nizami (Tayob et al. 2011) curriculum, which has its roots in the Indian Islamic traditions. The primary aspect of this curriculum is its emphasis on broadening students' intellectual scope by developing their habit of reading, researching and analytical skills (Khan 2011). Moreover, to promote logic and philosophy together with the religious sciences, the curriculum lays a heavy focus on aspects of language such as grammar and syntax in order to develop language skills in Arabic, the primary language of the textbooks; Urdu, the secondary language of the textbooks ie commentaries of the core textbooks; and English, the language needed to transmit the heritage of the Islamic tradition (Khan 2011).

## LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY

Bilingual education is an aspect of language pedagogy in which two autonomous languages are used alternately as a medium to teach and give instruction (Cenoz 2009; Baker 2011;). This concept, however, has historically been frowned upon in the Western context by monolinguals in the field of education who consider bi/multilingualism and the notion of switching between languages as an academic deficiency (Creese and Blackledge 2010). Hence, the approach to bilingual education was until the mid-20th Century conflated with negative connotations (Saer 1923; Jones 1959;). This was predicated on the assumption that by keeping languages separate, the teacher avoids cross-contamination of the languages (Jacobson and Faltis 1990), thus making the acquisition of a new linguistic system easier (Creese and

Blackledge 2010).

A vast array of contemporary discourses offer the opposing perspective where classroom-based research has established the positive aspects of bilingual learning (Peal and Lambert, 1962; Cummins, 1986; Hornberger 2002; Thomas and Collier 2002; May et al. 2004; Perez 2004; Tuafati and McCaffery 2005; August and Shanahan 2006; Genesee et al. 2006; Potowski 2007; Kenner et al. 2008). In Tower Hamlets for example, Kenner et al. (2008) examined the response of second- and third-generation British Bangladeshi children who were given the opportunity to apply their full language repertoire within the mainstream curriculum. The outcome of their study revealed numerous benefits of bilingual learning. These included models of conceptual transfer, metalinguistic awareness and, more significantly, a deepened understanding of the curriculum (Kenner et al. 2008). Furthermore, these studies discredited ideas about deficit models in bilingual learning held in the past (Saer 1923; Jones 1959; Setati et al. 2002; Shin 2005; ). On the contrary, they revealed cognitive advantages and cultural benefits of such pedagogy (Baker 2011). As increasing academic research championed the benefits of bilingual learning; the term translanguaging was developed by the Welsh educationalist Cen Williams (1994 cited in Baker 2011) – it was originally coined as a Welsh word (*trawysieithu*), referring to a pedagogical practice which deliberately switched the language mode of input and output in bi/multilingual classrooms (Lewis et al. 2012). Since its original development, the term has been extended and developed by numerous researchers and scholars to refer to the various language practices of bilinguals as well as the pedagogical approaches that use those practices (García 2009a, b, 2012; Creese and Blackledge 2010; Baker 2011; Canagarajah 2011; García and Sylvan 2011; Wei 2011; Hornberger and Link 2012; Lewis et al. 2012; Sayer 2013; García and Wei 2014). To conclude, action research in the classroom context

has cemented the value of using the many linguistics skills and assets a learner has access to with a shift in the focus from bi/multilingual competencies to translanguaging.

## TRANSLANGUAGING

The concept of translanguaging is essentially based on various notions of language use and bi/multilingualism (García and Wei 2014). Baker (2011: 39), who first translated the word into English, defines it as 'the process of making meaning, shaping experiences, gaining understanding and knowledge through the use of two languages'. García (2009a: 41), however, has developed the term further, and what began as a pedagogical theory she now conceptualises as the 'multiple discursive practices used as a "norm" in which bi/multilinguals engage in order to communicate effectively and make sense of their bilingual worlds'. From this definition it is evident that translanguaging is ultimately regarded as an essential tool for bi/multilinguals, who are estimated to make up between half and two-thirds of the world's population, in order to understand and communicate effectively (Grosjean 2010). Furthermore, Lewis et al. (2012) ascertain that the process of translanguaging develops a variety of cognitive processing skills in listening and reading. This is due to the bi/multilinguals having to assimilate and accommodate the information they receive by strategically choosing and selecting which language they absorb the information in. This same process is required in speaking and writing and therefore they conclude that translanguaging entails a deeper understanding than other bi/multilingual competencies such as translating, as it moves from finding 'parallel words to processing and relaying meaning and understanding' (García and Wei, 2014: 27). In relation to the potential educational advantages of translanguaging, Baker (2011) emphasises four important aspects. Firstly, It may promote a deeper and fuller understanding of the

subject matter; secondly, it may help the development of the weaker language; thirdly, it may facilitate home-school links and cooperation; and, fourthly, it may help the integration of fluent speakers with early learners.

These discourses demonstrate that there are other significant advantages to implementing translanguaging as pedagogy within educational contexts. Translanguaging not only promotes a deeper understanding of the subject content, it can also increase proficiency in the weaker language in relation to the one that is more dominant.

### METHODS OF ANALYSIS

The chosen methods of analysis in this case study were non-participant interviews and one-to-one interviews with both madrasah teachers and students. Data from the observation were first transcribed and transliterated. Thereafter, they were colour-coded into a document in order to identify the patterns of translanguaging that occurred. The class observation took into consideration the alternating and shifting of languages that were used for each part of the lesson and information on the students' understanding of the subject content by analysing their choice of language to understand, ask as well as answer questions. Interviews with the teachers were also transcribed and coded taking into consideration the role and significance of each language, and how the teachers perceived the role of the four languages in teaching and learning the academic content. Following transcription, the data gathered were analysed in correlation to the key research questions. The primary focus was on the teacher's use of translanguaging and how the students used this in order to understand and comprehend the subject content. Additionally, the interviews and observation provided insight into the specific roles of the four languages in the context of studying the Qur'aan in that particular location, ie Tower Hamlets, and by critically examining

why and how the teacher used the four languages simultaneously to teach the subject. These analyses provided an in-depth method of contextualising and thus created a better understanding of the teacher's and students' translanguaging practices observed in the classroom.

### FINDINGS

The observations, which took place over a number of weeks and involved the same group of students and teacher, revealed that the teaching session in the madrasah was mainly in the form of a formal lecture followed by interactions between the teacher and students taking place through discussions. The classes were conducted in the traditional style in which students would begin the lesson by repeatedly reciting in turns the verses of the Qur'aan that were to be studied in the lesson. This repetition would focus on correct emphasis, pronunciation and the all-important auditory experience linking current practice to the techniques of oral tradition which first helped to establish the Qur'aan as a sacred text. After reciting, students would then translate the Arabic verses into a language they felt comfortable with – Urdu, English or Sylheti – to demonstrate to the teacher their understanding of the meanings of the text. It was observed during this period of translating that the students seemed most engaged and maintained high levels of participation, facilitated by the free choice of preferred language of expression. This process involved high levels of self-confidence and language proficiency by the students as they mastered the ability to read, recite and then translate a passage into a language of their choice while being able to understand their peer's translation of the same passage into another language. For a non-participant observer this was a compelling experience which first and foremost celebrated a mix of traditional and contemporary teaching approaches alongside linguistic flexibility – the ability to translate in one language while listening to a further translation in

another. Following the reading of the core text the teacher began his formal lecture and explanation of the verses. Levels of engagement and attention were observed to fluctuate, as this element demanded high levels of listening; in the main, students are passive. Later on, further discussions in a variety of languages took place. It was apparent that the language of choice was the language each individual was most comfortable with; however, as conversations overlapped so language merged one into another at key points. By way of summary, this observation demonstrated the high levels of language skills required to participate in and keep up with the pace of the lesson as translanguaging occurred consistently throughout the lesson.

The analysis of the data revealed that the teacher's style of delivery followed a theme of reading the original text in Arabic, then translating it into Urdu and thereafter explaining the verse in English and, in rare cases, Sylheti. This technique enabled the same information to be repeated to the students a minimum of three times, and, in some cases, where Sylheti was used, four times. It is evident that the teacher used his multilingual competences most frequently as a means of repeating information and thereby embedding that information into the students' minds. This interpretation is supported by the teacher's interview data in which he explains the benefits of being proficient in more than one language as a teacher. The teacher concluded:

*'[Translanguaging] enables certain concepts to be reinforced through repetition [in several languages] and clarified in much more detail as opposed to using one language.'*

Teacher, madrasah A.

Referring back to the literature, in which Baker (2011) discussed the potential advantages of translanguaging, this concept was identified as the primary use of translanguaging within the class. The process of using translanguaging

as a strategy to reinforce meaning and understanding and thereby promote a deeper and fuller understanding of the subject was consistently observed throughout the observation. Additionally, the analysis found that multilingual competencies were employed to convey information in a language when other languages were less able to provide a definitive meaning for a certain word. In other words, both teacher and student simultaneously switched between English, Bengali, Urdu and English in order to grasp the definition of new vocabulary. Students opted for English, reflecting their comfort zone and area of self-confidence whereas the teacher opted for Bengali, using narrative to support the definition. Consequently, all languages were used in combination in order to convey a distinctive meaning. This classroom interaction was therefore an example of how the teacher utilised multilingual competencies in order to teach, and how the students accessed their multilingual competencies in a pedagogic context to convey meaning and information.

The non-participant observations demonstrated that multilingual competencies were used in the madrasah setting in order to develop the weaker language which was identified by the teacher as Bengali (here the teacher used Bengali synonymously with the term

Sylheti without differentiating between the two dialects). This was the second of Baker's (2011) potential advantages that were revealed in the analysis. The use of Sylheti within the madrasah was to develop the students' proficiency in the language by exposing them to it, cementing the importance of cultural heritage as a language legacy. This would presumably accustom the students to this dialect and, as the teacher suggested, enable them to discuss their curriculum studies with their Bengali-speaking parents in their usual medium, hence facilitating links between the madrasah and the home and addressing parental and wider community concerns of a loss of cultural identity.

## CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, it is evident that translanguaging has a significant role in teaching and learning within the madrasah. The findings demonstrate how multilingual teachers and learners in a madrasah use translanguaging to engage with the core content of the Islamic curriculum. The language pedagogy used employs the combining of languages as a pedagogic tool. Furthermore, the analysis of the data was coherent with the literature in that it demonstrated in practical terms the potential advantages of translanguaging. The discussion has

demonstrated how the teacher utilises multilingual competencies in meaningful forms to teach the curriculum content, thereby answering the second research question. Students are also seen to be translanguaging effectively to facilitate learning which provided the answer for the third research question.

In terms of implications for the mainstream classroom a number of key factors must also be considered including the cost implications for a school of investing in staff with linguistic expertise or training of existing staff, the challenge of celebrating and including the multiplicity of languages present in urban settings and the adjustments to curriculum delivery in order to make more space to speak and hear a range of linguistic competencies in the classroom. Making the most of home and extended community links is a step in the right direction in addressing some potential barriers. Significantly, translanguaging in the mainstream classroom demands a shift from the conceptualisation that language is a 'bolt-on' part of a child's educational experiences, and, when applied consistently and rigorously in the acquisition of new knowledge, translanguaging can be an empowering experience for both learner and teacher alike. ■

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Contact [n.hassan@uel.ac.uk](mailto:n.hassan@uel.ac.uk) and [k.ahmed@uel.ac.uk](mailto:k.ahmed@uel.ac.uk)