

## Children using multiple languages together in the classroom: a method for learning and teaching

### What this research was about and why it is important

The majority of schools in England are now multilingual, but they often rely heavily on English in the classroom as the main tool for language learning and teaching. This article looks at the benefits of what is known as ‘translanguaging’. In the classroom, for example, ‘translanguaging’ means children and teachers using aspects of different languages alongside each other to complete, say, a set task or to communicate more effectively. The researchers argue that teachers should not now teach bi- and multi-lingual children using the ‘one language’ approach, but should adopt teaching strategies that include ‘translanguaging’, using two or more languages together as needed, and when desired. The researchers argue that this makes sense given the knowledge base of skills which exists across languages. As part of a larger project, two complementary schools were chosen as case study schools in each of four different language communities: Gujarati, Turkish, Cantonese and Mandarin, Bengali. The researchers observed lessons, collected audio recordings of classroom interaction, interviewed teachers, administrators, children, and parents, and collected documentary evidence. They report that the language fluidity and movement (‘translanguaging’) used in the learning situations helped make connections between people in the classroom, helped to harness knowledge already known, and to create and pass on new knowledge

### What the researchers did

*The researchers took an ecological standpoint whereby the development of a new language is considered alongside the development of an existing language or languages – a two-way cross-language approach.*

- This article looked at four case-study schools, two each teaching Gujarati and Chinese. Classes in these languages were held in the evening or at weekends, for about 2 to 3 hours weekly. The number of students varied between 200 and 350. The number of volunteer teachers varied between 15 and 35, and their experience and qualifications varied.
- In this article, the researchers analysed and commented on recorded extracts from activities at the schools (such as an assembly) to make points about the use of languages. Two languages were used interchangeably in all the activities.

### What the researchers found

- Different languages were used to convey different information, but only both languages together gave the whole message. A head teacher, for example, used ‘translanguaging’ to engage a mixed audience (parents and children), to convey meaning according to audience levels of proficiency in different languages, and to connect and engage with the community. A teacher used two languages to narrate a story; both were needed to fully understand what was happening in the story.
- Teachers used both languages to explain tasks children should do. Children asked for clarification in both languages, joked in English, discussed in their own language. They used a combination of languages to move the task forward. Teachers used their bilingualism to pace a lesson, and ensure tasks were accomplished.
- Teachers and children became aware of when it was acceptable to say what in one or other of the languages; language antennae became fine-tuned. Language choice was used as a means to establish identity and develop confidence. Children began to recognise that languages do not have clearly-defined boundaries.
- Teachers and children skillfully used their languages for different goals. For example, vocabulary was given in one language, but explained in the other; languages were used as a translation strategy.
- ‘flexible bilingualism ... [was] used by teachers as an instructional strategy to make links for classroom participants between the social, cultural, community, and linguistic domains of their lives’ (p. 112).

### Things to consider

- The researchers looked at only a few examples of schools with a high proportion of bilingual children in this article.
- Could the languages that children bring to the primary-school classroom be more effectively used? For example, if ‘translanguaging’ were encouraged more, could it help children who know only one language learn other languages better and help them become more aware of other cultures? And could it help children who speak more than one language understand concepts better and learn faster in schools where English is predominantly spoken?