

# **Decolonizing Information Literacy Instruction for Multilingual Students: A Translanguaging Approach**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Despite efforts to teach information literacy to multilingual students, the learning outcomes have not been entirely satisfactory. To address this issue, this conceptual paper introduces translanguaging as an asset-based approach that allows students to use their full linguistic and cognitive resources in learning. It challenges the practicality concern about translanguaging by advocating for a shift in teachers' roles from knowledge tellers to co-learners and links this shift to threshold concepts in the ACRL framework. Additionally, it explores the relationship between translanguaging, critical language awareness, and critical thinking, emphasizing that both translanguaging and information literacy share critical thinking as a core component. Ultimately, we argue that adopting a translanguaging approach not only supports a more inclusive, decolonizing pedagogy, but also benefits students, instructors, and institutions by enhancing the teaching and learning of information literacy.

## **ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS**

Information literacy; Specific populations; Education; Pedagogy; Critical librarianship.

## **AUTHOR KEYWORDS**

Translanguaging; Multilingual students; Decolonizing.

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# **INFORMATION LITERACY INSTRUCTION FOR MULTILINGUAL STUDENTS: PROBLEM STATEMENT**

In today's world, the majority of information users do not speak English as their first or strongest language and this trend is becoming increasingly pronounced (74.1%, World Internet Statistics, 2025). In contrast, nearly half of all online information is still in English (49.1%, with Spanish 6.0% being the second, Web Technology Surveys, 2020). Needless to say, English remains the dominant language for academic communication (Hyland, 2015). Given these data, there will continue to be a need for non-native English speakers to develop information literacy knowledge and skills, comprised of behavioral, cognitive, social, and metacognitive dimensions, that are an important part of both everyday-life and academic competence (Association of College and Research Libraries [ACRL], 2015). Existing research demonstrates that non-native English-speaking students often have difficulties and challenges in acquiring information literacy, and instructors of information literacy have explored various pedagogical approaches (Nzomo et al., 2021). However, identifying best practice in information literacy instruction for non-native English speakers remains an open question (Nzomo et al., 2021). Scholars argue that the achievement gaps of minority students (racial, linguistic, and social classes) are not a student learning problem, but are caused by institutional actors who fail to adopt an asset-based approach to encourage minority students to bring their experience to the classrooms (Folk, 2019).

Following this asset-based approach, we initiate an interdisciplinary conversation to introduce the decolonizing translanguaging pedagogy, an asset-based pedagogical approach proposed by applied linguists (García & Li, 2014) to the teaching of information literacy and argue for its usefulness and benefits in teaching non-native English-speaking students. From this asset-based perspective, we replace the phrase “non-native English-speaking students” with the phrase “multilingual students” to honor their multilingual competence and experience in a language other than English. We believe that this new approach is of significance in two aspects. First, decolonizing pedagogy disrupts colonial influences in education by challenging Western-centric knowledge and creates an inclusive learning environment. It values diverse voices, especially from marginalized communities, and examines how knowledge is produced and shared, ultimately encouraging equity and social justice in education. Second, acknowledging the value of multilingual students' ways of knowing, thinking, and being can facilitate their development of agency and autonomy, which can ultimately contribute to better learning outcomes.

## **INTRODUCING TRANSLANGUAGING**

The theory of translanguaging sees all named languages and semiotic systems known by an individual as a linguistic repertoire (García & Li, 2014). Translanguaging instincts and translanguaging space are two key concepts in translanguaging theories (Li, 2018). People have translanguaging instincts to use a variety of multilingual and multimodal resources in their

linguistic repertoire unitarily to make meanings in social interactions, and a translanguaging space should be created for teachers and students to make full use of the multilingual and multimodal resources that are traditionally separated in practices of social interactions (Li, 2018). The creation of translanguaging space values bringing together various resources, for example, personal life history, experience, cognitive capacity, and identities to present coordinated, appropriate, meaningful, and creative performance (Li, 2011). Recognition of the value of these resources not only makes translanguaging an asset-based approach to teaching multilingual students, but points to its potential as a decolonization theory, because it abandons the view of standardized languages and a normative ideology (Li & García, 2022). Translanguaging frees people from linguistic, cultural, and ideological oppression and is therefore welcomed by educators in multilingual contexts. Translanguaging pedagogy involves encouraging students to use all their linguistic skills, effectively engaging across languages and it transforms teachers from knowledge tellers to facilitators and co-learners (Cummins, 2019). Empirical research demonstrates that translanguaging pedagogy can promote learning of both language skills and disciplinary knowledge in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms (e.g., Muguruza et al., 2023; Pun & Tai, 2021; Tai & Li, 2021; Tai, 2022). However, it is worth noting that translanguaging pedagogy does not mean that teachers and students will receive input in different languages that they do not understand. Translanguaging does not only happen in verbal communication, but can happen mentally. Students can think in their first languages, but talk about their experience gained in the first language in the language of instruction. Given the above-mentioned research on translanguaging, we argue that translanguaging as a decolonizing endeavor is not only a more inclusive approach to learning in general, but directly benefits students, instructors, and institutions over the long term as learners and teachers of information literacy.

## **TRANSLANGUAGING: WHY AND HOW?**

This section elaborates why we need translanguaging for the teaching of information literacy for multilingual students from a theoretical perspective. We relate the main ideas of translanguaging and the threshold concepts in the ACRL (2015) information literacy framework to explain how translanguaging can improve multilingual students' information literacy.

### **Encouraging playing the drum with two hands.**

Neocolonialism perpetuates past colonial practice and sustains colonial influences (Altbach, 1982). In educational contexts, research shows that instructional design and evaluation practices are still heavily influenced by the philosophies and procedures invented by the former colonizers, especially in previously colonized countries and regions (Walker & Dimmock, 2000). For example, during British rule of India, the government only needed clerks and bureaucrats who were good at memorizing and reinforcing rules to meet colonial needs. This influence has had a lasting effect as Indian education continues to value memorization and overlooks creativity

(Kumar, 2005). This neocolonial influence affects indigenous knowledge systems, values, and beliefs (Crossley & Tikly, 2004), limiting the full ability of communities previously colonized to achieve sustainable innovation and independent development. The neocolonial impact is further reinforced by linguistic imperialism that elaborates a hierarchy of languages, which refers to the way languages are prioritized and valued in a global system of power, often as a result of colonial history (Phillipson, 1992). In addition, there are differences in knowledge, values, and beliefs carried in different languages. For example, in Japanese, honorifics are used for verbs and nouns, whose forms are altered depending on the social status of the person being addressed. This linguistic phenomenon reflects and influences Japanese people's strong cultural emphasis on respect, hierarchy, and social harmony. A hierarchy of languages also brings a hierarchy of knowledge, values, and belief systems. The western colonizers' languages, knowledge, values, and belief systems control many intellectual practices by othering the nonwestern ones. In applied linguistics, translanguaging scholars have used a vivid metaphor of drum playing to describe the consequences of this dominance and othering (García & Otheguy, 2017). Some drummers get two sticks, one for each hand, while others are forced to play with only one stick in one hand, the other hand tied behind the back. The two-stick players are the monolingual speakers of the dominant language who are privileged to use their full linguistic repertoire, while the bi/multilingual students only use some of their linguistic repertoire. We do not deny that some lucky multilingual students with unfailing support, a generous supply of resources, and admirable persistence can achieve success comparable to the monolingual student, but this does not happen to the majority of people in previous colonies.

An asset-based translanguaging approach to instruction challenges the existing hierarchy of languages to foreground the value of non-dominant languages, together with the knowledge, values, and beliefs carried by these languages, and encourages playing the drum with two hands for the multilingual students. Although this decolonizing translanguaging approach may be less familiar to our fellow instructors of information literacy, our social framing of information literacy and the corresponding approach to teaching the ACRL (2015) information literacy framework shares the same underlying logic, that is, a shared recognition that knowledge within a particular domain or context can be usefully transferred to a less familiar context to facilitate learning (Elmborg, 2006). Information literacy acquired at home in the first language of students can be transferred to the academic context where second language is usually used. Instructors of information literacy following an asset-oriented approach can encourage students to draw on their experience in their first language, rather than denying the value of their experience by not allowing them to play drum with two hands. Furthermore, translanguaging is an instinct, and multilingual students live in a multilingual world outside of class. Developing multilingual information literacy transfers their learning in classrooms to the real world where they actually use two hands. Evaluation of learning outcomes should consider information literacy in a student's first language and integrate it into existing evaluative criteria in the second language to decolonize information literacy instruction. By acknowledging non-western ways of thinking and doing, the translanguaging approach disrupts a hierarchy of languages, prevents othering of non-dominant ideas, and facilitates innovation by conversing with wisdom from other cultures.

## **Instructors as co-learners: promoting student autonomy and agency.**

Teaching information literacy with a translanguaging approach may sound difficult to librarians as they may not understand their students' first language. Even if the librarian does speak the first language of some students, they would never only teach in that language, nor would universities have librarians who speak the first languages of all the students. A translanguaging approach acknowledges a need to redefine the role of teachers. Teachers are not knowledge tellers, but learning facilitators, scaffolders, and critical reflection enhancers in the class. With the redefinition of the teacher's role, learners become empowered explorers, meaning makers, and responsible knowledge constructors (Brantmeier, 2013; Li, 2024). With newly defined roles, teachers do not impose information but rather guide learning by asking learners to reflect on what and how they learn, and providing opportunities to engage in meaningful knowledge construction that promotes relevance to real life (Brantmeier, 2013). The key to co-learning in the classroom is the unlearning of pedagogical cultural conditioning that emphasizes traditional authoritative roles and unequal power dynamics in education (Brantmeier, n.d., n.p., as cited in Li, 2024). Co-learning helps to build a genuine community of practice, bridging the gap between teacher and learner for more dynamic and participatory knowledge construction. Co-learning helps build a student-centered class, which has long been desired by educators in all contexts, and promotes learner autonomy and agency by offering students freedom to take control of their learning.

Under this approach instructors of information literacy are invited to listen to students' information needs and understand how students understand and perceive authority in their multilingual community. This is a wonderful opportunity for instructors of information literacy to model how authority is constructed and contextual, a threshold concept in the ACRL (2015) information literacy framework. Co-learning also encourages the expression of "varied perspectives and interpretations" highlighted in the threshold concept, "scholarship as conversation", in the ACRL (2015, p. 8) framework, inviting perspectives and interpretations from students' experience in their first language. Finally, the participatory characteristic of co-learning in classrooms prepares students for the current "participatory information environments" (ACRL, 2015, p. 8) enacted in this era of content creation shared through social media (Jacobson & Mackey, 2013).

## **Using critical language awareness to develop critical thinking.**

Research has shown that translanguaging pedagogy can equip students with more linguistic resources, knowledge, and confidence to communicate with others and reflect on their language use, and the emphasis on self-reflection cultivates metalinguistic awareness (Sun, 2023). Coupled with awareness of linguistic prejudices, discriminations, and linguistic social injustice, translanguaging pedagogy can also facilitate students' critical language awareness (Sun, 2023), which refers to "the intersections of language, identity, power, and privilege, with the goal of promoting self-reflection, social justice, and rhetorical agency" among multilingual speakers (Shapiro, 2022, p. 4). Furthermore, it has been found that there is an association

between critical language awareness and higher-order cognitive processes, particularly the analysis and evaluation dimension of critical thinking (Wangdi & Savski, 2023), defined as the ability “to analyze and evaluate information, reasoning, and situations, according to appropriate standards, for the purpose of constructing sound and insightful new knowledge, understandings, hypotheses and beliefs” (Heard et al., 2020, p.2). If we aim to cultivate critical language awareness, for example, by stimulating the interrogation of hegemonic ideologies, we can expect the activation of critical thinking. In other words, practicing critical language awareness through translanguaging creates opportunities to practice critical thinking, an equally important higher-order ability for information literacy (Goodsett & Schmillen, 2022).

Principles from translanguaging and critical language awareness can extend current expected dispositions for the “authority is constructed and contextual” threshold concept in the ACRL (2015) framework. Multilingual students should not only “develop awareness of the importance of assessing content with a skeptical stance and with self-awareness of their own biases and worldview” (p. 4), but also to examine biases and worldviews from the dominant language and culture and those from their first language. Critical thinking empowers multilingual students to decolonize the views of authority held by hegemonic linguistic ideology and cultivate agency.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

To prepare future librarians as translanguaging-informed educators, MLIS programs can embed translanguaging pedagogy into their coursework. Conceptually, the ideas of translanguaging can be introduced through readings and discussion. Students can be encouraged to reflect on their own linguistic repertoires. All students have multiple linguistic systems, even if they are monolingual speakers. The language system used in certain personal contexts will be different from the systems used in the workplace or school. Discussion questions or journal prompts can be developed to invite students to compare their own language systems and reflect on when and how they use them.

Assignments can also be created to encourage students to imagine how they would enact a translanguaging pedagogy. For example, students can learn how to design IL lessons that explicitly draw on multilingual learners’ repertoires. The multilingual students could be invited to share disciplinary knowledge in a different language, reflect on whether they are expert on that knowledge, and examine who else is an expert and why. Such activities help learners compare the same knowledge across languages, reflect on ways of knowing, and evaluate how expertise is constructed. It can help to identify and remove hierarchies embedded in language systems and stimulate new ways of critically considering knowledge. As another example, LIS students could analyze case studies of library services or instruction in linguistically diverse settings. LIS students could observe librarianship in practice and then reflect on whether and how they noticed a translanguaging approach in action, and how they might introduce such an approach in a similar situation.

## **CONCLUDING REMARK**

This paper argues that a translanguaging approach to information literacy instruction enhances multilingual students' learning by valuing their linguistic repertoire. We believe this is a rich area for future research and invite scholars to investigate the implementation of the translanguaging approach to information literacy instruction, particularly its effectiveness on students' self-efficacy and learning outcomes of information literacy. By challenging linguistic hierarchies, a translanguaging approach promotes equitable knowledge construction and acknowledges the role of non-dominant languages. Adopting translanguaging fosters co-learning, shifting instructors from knowledge tellers to facilitators, and empowers students as autonomous learners. Furthermore, integrating translanguaging with critical language awareness cultivates critical thinking, a key component of information literacy. Ultimately, embracing translanguaging not only decolonizes information literacy instruction, but also benefits students, instructors, and institutions by fostering inclusive, dynamic, and effective learning environments.

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