

Pedagogical Translanguaging as a Bridge of Return: Supporting Children of Re-Emigrant Families in Polish Schools

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Abstract

The growing return of Polish citizens from Western European countries, increased by Brexit and steady economic growth in Poland, has, for some years, been transforming the demographic and linguistic condition of Polish schools. School children of re-emigrant families, who are frequently bilingual and bicultural, experience educational difficulties entering Polish schools. Based on current research on and theoretical framework of pedagogical translanguaging, this article claims that recognition of students' multilingual competencies can be a pedagogical answer to such learning difficulties. Pedagogical translanguaging, a thoughtful practice that activates the whole learner's linguistic repertoire, provides individualization, cognitive flexibility, and facilitates education. The article outlines the philosophical implications for rehumanizing education in an era of global mobility and presents practical applications within the Polish curriculum.

Keywords

re-emigration; bilingualism; pedagogical translanguaging; education; philosophy of education; inclusion; personalistic pedagogy; Polish system of education

Introduction: Return Migration and Educational Change in Poland

Since 2004, the year Poland joined the European Union, many Polish citizens have been leaving the country and settling in Western states. For a couple of years now, we have witnessed a steady process of return migration¹ as a result of, i.e. Poland's economic development (Polish Observer 2024). According to the German statistics office (Statistisches Bundesamt [Destatis] 2025), for the first time in 2024, the number of Poles returning from Germany (90,807) exceeded the number leaving (82,082). As Fihel et al. (2023) predict, Poland is projected to transition from net sender to net receiver around 2030–2034. This situation expands the topic

¹ According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM 2019), return migration refers to “the movement of a person returning to his or her country of origin after spending time abroad.” In Polish educational studies, the term re-emigrant (reemigrant) is used interchangeably to denote returning citizens and their family members (Słowik 2020; Jędrzysek-Geisler 2024).

of financial capital flow, enrichment of diverse experiences and competencies among citizens but also complex educational challenges. Children of re-emigrants often re-enter Polish schools after years of studying abroad, usually in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany, or other EU countries. Their linguistic repertoires are plural, often dominated by English or German, and their cultural frameworks have been shaped by other educational systems (Jędryszek-Geisler 2024; Słowik 2020). Therefore, Polish schools are becoming multilingual and multicultural spaces, unfortunately still without adequate systemic preparation to this evolving situation.

Comparable educational challenges are met in Southern Europe, where the return of emigrant families from Western countries has changed school demographics (Italy, Portugal, Spain). Studies in Germany and the Netherlands (Veerman et al. 2025) similarly demonstrate that translanguaging-based pedagogies help multilingual learners in mainstream classrooms. Therefore, the Polish case represents part of a wider European pattern of re-integration through multilingual education.

This phenomenon cannot be fully understood without recognizing its wider pedagogical and social ranges. This type of return migration involves not only linguistic and didactic concerns, but also psychological adjustment, economic reintegration, and the political responsibility of educational systems to foster inclusion. Consequently, the issue of re-emigrant education requires an interdisciplinary perspective joining philosophy, pedagogy, and social policy. While this article focuses primarily on Polish context, the reflections presented here resonate with challenges shared across Europe, where schools increasingly educate children of return migration.

Although children returning to Poland are not separated from their parents, they still face emotional discontinuity i.e. in the area of social, linguistic, cultural and emotional gap. In her narrative study ‘It was better in London,’ Aneta Słowik (2020) documented the re-rooting process of Polish families returning from the United Kingdom. Parents frequently describe their children’s struggles in Polish schools, connected with difficulties with understanding specific concepts presented at lessons or reading and writing in the Polish language. The children, on the other hand, describe the feeling of undergoing an identity crisis – ‘Who am I here?’ – and longing for the familiar environment of their previous schools abroad. The research conducted by Jędryszek-Geisler (2024) supports these voices, proving that the main difficulties faced by returning learners include limited academic Polish, emotional distress, and insufficient institutional support.

To shed further light on this issue, it is pertinent to note that the traditional approach prevailing in the Polish system of education responds to linguistic diversity with assimilation- the goal is to make the re-emigrant student ‘fully Polish’ as quickly as possible. Official documents, such as subject-specific curricula and the core curriculum itself (both for primary and secondary education), abound with regulations and recommendations that are consistent only with monolingual teaching. This approach may have functioned well even a few years ago, but in the current situation of growing returns of families with school-age children, it is becoming insufficient. Moreover, this monolingual approach not only disregards linguistic equity, but

also disables the use of student's understanding of crucial terms and accumulated subject knowledge in a foreign language. In contrast, research in multilingual education highlights that bilingualism enhances metacognition, creativity, and problem-solving (García & Li Wei 2014). Recognizing the bilingual repertoire of re-emigrant students as a pedagogical asset means the need to transform classroom discourse.

Pedagogical Translanguaging: Concept and Application

The problems described above with bilingual students are nothing new. Going back to the beginnings, the concept of pedagogical translanguaging originated in the Welsh bilingual context (Cen Williams 1994) and has been furthered among others by García, Li Wei. This approach to education refers to the planned integration of all learner's languages in the learning process. For re-emigrant students, translanguaging may serve several functions: cognitive, affective, social, and cultural. Translanguaging is not random code-switching but a structured pedagogy that purposefully integrates all learner's linguistic resources in order to support comprehension and academic achievement. It enables re-emigrant students to bridge their home and school languages in meaningful, empowering ways.

There are some Ministerial advances in thinking about teaching in multilingual classroom i.e. the IBE-PIB (2024) has been working on "Activities supporting educational accessibility" including a project "Accessible School for All" which addresses pupils with migration experience and language development support. Furthermore, the new curriculum project on modern foreign language education (IBE-PIB 2025) emphasizes intercultural competence and communication. Nevertheless, most educational documents still conceptualize Polish and foreign languages as distinct domains. Integrating translanguaging seems to be a far-away transformation requiring systemic reinterpretation and teacher awareness. To support bilingual learners effectively the focus should be directed towards teacher education (further training of in-service teachers and academic training of up-coming teachers), collaborative teaching, and evidence-based teaching approach.

Viewed through the lens of pedagogical personalism promoted by Pope John Paul II, translanguaging transcends its methodological dimension to become a deeply humanistic and philosophical act of education. Personalism, as articulated in *The Acting Person* (Osoba i czyn; Wojtyła 1969) and in later papal writings, affirms that the human person is the subject – never merely the object – of education, summoned to truth, closeness, and self-realisation through free and responsible action (John Paul II 1979, 1998). In this context, the learner's linguistic identity is not marginal but fundamental of personhood. Translanguaging, therefore, has a chance to serve as a genuine personalist pedagogy of encounter and presence, one that respects the dignity and wholeness of learners by welcoming all their linguistic resources into the process of meaning-making. If teachers allow re-emigrant students to draw upon their full linguistic repertoires, they will endorse what John Paul II described as the "law of the gift" – the pedagogical expression of love and affirmation that enables the person to fully become themselves in relation to others. Thus, translanguaging has the potential to function in Polish schools simultaneously as an act of educational care, that fosters belonging, and as

a philosophical embodiment of personalist anthropology, in which language creates the centre of the human person's search for truth, meaning, and community. The presence of pedagogical translanguaging in the classroom is capable of carrying a deep ethical consequence, affirming the student as linguistic being-in-relation – someone whose identity is constituted through language and presence. Translanguaging has the opportunity to become a pedagogy of return, recognising the student's migration story as a foundation of wisdom and enrichment rather than trauma.

Classroom Implications: From Philosophy to Practice

The translation of personalist philosophy into educational practice can take modest yet profoundly transformative actions. In everyday classroom practice, translanguaging can take the form of peer-translation tasks, where bilingual students collaboratively reconstruct Polish texts in English and vice versa (Daniel & Pacheco, 2015). Learners may keep translanguaging notebooks (Busse et al. 2020) that record key vocabulary and conceptual connections across both languages, and create bilingual “identity texts” (Kapoyannis, 2019) expressing their stories of migration. Moreover, translanguaging may be realised through bilingual learning spaces, where students can access and compare materials in multiple languages. Such practices operationalise the personalist and inclusive dimension of translanguaging, grounding it in everyday experiences of learners and teachers.

Return migration is not a simple reversal of emigration – it is a complex process of re-rooting that involves renegotiating identity, memory, and belonging. For children, this transition clarifies most intensely in the classroom, where linguistic and cultural worlds intersect. Within this context, pedagogical translanguaging emerges as a bridge that connects past and present, home and host, the familiar and the new. By acknowledging all the languages that create a learner's experience, Polish schools can transform the experience of re-emigration from the feeling of discontinuity and loss into an opportunity for excitement and integration. Translanguaging perceives bilingualism not as a short-term coping mechanism but as a lasting expression of belonging and care – a way of feeling at home across languages and cultures. In this sense, it resonates with the vision of pedagogical personalism inspired by Pope John Paul II, who understood education as the formation of persons capable of dialogue, responsibility, and communion. Ultimately, translanguaging emerges not only as a pedagogical bridge but also as a goal, directing Polish schools toward communities that are more inclusive, compassionate, and intellectually aware in this new era of migration and return. The Polish example may serve as a research laboratory for rethinking multilingual education in Europe shaped by mobility and return. Translanguaging, anchored in personalistic pedagogy, offers not only a methodological innovation but also a philosophical response to the moral and social obligation of education in times of global mobility.

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