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Translingual arts-based practices for language learners

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In this article, we advocate for the enriching role of arts-based practices in the delivery of a translingual pedagogical approach. With a growing interest in translanguaging, ELT practitioners are searching for models and creative ideas that foster a translingual environment for their learners. We have responded to this call and developed a collaborative project entitled 'Creative Language Practices: Exploring Translanguaging in Pedagogical Contexts and Beyond.' The project brought together language researchers from the University of Glasgow, creative artists and school teachers. By sharing our approach and practices, we want to promote the adoption of translingual values and guiding principles through the use of arts as a methodology for language learning and meaning making. Instead of feeling intimidated by the complexity and difficulty of the concept of translanguaging, teachers and practitioners could adopt an arts-based pedagogy as the catalyst for creative practice that will help learners to explore their creative resources.

Introduction

The idea of creating a language suitcase is definitely not new. As language learners and practitioners, we have thought on many occasions about the language tools that we are able to draw on or the linguistic resources that allow us to communicate effectively. We may have asked our pupils to develop their own language suitcases by thinking reflectively about their linguistic repertoires and by gathering language bits that show who they are as language users. So how is a translingual suitcase different? And how can arts-based practices transform what goes into the language suitcase? In this article, we share the approach and the benefits of developing a translingual pedagogical approach that builds on the enriching and critical role of arts-based practices in various language learning contexts. To do so, we present a professional development project, entitled 'Creative Language Practices: Exploring Translanguaging in Pedagogical Contexts and Beyond.' Throughout this project, we supported language teachers in primary and secondary schools in Glasgow (UK) to gain a fuller understanding of translanguaging by developing creative practices that they tested and adapted to their pupils' contexts. Through a series of workshops and a collaborative approach with creative artists, we were able to build new experiences for language learners, as well as to encourage the active integration of translingual principles.

In consultation with EAL (English as an Additional Language) teachers, this project aimed to address two important needs: first, the teachers' increased interest in exploring the concept of translanguaging for their own classrooms; second, teachers' search for practical models and pedagogical ideas on how to implement a translingual approach. While the term has gained significant scholarly interest over the past 25 years (Conteh 2018, Jones 2019), translingual activities and practices are still being developed and need to be tailored to learners' specific contexts (see Ballinger, Lyster, Sterzuk and Genesee 2017). The teachers we worked with felt challenged by the complexity of the term at the beginning of our project and, although they showed an openness to develop new language pedagogies,

they sought guidance on how to build a creative and inclusive approach to language learning and teaching.

Instead of bringing to the forefront the literature on translanguaging and translingual pedagogy, we developed a different approach. We drew on the creative potential of translanguaging (Li 2018, Jones 2019) and used arts-based practices to transform and enrich experiences of language learning and teaching. Our goal was to open up this concept and to make it relevant for teachers' practice and pupils' learning experiences in ways that were engaging, relevant, and generative. The resulting activities, some of which are presented in the following sections, are an invitation to all language practitioners to draw on their creative resources and to place arts-based activities at the core of their translingual experiences.

A professional development project

'Creative Language Practices: Exploring Translanguaging in Pedagogical Contexts and Beyond' is a collaboration between the authors of this article, three creative artists, seven primary teachers, two secondary teachers and one Early Years teacher from Glasgow. During autumn 2018-spring 2019, the entire team of researchers and practitioners participated in a series of workshops where they explored and developed translingual activities which teachers put into practice in their own classroom and community contexts. The pupils from the classrooms involved in the project were multilingual speakers with various linguistic backgrounds, including Polish, Romanian, Slovakian, Mandarin, Punjabi, Arabic and Urdu (one school had speakers of 30+ different L1s). The teachers committed to test and adapt their newly developed activities in the classroom, as well as in the wider communities where the pupils lived. The creative artists shared their expertise as they explored the concept for the first time and contributed with their own artistic ideas. These activities were then compiled into a suitcase-toolkit and shared via open-access with other language practitioners (see https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/gc/creativepracticestranslang/).

While the authors of this article were familiar with the scholarly literature on translanguaging, we avoided taking a prescriptive approach to the term by presenting a set definition or framework of translingual pedagogy. Our teacher-learners' conceptual understanding of the term and its pedagogy was channelled through artefacts, arts-based activities, conceptual cues and creative interactions with the artists. In the spirit of a collaborative approach, we were interested in artists' emergent understandings and practices of translanguaging that resonated with teachers' experiences and contexts. Because we explored the creative dimensions of translanguaging, we wanted to record how teachers and creative artists assembled a translingual approach together and, based on our collaborative work, we developed guiding principles for a translingual arts-based pedagogy that could be implemented in different learning contexts.

Translanguaging through creativity and arts-based practices

Translanguaging is a notoriously difficult concept to pinpoint. On the one hand, its difficulty derives from a lack of research-based consensus on what translanguaging is: a pedagogy, an orientation, an approach, a practice, an ordinary process (Conteh 2018). On the other hand, translanguaging is difficult to work with as a concept because of its complex and abstract nature. Rather than trying to define what translanguaging IS or IS NOT, in our project we explored translingual principles and we focussed on what arts-based practices enable us to understand about translingual experiences. In other words, we focused on the creative dimension of translanguaging (see Li 2018) and we systematically turned to arts as a methodology for translating this theoretical concept into practice. In lieu of a definition, our teachers explored, experienced and engaged their learners into thinking about language as a verb, as a doing. Our collaboration aimed to enact what Jones (2019) calls for, to move 'beyond traditional notions of linguistic creativity and creative pedagogy to formulate new ways of imagining creativity in language learning based on encouraging learners to make use of the full range of their semiotic resources and social experiences when communicating' (3).

If language users engage with the world by *languaging*, then the possibilities for creativity are numerous. Arts-based practices enabled our participants to see that creativity can be brought into classroom and community-oriented activities at multiple levels. Creative language practices bring learners out of old linguistic habits and disrupt already formed ways of working with language (Anderson 2018). Arts-based activities enable learners to think and do new things with language while also reflecting critically on how they generally deploy their linguistic resources in everyday interactions. Therefore, creativity, criticality and language awareness operate together in translingual experiences (Li 2011). The use of arts and the move to creative language actions also have a fundamental transformative power that open up fluid and dynamic ways of being in the world (Moore, Bradley and Simpson 2020). In other words, integrating the arts in language learning generates new opportunities for using the full repertoire an individual can work through to adapt and respond effectively to any new communicative situation.

Yet, an arts-based translingual approach is not extraordinary because it facilitates different or non-traditional ways of using language resources. As our teachers discovered and as noted in the already existent literature (Dovchin and Lee 2019), creativity is folded into ordinary experiences with language. Creativity is not something we opt-in by deciding to work on a one-off creative exercise; it is instead a constitutive part of meaning making processes because language encounters are always created anew, in response to others' language actions and in relation to new language resources that we acquire through these new encounters. Put simply, creativity in meaning making is the process of growing through and with languaging with others, an ongoing process of expansion and dynamic learning of bits of words, sounds, emotions, gestures, and interactions with our environments.

Towards a translingual arts-based pedagogy

Our collaborative project adopted a bottom-up approach whereby we learned from the participating teachers and creative artists how a translingual approach works to provide

language learners with rich and transformative experiences. Below we present key principles that begin to articulate an arts-based translingual pedagogy informed by the generative links between translanguaging and creativity. At the same time, given the complex nature of translanguaging as a theoretical and practical concept, we want to invite readers to view these principles as guiding rather than prescribing practice. A translingual arts-based pedagogy is predicated on openness, dynamism and creative possibilities for collaborative transformation (Moore, Bradley and Simpson 2020).

Exploring meaning making and the multiple relations between signs

In many traditional classes, the underlying ideology focusses language learning on the acquisition of a code and on learning how to speak or write English well (Li 2018: 3). In our project, we used arts-based practices to shift attention from language as a code to processes of meaning making. In the 21st century, it is not enough for language learners to be able to express, decode or even negotiate meaning. To tackle the challenges of their increasingly complex contexts, language users need much more sophisticated competences in manipulating symbolic systems — they need to understand the practice of meaning making itself (Kramsch 2006). This implies moving the focus from expressing and communicating (fixed) meaning towards the performative aspect of language using (i.e. languaging) and the process of making/negotiating the meaning.

To make learners aware of the meaning making processes, we developed an activity entitled 'Translanguaging Comics.' For this activity, learners had to create their own comics in which they portrayed in watercolours encounters with translingual situations, i.e. interactions between characters where different language resources were negotiated and worked through.

Fig 1. Monika Szydłowska *Do you miss your country?* Centrala. 2015
NO/nɔ/ in Polish (colloquial) means 'yeah', 'yep'; 'nie' is the formal Polish version of 'no'

To help pupils understand the prompt, we used translingual comics created by Monika Szydłowska from her book, *Do you miss your country?* In her work, Szydłowska reflects on her own encounters with Polish and English in everyday encounters with others who may or may not share the same linguistic resources or strategies for communicating. By drawing these comics, learners were able to think not only about what language is produced and for what purposes, but also where and how meaning making negotiations happen in real life.

Arts-based practices as methodology for meaning making

In our project we integrated contemporary art as a systematic methodology for structuring activities, supporting language learning and reflecting on meaning making. Art-as-methodology opened a space for experimentation beyond the framework of being right or wrong, a space where the value of other forms of understanding arising from 'thinking in a medium, thinking in a language, and thinking in a context' (Sullivan 2010: 123) was emphasized. Teachers and learners were encouraged to explore the topic of translanguaging by 'gathering permissions' – being inspired both by artworks created by artists and their 'modes of operation' (Lucero 2011: 25, 40).

An activity inspired by Marc Chagall's paintings exemplifies this process. The first part of the activity consists of 'gathering permissions' (Lucero 2011) from Chagall – learners are encouraged to explore the artist's life and work. Chagall's depictions of flying people, a cow lying eggs on the roof, a cat with a human face or a painter with seven fingers may be perceived as strange, funny or unusual. Teachers may want to prompt learners to consider what elements or aspects of the works cause those impressions and why, before disclosing that several of them are literal visual representations of various idioms from languages known to Chagall. The artist's painting, *Paris through the Window* (1912-1913), can be used as an example of translingual meaning making (Lvovich 2015). The painting represents Paris through the eyes of Chagall and contains several idiomatic expressions. An image of a couple flying close to the Eiffel tower corresponds to the idiom 'luftmensch' ('man of the air'), which denotes in Yiddish an individual overly involved in intellectual pursuit and represents Chagall and his wife Bella. Bella is also represented as a cat with a human face sitting on the windowsill - in Russian, one often calls a dear person 'kiska'('kitten') whilst a person parachuting with an umbrella denotes Yiddish 'Bashiremt' ('covered with an umbrella'), which means 'protected by the destiny'. Knowing Chagall's biography and the meaning of the idiom, learners may discuss why the umbrella is in the colours of the French flag. Discussions of various symbols and idioms depicted in this painting and the ways they make meaning, for example by referring to literal, figurative and cultural referents, prepare learners for the second part of the task.

In part two, learners are provided with a selection of idioms from several languages and encouraged to create their own paintings, in which they incorporate idioms from more than one language using both paint and cut-outs of the words (they may again look to Chagall's paintings for examples of how words are included in his artworks).

Fig 2. Two paintings of idioms:
(left image) *Raining cats and dogs* (English idiom) & *Ej bekot / Go pick mushrooms* (Latvian idiom for *Go away, leave me alone),* 2020
(right image) Marzyć o niebieskich migdałach /*Dreaming about blue almonds* (Polish idiom for *Daydreaming) & Being in the same boat*, 2019
© Dobrochna Futro

The activity offers a safe space for creative and critical experimenting with meaning making and, specifically, with the use of several semiotic modes (visual, written, conceptual, tactile), and named languages in the process of knowledge construction (Li 2018). Learners come to explore language idioms by tapping into the imaginary worlds of these idioms: visualizing what they mean, reflecting on how their message is experienced through different objects and sets of relations.

In this way, learners authorize themselves as language and knowledge makers by using artistic tools and, in doing so, they are able to integrate art as a constitutive form of how they engage with the world. In other words, through this activity we promote art as a source and a mode of being, as a lens through which we see the world rather than a 'high form' or an occasional/experimental form of engaging with content.

Embedding creativity in everyday experiences of language

Our approach inspired participating teachers in our project to transform their pedagogy and expand it to their immediate communities. For instance, one primary school teacher asked pupils to design posters on the benefits of being multilingual and, together with her class, they toured various businesses in their communities and posted their posters where permitted. This enabled the pupils to raise community awareness of the importance of making visible all the language resources shared in that community. Moreover, the pupils had the opportunity to engage with shop owners and their clients in conversations about language use and language heritage. Conversations also led to new translingual encounters where words, gestures, sounds and movements were shared among the participants.
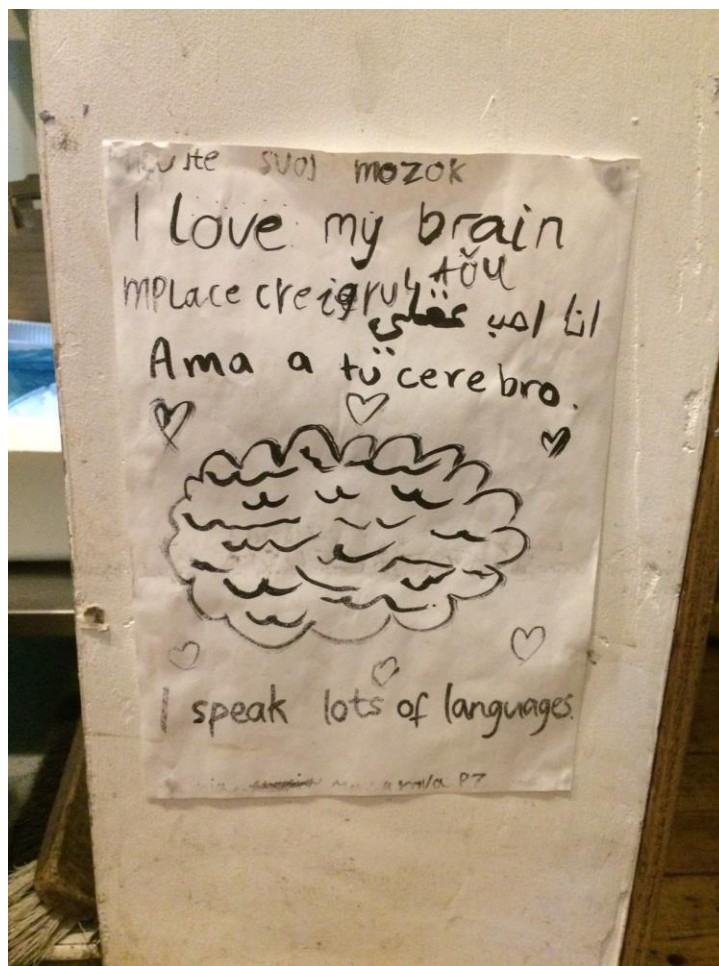
FIG 3. Pupil's poster in a café (Glasgow). *I love my brain*
(in Slovak, English, Romanian, Arabic, Spanish)
© Lavinia Hirsu

The sensory dimension of translanguaging

In the following *Word and Picture* poem activity, learners are invited to examine their own responses to words and phrases which can help them move beyond the more mechanical simple one-word description and translation language activities, so often found in more traditional language classrooms. This translingual activity provides an opportunity for learners to explore their emotional, sensory and abstract conceptual thinking, when responding to words and poems.

The teacher introduces three to four colours, by writing on the whiteboard the word of the colours in the target language, using a marker pen of the target colour. To scaffold the process, the teacher can either use emoticons (☺) to indicate emotions such as 'happy', 'sad' or objects to indicate the images we might think of when we see the colour (☼ - sun for 'yellow'). The learners then are given an activity sheet with some further examples of colours in the target language, on which they record their emotional responses and the images that appear in their mind's eye when they think of the colour, either in the L1,

target language or a simple visual representation. The learners then share their responses with their peers. At this point, the teacher can supply the target language translation or the students can use Google translate or dictionaries to find it themselves.

To extend this activity, the learners are invited to read the poem below, *Yellow*, written by Sally Zacharias and inspired by .Pd. is here (2006). The learners are not given the title of the poem, the word 'yellow' has been removed, and the L1, in this case German, (e.g. 'Hummeln', 'Blätter', 'Feigheit') for some of the words ('bumblebee', 'leaves', 'cowardice') are given:

_____ are the sunflowers
Hummeln and butterflies
the harvest and
the autumn Blätter.

_____ are the Simpsons
the Pikachu my brother stole
the colour of
smilies.

_____ is Feigheit
banana skins I slipped on
penalty cards at a football game
canaries in coal mines.

_____ is happiness
golden jewels, the crown
warmth and laughter
and the seaside, sunset glow.

The learners are asked to say what colour the poem evokes. Depending on the level of the students, this poem can be adapted by providing more or less of the L1 to support them. As the learners gain more confidence, they can then draw on their language resources to write their own poem and then visually represent it through drawing or painting. To support this stage, learners are given the following template to cue their creative thinking:

Blue are the _____
the _____ and _____
_____, sea
and cornflowers.

_____ is for _____
shivering cold,
the colour of _____
_____.

Allowing learners to explore their own emotional and sensory responses as they engage with different languages they encounter in poetry and other texts is key to developing critical, creative and emotionally aware dispositions in our learners. Revealing the emotional dimension of meaning making is a crucial aspect of the translingual experience. This appeal to the senses takes the learners outside the boundaries of words and moves them into exploring the multi-layered experience of language learning – from mind to body.

Translanguaging in context

The arts-based practices presented in the sections above have been implemented in a multilingual context where English maintains a primary role among the learners' aspirations to *language* in the UK. This context may be quite different from other learning environments where teachers might work with monolingual learners with a shared L1 or with multilingual learners whose various linguistic resources carry different socio-political values. Languages are intertwined with identities of different groups whose position in the larger communities may be contested, challenged, reclaimed and continuously negotiated. In these contexts, teachers may be constrained by social norms, stereotypes, policies, curricula and institutional expectations (e.g., using Romanian in the classroom in a community where attitudes towards Romanians may not be welcoming). Arts-based activities may seem daunting and allowing learners to use L1 with all its meaning making resources might be seen as a threat to meeting L2 language expectations. In response, we would like to argue that the translingual approach, as articulated in this article, opens up possibilities for dialogue across labelled languages/identities. We want to emphasize that learners bring L1 resources to the classroom anyway and, by integrating arts-based practices, we are seeking new ways to engage L2/L1 boundaries, which are always dynamic and fluid (Conteh 2018, Anderson 2018).

Even when assessments requirements may call for a one-language focus with little room for trying out new ideas of language learning, teachers can help learners achieve assessment benchmarks by consistently adopting a holistic way of language learning. The learners' abilities to draw on their language creativity can be valued and rewarded through formative assessments that recognize the pupils' multiple language resources (e.g., representing the notion of 'respect towards elders' in multiple modes and according to different cultural-linguistic terms). If changing summative assessment is not possible, consistently approaching L2 language targets by situating learning within the context of language resources may encourage learners to seek connections between these resources and to experience language both as a repertoire of competences, as well as a process of making sense of their world.

Paradoxically, this approach requires not only an understanding of arts-based practices as opportunities to *create* rich contexts for language learning, but also an occasion to *decreate* what we seem to know, control and manage about language(s) (Phipps 2019). If we are to take seriously the creative power of meaning making practices, as language practitioners we need to decrease our positions as knowers of language. This requires that we trust more our pupils' creative capacities to *language* while accepting that we too can learn from their semiotic resources, be surprised at their ability to move in and across language(s) and be

willing to change our own repertoires by participating in shared language learning experiences. In this sense, our translingual approach is an invitation for language practitioners and learners to work together to create, decreate and recreate the processes of meaning making.

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