



Why plurilingualism belongs in our classrooms

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considers how beneficial and welcoming a multilingual approach is.

Only English, please.' We've all said it. We've all meant well. And sometimes, it feels like the right thing to say. But after almost two decades of teaching in multilingual classrooms, I've come to realise something: maybe it's not. Let me tell you why.

Why plurilingual teaching matters – especially now

Most English teachers today work in multilingual classrooms. Yet many of our methods still reflect monolingual assumptions – that English must be learnt in isolation from other languages. But research tells a different story.

Macaro (2005) found **no evidence** that banning other languages improves English learning. Hall and Cook (2012) emphasised that multilingual learners routinely draw on their whole language repertoires for scaffolding, especially at beginner levels. Why take that away from them? Cummins (2007) and Swain and Lapkin (2000) showed that using students' languages supports cognitive development and reduces anxiety, especially for emerging learners. In my own research, learners described feeling included, empowered and more engaged when their full linguistic repertoire was recognised, as also confirmed by De la Campa and Nassaji (2009).

So, what I found when I opened the door

In a recent adult learner elementary class at the British Council, UAE, I had learners from nine different language backgrounds: Arabic; Azerbaijani;

Chinese; Kurdish; Latvian; Farsi; French; Russian; and Turkish. I'd hear a quiet explanation in Kurdish or a grammar rule discussed in Azerbaijani. The old voice in my head, trained in English-only orthodoxy, whispered: '*Should I stop this?*'. Rather than seeing learners' languages as a barrier, I asked: '*What will happen if I make space for them instead?*'. Using classroom observations, informal interviews, exit reflections and journals for three months, I tracked how learners responded to intentional moments where they could engage with English through their languages. Here's what emerged.

- 100% of my elementary adult learners used their languages at some point to support their English learning.
- 85% said this helped them understand grammar or vocabulary faster, as also supported by research (Liu & Zeng, 2015).

- 75% reported increased confidence in language learning.
- Learners frequently supported one another in shared languages, leading to richer peer mediation and interaction.

English remained the primary medium, but it was no longer the only one present. And that made a world of difference.

But why are teachers still on the fence?

If plurilingual teaching feels unfamiliar, you're not alone. Many of us were trained in systems that equated English proficiency with English-only instruction. And while the intent was good, it often left both teachers and students cut off from valuable linguistic resources. To make plurilingual teaching sustainable and effective, we need:

- institutional recognition and encouragement;
- practical ideas that fit into existing lesson plans; and
- time and space for reflection and experimentation.

We don't need to master every language. We need to shift our mindset from gatekeeping language use to designing learning that reflects how people actually communicate in real life.

But I don't speak their languages – can I still do this?

That's the first question I hear from teachers. And the short answer? Yes. The good news: I didn't speak any of my learners' languages either. I created opportunities within the lesson for learners to use their languages and support each other's understanding. And what I saw was transformation, not confusion.

Students translated key points for one another. They brainstormed in their languages and presented ideas in English. They reflected bilingually in journals. They turned to familiar tools like bilingual dictionaries or Google Translate and built stronger connections to new English input and with each other. The result? More meaningful communication in all languages – not less.

Teachers also worry that students could overuse their languages, which can negatively impact target language practice. While this is a valid concern, research shows that strategic and principled use of other languages can support, rather than hinder, learning. One way to do this is through **pedagogical translanguageing**, which Cenoz and Gorter (2017) define as:

planned by the teacher inside the classroom and can refer to the use of different languages for input and output or to other planned strategies based on the use of students' languages.

– Jasone Cenoz and Durk Gorter (2017)

The Pedagogical Translanguageing Cycle (Figure 1) is a structured approach that guides teachers in integrating students' linguistic resources in a meaningful and strategic way.

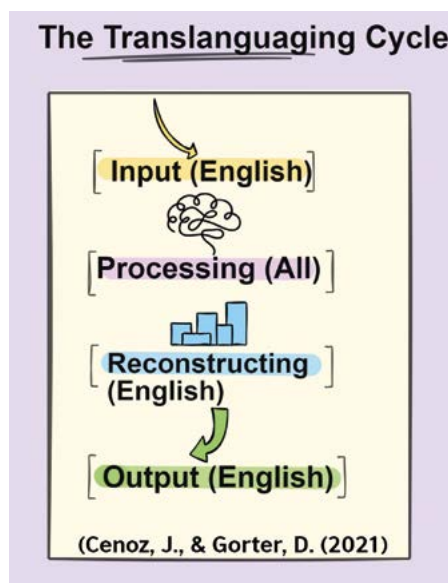


Figure 1: The pedagogical translanguageing cycle

1. **Input** – learners engage with content in one or more languages (reading or listening).
2. **Processing** – they analyse and make sense of the information, using their full linguistic repertoire.
3. **Reconstructing** – learners reformulate knowledge, often switching between languages to deepen understanding.
4. **Output** – they produce language, demonstrating understanding (writing, speaking or multimodal work).

It's not just about the teacher – it's also about the system

To truly embrace this shift, we need change across the broader ELT landscape.

Coursebooks

Most teaching materials still assume a monolingual learner. They fail to build on learners' existing knowledge and do not reflect multilingual lived realities. Imagine instead:

Imagine instead:

- prompts to compare grammatical structures;
- opportunities for translanguageing or multilingual mediation; and
- reflection questions that tap into students' linguistic and cultural experiences.

Until coursebooks evolve, teachers can innovate through minor tweaks.

You can try this tomorrow if you want to

Here are a few low-prep strategies from my classroom research.

- **Translanguageing corners** – Create a shared board (physical in the classroom or digital via Padlet or Google Docs) where students add new vocabulary in English alongside translations in their languages. Over time, this becomes a multilingual reference bank that students can revisit for revision, cross-checking meaning and noticing similarities or differences between languages.
- **Contrastive analysis** – Invite students to compare specific grammar structures, pronunciation patterns, or 'false friends' between English and their own languages (Figure 2). For example, you could give a sentence in English and have them write an equivalent in their language, then discuss where structures match or differ. This raises awareness of language transfer and helps learners self-correct more confidently.
- **Peer mediation groups** – Organise small groups where learners with shared languages collaborate on reading or writing tasks. They might discuss

a challenging text in their language first, clarify key points and then work together to produce a summary, presentation or piece of writing in English. This builds confidence with complex ideas before expressing them in the target language.

- **Multilingual journals** – Encourage learners to keep learning journals where they can reflect in any language they choose. This could include thoughts on the lesson, new vocabulary or connections to their own culture. Once or twice a week, ask them to summarise an entry in English. This allows for deeper thinking in their strongest language while still practising English output.

These strategies won't compromise English learning. They'll support it.

Parents and students

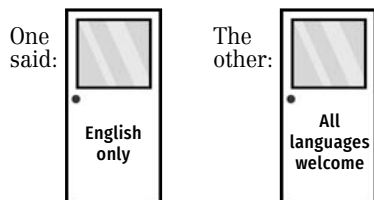
Many students and families still associate English-only learning with faster results. This belief, while understandable, is based on outdated assumptions. We all have a responsibility to decolonise our minds, our teaching spaces by communicating, both verbally and visually, that:

- using additional languages can accelerate English learning;
- working across languages helps learners notice patterns and clarify concepts; and
- recognising learners' languages strengthens identity and motivation.

Consistent messaging is the key.

Final thought: let's open the door

In my recent IATEFL 2025 talk in Edinburgh, I shared images of two classroom doors.



Many of us were trained to walk through the first one. It feels familiar. But our learners? They live behind the second. When we walk through that second door, even slightly, we connect with students in ways that go far beyond grammar or vocabulary. We make room for their voices, their identities, their stories and their culture.

- We don't have to translate everything.
- We don't have to speak every language.
- We just need to make space.

And that space can change everything.

The present perfect – think and compare

English sentence: *Cameras **have become** cheaper.*

1. **How do you say this sentence in your language?**

(Write the full sentence.)

2. **Does it mean the same thing in your language?**

(Yes/No – explain if it's different.)

3. **Do you use the same tense (the present perfect) or grammar to say this? Or is it different in your language?**

(What's different or similar?)

4. **Do you think it is useful to compare English grammar with your language? Why?**

Figure 2: Contrastive analysis worksheet

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