



**UNIVERSIDAD
DE ANTIOQUIA**

Trabajo de investigación presentado como requisito
parcial para optar al título de:

Licenciado en Lenguas Extranjeras

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Universidad de Antioquia
Escuela de Idiomas
El Carmen de Viboral, Colombia
2020



Making Heritages Available: Using Translanguaging to Foster 6th Graders' Reading
Comprehension

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Abstract

This action research project had the purpose of exploring the role of translanguaging practices in fostering 6th graders' reading comprehension of written literary texts at a public institution in El Carmen de Viboral, Antioquia. For this purpose, and as long as the COVID-19 pandemic allowed us, we ventured to read Franz Kafka's story *A Hunger Artist*, adapted to make room for both English and Spanish languages. Data was collected through students' artifacts, questionnaires, journals and a focus groups interview. The analysis showed that, in spite of the limitations imposed by the pandemic, appealing to the rich linguistic fluidities of emergent bilinguals has promising possibilities for widening their access to content and a new language at the time they explore their particular voices.

Key words: Translanguaging, reading, Franz Kafka, emergent bilinguals.

Degree requirement

This action research project is submitted as a requirement of the Bachelor of Education in Teaching Foreign Languages (English-French) at the Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia, in El Carmen de Viboral, Colombia.

Acknowledgements

To my parents and my sister,

good enough protectors

To my friends,

for the gestures emitted, source of charm

To my students,

adventurers in the forests of signs

To Diana C. and Natalia,

for their comprehension, patience and generosity

To Diana A. and Dora

for their hospitality in making room for one more together with them

To a pair of teachers who saved me from myself

Preface

The title I decided to give to this project is rooted in a specific way of conceiving education and, therefore, what is at stake within a classroom. With the poignant help of others, I understand education as a legal action of symbolic affiliation and a political action of designation that ensures that everyone is authorized to enter, interpret and expand the common *arkhé*, a distribution in the manner of a gift that does not entail debt (Frigerio, 2004, p. 130). Thus, educational institutions are supposed to hold an offer of *knowledges* that make available to anybody the common heritages of our culture and the possibility of resignifying them. If our singular lineages have provided us with our genetic inheritance, then education is supposed to bestow symbolic inheritances upon which our humanity is held. The symbolic inheritance this project tried—to a certain extent, as we will see—to transmit is named Franz Kafka. Thus, the passion that assembled this work was nothing but literature. And translanguaging seemed to be the key thanks to which I could make room for this passion through English language teaching. Because in the end, this is what is at stake at the social scale: to crush life or to make it live, because it is not enough to produce human flesh, it must be also instituted (Legendre, 1996, p. 9).

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Context

Throughout this section, I will provide information about the characteristics of the school, the participants involved in this project, the classroom, and the syllabus for the English class adopted by the institution.

Institución Educativa Fray Julio Tobón Betancur (IEFJTBB henceforth) has two branches located in the urban area of *El Carmen de Viboral, Antioquia*: branch A, which offers preschool, elementary school and sixth grade in double shift, and branch B, which is in charge of high school. My practicum took place in the former. The pedagogical model that guides the horizon of the institution is focused on developing three dimensions of human beings: *being, knowing* and *doing*. Its mission is to educate upright and comprehensive people with high human and academic quality, cultivated in values such as respect, autonomy and democracy (IEFJTBB, 2018). Furthermore, the institution envisions to be recognized in 2020 for the quality of its students, educated according to values such as respect, autonomy and responsibility (IEFJTBB, 2018).

In relation to the groups where I developed my practicum, it is important to mention that this research emerged from two groups of fourth grades in which I worked two hours per week during the second semester of 2019. However, due to institutional decisions, I had to develop such a research proposal in a 6th grade. Therefore, since the characteristics of the groups were different, it is highly probable that a different project had emerged if I had worked before with 6th graders.

Taking into account the aforementioned circumstances, it is necessary to provide information about both contexts. In fourth grade I worked with two groups, one with 43 students and other with 42, whose ages ranged from 9 to 13 years old. Their socioeconomic status was low and middle, with most of them coming from the urban area of the municipality and only a

few living in rural areas. Each group studied two hours of English per week and their feelings towards English were not unanimous: Some students liked it, some others did not, and some others were in between these two positions. The main reason for not liking English, as expressed by students, was that sometimes they did not understand anything (Questionnaire, August 14th, 2019). However, most of them conceived English as an important subject because it opens opportunities to work and travel, or because it was a new knowledge they were learning (Questionnaire, August 14th, 2019). Their English proficiency level was regular for beginners, which means that they could create short sentences about themselves and their families, express their mood, recognize different professions, or orally repeat tongue twisters (Student-teacher journal: July 29th, September 2nd, 4th).

Regarding the group where this project was carried out, it was a 6th grade class with 45 students whose ages ranged from 10 to 13 years old. This group had four hours of English per week and when asked about their feelings and opinions towards English language learning, they said they liked it and that it was important because of the ease it provides for travelling or finding a good job position (Questionnaire, February 11th, 2020). In general, their English proficiency level was regular for beginners. The classroom was located on the first floor of the building in a really dark room where the only natural light came from the cracks of a wide but small window. The classroom space was just enough to place forty-five students, the teacher's desk and seat. Additionally, it also had a board and a TV installed in the back.

In relation to the English teacher for 6th grade, she had a bachelor's degree in Spanish-English teaching from *Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana* and holded a master's degree in foreign languages from *Universidad de Santander*. By the time of this study, she had been teaching for twenty-six years, eight of which had been at *IEFJTB*. In terms of her beliefs about

English language teaching, she expressed that daily life, students' routines and experiences had to be the point of departure for language teaching. Moreover, she considered that her role in the classroom was not only that of a teacher but also of someone interested in establishing bonds of trust with students. Finally, the main difficulties she perceived when teaching English were related to students' lack of commitment and responsibility (Interview, February 18th, 2020).

Concerning the syllabus, the English lessons were based on a curriculum map provided by the institution that was constructed together with the University of Antioquia. The English syllabus for sixth grade was divided in three terms, each of them guided by five or six standards. Subsequently, those standards guided the teaching topics, the performance indicators, the contents to be addressed —lexical, grammatical, discursive, sociolinguistic/sociocultural—, as well as the suggested activities and skills to be assessed.

Towards a possible action research project...¹

According to Flavia Terigi, teaching can be thought as a political problem —at an institutional level—, and this is justified by the fact that if there is something we hope from educational policies is that they appear, again and again, compromised with the improvement of teaching (Terigi, 2004a, p. 193). In this sense, Terigi argues that we are failing to make the subject of analysis the variety of options that teachers can make in their classrooms within the frame of the institutional conditions of schooling: Previsions about the implications of those possible options for students' learning are needed [...] By not producing a correlative analysis of teaching, policies understood in the sense we have just defined leave a great responsibility to

¹ From my perspective, we need to think more about what is actually a research problem, not only in this type of projects but also in the entire academia. Duschatzky, Farrán and Aguirre (2010) glimpse this: “Un problema implica la construcción de un territorio nuevo, que no supone una mudanza física [...] La cuestión no es aplicar un pensamiento preexistente.” (p. 75-85).

schools and teachers (Terigi, 2004b, pp. 55-56). If such is my beginning, it is because I need to clarify that the state of things on which I will focus has to do more with the institutional and political conditions described by Terigi than with any blames to the English teacher. However, this does not imply justifying a lack of teachers' commitment inside the classrooms. Having stated this, I will now describe (a) the issues I identified after a period of one and a half months observing classes and that opened the possibilities for this project, (b) the argument and evidence for these issues, and (c) the decisions I made to face the situation I had in front of me.

Succinctly, the scene that this research project found was the following: Since students were not proficient enough in English, everyone used Spanish in class for meaning-making, leading the teacher to focus her work on grammatical explanations considering both the difficulties of level to use language for communicative purposes and the institutional conditions that framed her teaching (e.g. number of students, teaching hours per-week, curricular policies). From such a scene, at least two consequences arose, which I now turn to describe.

The first one is that by focusing classes on grammar, students were being limited to the potential messages they could be *bashed*² by and convey, as if language did not imply the creation, transformation and enhancement of reality (Larrosa, 1998). In this sense, the activities carried out in class demanded students to fill the gaps in sentences or texts, to express the different functions of the verb to be, to write down theoretical elaborations of grammatical rules or to answer yes/no and multiple-choice questions (Student-teacher journal: July 29th, 2019; August 5th, 12th, 14th, 21st, 26th; October 16th, 23rd, 2019). This focus reduced students'

² Here, I am following Kafka and his particular conception of reading: "Si el libro que leemos no nos despierta *como un puño que nos golpeará en el cráneo*, ¿para qué lo leemos? ¿Para que nos haga felices? Dios mío, también seríamos felices si no tuviéramos libros, y podríamos, si fuera necesario, escribir nosotros mismos los libros que nos hagan felices. [...] Un libro debe ser como un pico de hielo que rompa el mar congelado que tenemos dentro". (Kafka, as cited in Steiner, 1982, p. 101, the italics are mine).

possibilities of catching a message or a word that could have a meaning for them (Student-teacher journal: July 31st; September 11th, 25th, 2019). During my observations, for example, they did not have any reading or listening space in class, and when a pair of opportunities for reading emerged, these were missed by focusing the activity on isolated grammatical aspects of language (Student-teacher journal: August 12th, 2019).

The second consequence is that even though language was reduced to grammar, students still lacked the vocabulary and syntactic knowledge to express and comprehend messages because their exposure to and production of language was precisely confined to isolated grammatical aspects. In classes, a common situation was that when they were asked to create phrases using the verb to be, even if they knew how to conjugate it, they still faced problems in the search for the vocabulary needed or desired to complement their phrases (Student-teacher journal: July 31st, 2019; August 5th, 14th, 21st, 2019). Furthermore, during the reading comprehension activities that I tried to carry out in some classes, students seemed to struggle when constructing meaning from texts due to difficulties with words and sentence structures (Student-teacher journal: September 30th; October 21st, 2019). Since one of the primary mediums, whether deliberately or incidentally, through which new vocabulary and syntactic knowledge is acquired is reading (Boutorwick, 2017), I thought this problem could be addressed as part of my research.

Taking into account the previous description, I decided to work on *reading comprehension* through the use of *translanguaging* practices. On the one hand, the reason for deciding to work on reading was nothing but a passion. As George Steiner points out: If a student perceives that one is a bit crazy, possessed in some way by what one teaches, it is a first step. He may not agree; maybe he will make fun of it; but he will listen: It is about the miraculous

moment in which the dialogue with a passion begins. Never look for a justification (Steiner & Ladjali, 2005, p. 116).

My decision for translanguaging, on the other hand, had to do with the fact that everyone used Spanish for meaning-making in class. In lieu of just banning the use of the mother tongue, as many monolingual approaches try to do it, translanguaging offers a way “not only [to promote] a deeper understanding of content, but also [to develop] the weaker language in relationship with the one that is more dominant” (García & Wie, 2014, p. 64). Working on reading through translanguaging was deemed important to (a) replace the government of grammar over a focus on understanding, (b) open reading opportunities for students in which they were allowed to use their linguistic repertoires to make meaning, and (c) expand their vocabulary and syntactic knowledge.

Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this action research was to analyze the effects of translanguaging practices on fostering 6th graders’ reading comprehension of a written literary text. Thus, in this section I will delve into the following key concepts that were related to this project: translanguaging and reading comprehension.

Translanguaging

If we want to delve into what is at stake when we talk about translanguaging, first it is necessary to explore, although briefly, the concept of *linguaging*. Following the major work of García and Wei (2014), language is something more than a system of structures separated from human interactions. Instead, and the term *linguaging* conceptualizes this complexity, language implies a “simultaneous process of continuous becoming of ourselves and of our language

practices, as we interact and make meaning in the world” (García & Wei, 2014, p. 8). Thus, languaging captures the ongoing routes of language that are constantly created “as we interact with the world lingually” (García & Wei, 2014, p. 8). Or following Lacan (2001), language accomplishes a creative function, creating the subject at the time that the subject bursts in language, constituting a reciprocal link.

Now, what does *translanguaging* mean? In its first sense sustained by Williams (as cited in Garcia & Wie, 2014), the term was coined to allude to a teaching practice of consciously changing the language of input and the language of output “in order to increase understanding and in order to augment the pupil’s activity in both languages” (García & Wie, 2014, p. 64). For the purpose of this project, a recent definition elaborated by Baker (2001) will be used:

Translanguaging is “the process of making meaning, shaping experiences, gaining understanding and knowledge through the use of two languages” (p. 288). As Ortega (2019) has pointed out, such discursive practices do not entail a duality of separated languages but instead one linguistic repertoire used to construct meaning. Thus, “translanguaging may include translation³ and code switching practices, not necessarily as a shuttle between two languages, but as elaborated bilingual linguistic practices to make sense by doing various production and comprehension tasks” (Ortega, 2019, p. 159). Such conception entails changing dominant monolingual and colonial paradigms of EFL that sustain a monolithic and homogenous narrative of language learning.

Among the potential advantages of translanguaging identified by Baker (2001), I would like to highlight two. The first one is that translanguaging has the potential to promote a

³ “Learning to speak is learning to translate: when the child asks his mother for the meaning of some word, what he is really asking is that she translates the new word into his vocabulary. Translation within a language is not, in this sense, essentially different from translation between two languages [...] language itself, in its very essence, is already a translation” (Paz, 1979, p. 13).

profound and fuller comprehension of the subject matter in question by having to process and ‘digest’ topics in two languages. The second advantage is that skills in students’ weaker language can be developed by allowing them to “attempt the main part of the work in their stronger language and then undertake less challenging, related tasks in their weaker language” (Baker, 2001, pp. 281-282). As the studies of Mgjijima and Makalela (2016), Makalela (2015), and the extended reviews carried out by García and Wei (2014) have shown, the use and recognition of students’ linguistic repertoires through translanguaging constitute a vehicle for improving reading comprehension and gaining epistemic access to the world of ideas. Additionally, the use of the mother tongue to teach and learn EFL has been also proved to be fruitful as a way to help students convey the meaning of difficult words and syntactic rules (Hussein, 2013).

Reading Comprehension

*Qué cosa sea leer, y cómo tiene lugar la lectura,
me parece ser todavía una de las cosas más oscuras*
(Gadamer, 1998, p. 189)

The conviction at the basis of this project is that reading entails and needs, at least, two conditions from the reader already defined by Nietzsche: “he must be calm and must read without haste; he must not be ever interposing his own personality and his own special ‘culture’” (1910, p. 10). What Nietzsche is demanding is nothing but to interrupt the intervention of the reader and their culture as the right standard and measure of things, to suspend as much as possible all previous knowledge so the text does not ratify what we already know and the possibility that the text *gives us something to think about* remains open (Nietzsche, 1910). Thus, there is no such a thing as a previous knowledge —excepting that of some formal components

(i.e. word reading)— that would be indispensable for reading: only calm and the suspension of judgement. If not, then there is neither comprehension nor possible work of interpretation at all.

Having said this, now I turn to develop a conception of EFL reading that, although necessarily dependent on the interplay of some formal components, is not disconnected from the previous notes. For the purpose of this project, I followed Gough and Tunmer's (1986) *Simple View of Reading*⁴, in the form elaborated by Oakhill, Cain, and Elbro (2015). According to these authors, the formal components necessary for reading would be the interplay —and not the sum— of *word reading* (or decoding) and *language comprehension*. While *word reading* refers “to the ability to read single words out of context” (p.2), *language comprehension* alludes “to our ability to understand words, sentences, and text[s]” (p.2). In this vein, the authors argue that in order to facilitate the integration of both components into a significant whole, the construction of *mental models* by readers is necessary. Such *mental models* are mental representations created from information of a real or imagined world intending to draw what the reader has comprehended (Oakhill et al., 2015). Or dipping into the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk, “for what is reading but the animating of a writer's words on the silent film strip in our minds?” (1994, p. 260).

From my perspective, the *Simple View of Reading* can be linked to the popular concepts of *intensive* and *extensive reading*. Intensive reading can be defined as a way to approach texts at a lexical and syntactic level so as to improve students' knowledge of language features (Rashidi & Piran, 2011; Nation, 2008). This type of reading deals with a “close study of short passages, including syntactic, semantic, and lexical analyses and translation into the L1 to study meaning” (Susser & Robb, 1990, p. 161). Therefore, it is through intensive reading that difficulties of

⁴ This concept, rather than implying that reading is a simple process, is used to express “a simple way of conceptualizing the complexity of reading” (Oakhill, Cain, and Elbro, 2015, p.2).

structure, vocabulary and idioms are tackled (Rashidi & Piran, 2011). Extensive reading, instead, has been historically conceptualized as the type of reading that involves large amounts of materials and texts with the purpose of obtaining pleasure and a general understanding from them (Susser & Robb, 1990; Nation, 2008; Bennetayeb, 2015). Nevertheless, this project did not have any interest in reading large quantities of texts nor in obtaining pleasure from it. In lieu, the valuable point from *extensive reading* for the purpose of this work was its complementary contribution to intensive reading, in the sense that it focuses students' attention towards meaning of texts rather than linguistic features (Nation, 2008), involving students in the process of learning to read in English by reading (Silva, 2009). Having stated the theoretical foundations of this study, now I turn to the research question and objectives that guided this project.

Research Question

How can the use of translanguaging practices foster 6th graders' reading comprehension of written literary texts?

Objectives

General Objective

To analyze the role of translanguaging practices in fostering 6th graders' reading comprehension of written literary texts.

Specific Objectives

- 1) To examine how the use of translanguaging practices may facilitate students' epistemic and linguistic access.

- 2) To identify how the implementation of extensive and intensive reading can enhance a deeper understanding of content and linguistic features when reading.
- 3) To explore how the use of literature may contribute to stimulate students' involvement in reading.

Action plan

This action plan had a length of 10 weeks and its design was guided by the following sequence: introduction to the project, the story's author and the story; first extensive and intensive reading phase; recognition of ongoing difficulties; second extensive and intensive reading phase; summary and interpretation of the story through storyboards. The goal of the activities described below was for students to gain meaning from the story and be prepared to summarize it and interpret it.

During the first two weeks, I planned an introductory phase to the project and the story *Hunger Artist* by Franz Kafka so students could be familiar with the activities to be carried out during the next weeks. The following two weeks were thought to be devoted to extensive and intensive reading. The purpose of this phase was to gain a general understanding of the initial story scenes and to practice certain linguistic features, syntactic structures, vocabulary, etc. present in the story. Then, I planned a week for identifying, discussing and working on ongoing problems and difficulties in the activities carried out that, hopefully, would allow us to come up with a reflection and propose different solutions. After this, the idea was to keep working three more weeks on the story through extensive and intensive reading so as to complete our understandings and the linguistic features included in it. Finally, two weeks were to be used to conclude the storyboards that had to include a summary and an interpretation of the story. It is

worthy to mention that translanguaging practices were planned to be adopted throughout the entire project so it was not possible to confine them to specific weeks or activities.

With the purpose of gathering and analyzing information, I planned to use the following data collection methods: my journals, students' artifacts, a questionnaire and a focus group conversation. Firstly, journals were thought to enrich my insights from my observations in class and contribute to richly describe class events and first-hand experiences. The idea was to collect this data through anecdotal records of classes, descriptions of how they were developed, and reflections upon them. Recordings of free associations made immediately after each class and brief field notes about students' comments or behaviors related to the project were also planned to be gathered in order to complement the journals. Secondly, students' artifacts aimed at helping me realize how the use of translanguaging had a role in their reading comprehension so I could understand the central phenomenon of my project. Such information was planned to be collected through students' works, reflections, expressed difficulties, progress in the project and final storyboards. Finally, the questionnaire and the focus group conversation meant a way to gain access to students' feelings, perceptions, comments, critics and so on towards the work done throughout this project. The idea with this was to complement and discuss the insights that emerged after reading and analyzing the other data.

Development of Actions

Now it is time for the reader to make a coffee and carefully take a seat because this is stuff I guarantee you will not easily find in the tons of theses that every year are stored in the sewers of academia. To make no bones, 2020 was the year in which a pandemic caused by COVID-19 put on hold the temporalities of the entire world. Since by the time I wrote this I was living under such pandemic, I prefer to distance myself from the current times so as to avoid the

attitude of the master and owner who runs to appropriate all situations and senses. Therefore, now I will mention just some contextual information about the times under which this project tried to take place and then I will turn to the development of actions.

The first case of COVID-19 in Colombia was detected on March 6th and by March 16th all schools were closed so as to avoid the spread of the virus as we entered quarantine. As a result, school vacation was brought forward from that date until April 19th. From that date on, distance classes was the modality adopted in schools, so we worked through workshops that students received either printed or online and had to return every week or two weeks. Furthermore, we had occasional online meetings via Zoom with students so as to share questions, doubts and progress on activities. As you can probably conclude, due to the times we were living, the amount of work needed to be significantly reduced and made as easy as possible for students. However, in spite of having modified and adapted different times the activities planned in the frame of this project, I was asked by my CT to avoid any possible level of difficulty in reading. And since —as stated in the theoretical framework— I cannot but hold the idea that reading is difficult, I could not continue implementing the sequence I had planned. Thus, now I turn to present the short part of the sequence I could develop before the quarantine. The data collected during those activities and in a pair of interviews constitute the material of analysis for this project.

During the first week of implementation, I tried to capture the attitudes and feelings of students towards reading with the aim of framing the coordinates of the project. Different types of feelings and positions emerged, such as the following: “Me gusta leer porque nos podemos transportar a nuevos lugares”⁵; “I like read because is funny and help the imagination”; “No me

⁵ Translation: *I like to read because it allows us to transport to new places.*

gusta es porque uno se aburre”⁶; “Lo que no me gusta es que son demasiado largos [los libros] y te toca leer demasiado para terminarlo”⁷ (Students’ first associations on reading, February 11th, 2020). Briefly, we could say that their answers showed quite well the ambivalences that reading produces to all of us. During the second week, we talked about the aspects to consider when constructing a storyboard, among which students mentioned the illustrations, the legibility of the writing, imagination, and the topic to be addressed. Furthermore, we also discussed the project proposal, this is to say the activities that we were going to develop and the criteria that I was going to take into account to assess their works.

The third week was devoted to introducing Franz Kafka’s life and work and starting reading the first scenes of the story. As for Kafka’s introduction, students were asked to write down a text using both English and Spanish in the ways they liked about his life and work. The following pieces of information I handed in to each group constituted the base for the writing (see [here](#)).

As we started this work, I had to clarify several times that the idea was to elaborate the information in a text and not just to copy and paste it, something that many students were doing. But once this was understood, they came up with very interesting results which I will present in the following section. After having finished their writings, I asked students to take out a little piece of paper and write down their thoughts on the activity. Among their comments, I would like to highlight the following: “Me gustó porque podemos cambiar los idiomas [...]” (Students’ comments about Kafka’s life and work activity, February 28th, 2020)⁸.

⁶ Translation: *I don’t like it because one gets bored.*

⁷ Translation: *What I don’t like is that they [the books] are too long and you have to read too much to finish them.*

⁸ Translation: *I liked it because we can change languages [...]*

In regards to the reading of the first scenes of the story, we started this phase by discussing its title and some insights about what a hunger artist might mean. Some of their answers were that a hunger artist was someone forced to fast by someone else, someone so busy that didn't even have time to eat, or someone who was too fat and therefore had to fast (Student-teacher journal: February 28th, 2020). After having briefly shared these insights, students created groups and started to read the story. In spite of the difficulties emerged during this first approximation, dictionaries, online translators, the help provided by me, the CT, other classmates, or the drawings included in the story were ways to deal with complications.

After that, since I started to notice that in many cases problems with intonation, stress, rhythm and others were obstructing the comprehension of the story, I decided to focus on prosodic features. Thus, during the fourth week we carried out a reading aloud exercise with the first two paragraphs of the story in which, mainly, we focused on identifying word and sentence stress patterns. However, due to some difficulties I faced trying to capture students' attention and concentration, I decided to finish this activity sooner than I had planned so I could have time to figure out other ways to successfully work on those features. Therefore, we continued working on the comprehension of the first paragraphs of the story, and the week after this, the coronavirus pandemic altered everything.

Findings and Interpretations

This study aimed at analyzing the role of translanguaging practices in fostering students' reading comprehension of written literary texts. Having this in mind, data was collected through journals, students' artifacts and a focus group interview. In the case of students' artifacts, I selected six out of twelve since not all the students made use of their full linguistic repertoires, something which will be slightly discussed in the conclusions section. With the purpose of

analyzing the data, I followed an inductive approach by labeling the information with codes, then merging any possible redundancy of codes, and finally creating categories from them (Creswell, 2012). However, during the analysis I also resorted to theory as I noticed that some key ideas from there could label more accurately the emergent data. In that sense, whenever coding started to make visible certain patterns, I went through theory so as to look for ideas that could offer different lenses to read the relationships I had found.

After having done the aforementioned process and triangulated the collected information, I came to establish the following two categories: (a) Translanguaging practices and their effects on the comprehension of texts, and (b) Translanguaging practices and their effects on dealing with linguistic features. Before going deeply into them, I am compelled to make an important remark: since this project was only partially developed, all its results need to be even more relativized than those from studies entirely conducted. Among many other things, research is also about being reminded of limits...

Translanguaging Practices and Their Effects on the Comprehension of Texts

The data collected showed that translanguaging practices with the purpose of fostering comprehension of written texts allowed students to (a) gain epistemic access and (b) understand unknown vocabulary. Below, I provide further details.

Gaining epistemic access. In spite of the limits imposed by the data collected, we can say that the use of translanguaging meant a way for students to access the world of ideas through reading. The first insight about this was reflected in my journals as I kept record of the gestures and words emitted by students when reading:

I must say that some groups evidenced a conscious and detailed work on the reading by making pauses after certain lines and having brief discussions over them. (Student-teacher journal: March 2nd, 2020)

[...] some others demonstrated constant and careful work when they started to talk about the first or two paragraphs of the story they had read. (Student-teacher journal: March 9th, 2020)

Those observations were complemented by students when asked about what the use of both English and Spanish within the story had allowed them to do, as in the next excerpt: “[...] más fácil de comprender la lectura. [...] Pues porque si alguna frase no la entendíamos, ahí estaba la traducción y no teníamos que buscar cada palabra en el diccionario. Entonces me parece muy bueno tener la traducción ahí” (Focus group, May 14th, 2020)⁹. Even though I recognize the different ways in which such a comment can be read, for the purpose of this study I would like to prioritize one. As Madiba (2012) has observed, and as I think we can also do here, acknowledging the linguistic fluidities of students in a complementary rather than competitive manner when reading—which implies, for example, moulding and playing with texts—may facilitate their access to meanings and senses. Furthermore, when allowed and promoted in writing, those linguistic fluidities were a means to convey comprehension, as in the following example (see [here](#)).

The interesting aspect of this work and that is worth analyzing is that since it is written mostly in Spanish while the information was provided in English, it shows really well students’

⁹ Translation: [...] it is easier to comprehend the reading. [...] Well, because if we did not understand any phrase, the translation was there and we did not have to look for every word in the dictionary. So I think it is very good to have the translation right there.

comprehension of information and the ‘digestion’ of the topic in both languages. As shown by Baker (2001), one of the potential advantages of translanguaging is that it can promote a profound and fuller comprehension of topics by having to process and ‘digest’ them in two languages. Briefly, he states that “if the students have understood it in two languages, they have really understood it” (p. 281). In this sense, we can say that the students’ use of Spanish for concepts that were provided in English (e.g. hermanas, dirección, novia, nacionalidad, por causa de) is a way to confirm that the information was comprehended, ‘digested’, and not merely transposed to the text. In other words, a certain epistemic access took place.

Understanding vocabulary. Although this code could be easily placed in the next category, I have decided to put it here because of the seemingly impact of translanguaging practices on understanding vocabulary for the purpose of comprehending texts. For example, when asked about the perceived effects of translanguaging on English learning, a pair of students stated:

De pronto el vocabulario y el orden pues de las palabras para formar una frase completa, ¿no? (Focus group, May 14th, 2020)¹⁰

Profe, yo creo que facilitaría el aprendizaje porque usted puede ver la palabra en inglés y en español, entonces la puede analizar mejor y también el significado. (Focus group, May 14th, 2020)¹¹

¹⁰ Translation: *Maybe the vocabulary and the order of words to create a complete phrase, no?*

¹¹ Translation: *Teacher, I think it would facilitate learning because you have the word in English and Spanish so you can analyze it better together with its meaning.*

In this vein, helping students in the recognition of cognates and words of a certain lexical field apparently played a key role in the comprehension of vocabulary, as it was evidenced in my journals:

Furthermore, cognates such as poet/poeta, profession/profesión, philosopher/filósofo seemed to facilitate their [students'] comprehension. For instance, a couple of students asked me what occupation meant, so I pointed out some words like 'poet' or 'philosopher' and asked them to guess relating such words to Spanish. This worked really well. (Student-teacher journal: February 18th, 2020)

In relation to this, García and Wei (2014) recognize seven different goals which lead teachers to use translanguaging, mentioning cognates as one of the possible strategies for cross-linguistic transfer and metalinguistic awareness (García & Wei, 2014), aspects that, as I perceived them, facilitate reading comprehension. In my case, this was visible in the sense that through the use of cognates, students could recognize the influence that the knowledge of one language has on their learning or use of another language, and the fact that many times the common roots of different languages are a way to rely on those similarities.

Translanguaging Practices and Their Effects on Dealing with Linguistic Features

The data collected showed that translanguaging practices with the purpose of facilitating linguistic access allowed students to (a) gain understanding of verbal rules, and (b) fill linguistic gaps when writing. Below, I provide further details.

Understanding verbal rules. Based on the data collected, I might say that key switches between English and Spanish for the explanation of verbal rules seemed to benefit students' understanding. This was especially visible in my journals when trying to explain the simple past:

In the first place, I presented the main reasons to use simple past. I attempted this twice so it was clearer, with the difference that in my second attempt I resorted to the use of the past tense in Spanish so as to establish comparisons in terms of similarities [...] and differences [...]. This second effort made things much clearer for students than the first one in which I tried to present things by referring solely to the theory. (Student-teacher journal: February 19th, 2020)

Thus, having Spanish as a point of reference when explaining the functions and construction of the simple past in English apparently made things much easier. I think this shows that the interplay of both languages may be also beneficial for gaining metalinguistic knowledge. Such a finding may be linked to Cenoz and Gorter's (2017) study on the development of language awareness by focusing on translanguaging as a pedagogical tool. According to them, "when translanguaging is a pedagogical tool to develop language and metalinguistic awareness and to expand the learners' linguistic repertoires, [...] [it] is more natural than language separation because multilinguals process language and communicate by using the resources at their disposal" (p. 319).

Filling linguistic gaps. Even though this study was not focused on writing practices, one of the objectives was to examine the relationships between translanguaging and linguistic access. In this sense, it was through writing that data showed how allowing students to use both English and Spanish within their texts helped them to overcome some linguistic difficulties faced in the construction of meaning. Specifically, those linguistic difficulties were related to possessives and simple past, topics that, by that time, students had addressed only in a superficial way. Both cases are illustrated in the following excerpt (see [here](#)).

Such a piece of script shows that by making use of their linguistic repertoires in both languages, students had the possibility to construct senses in spite of and beyond their linguistic gaps, a major problem in the case of emergent bilinguals. This construction of senses was also visible in how translanguaging helped students to create cohesive and structured texts, as it is illustrated in the next script (see [here](#)).

As it is visible, Spanish is constantly used to introduce every personal information of the author so it is not presented just as a list of data. Thus, it was through their linguistic fluidities that students had the chance to elaborate the information provided for the activity in a way that showed connection and a certain degree of cohesion between ideas. Something similar can be grasped in the following comment about the reasons to use one language or another when writing:

Pues porque... al formar una frase en inglés no es exactamente como en español, y entonces tal vez en esas partes [the phrases] se nos dificultaba, entonces teníamos que utilizar el idioma [Spanish] [...] Y también porque tal vez no teníamos el conocimiento necesario. (Focus group, May 14th, 2020)¹²

Following this comment, it seems that translanguaging practices were not only used to deal with difficult or unknown grammatical constructions but also to build bridges between the different syntactic structures of the languages. Thus, we could say that by allowing students to use those linguistic resources to the fullest, language systems enter “in fluidity, lacking rigid

¹² Translation: *Because... constructing a phrase in English is not exactly as in Spanish, so maybe those parts [the phrases] were difficult. Therefore, we had to use the language [Spanish] [...] And also because perhaps we did not have the required knowledge.*

boundaries” (Nagy, 2018, p. 44), contrary to monoglossic views where the linguistic backgrounds of students are ignored.

Conclusions and Implications

The purpose of this research was to analyze the use of translanguaging practices in fostering their reading comprehension of written literary texts. Due to the limitations imposed by the pandemic, objectives were only partially achieved, so the effects of extensive and intensive reading as well as the role that literature may have in involving students in reading remain to be explored. Thus, the conjecture I feel authorized to enunciate is that allowing students to make complete use of their rich linguistic fluidities is a promising path to follow to widen emergent bilinguals’ access to content and a new language at the time we make room for their unique voices. It is by exploring those unique voices that students can play with two worlds (the one created by their use of Spanish and the one they are accessing by learning English) and conceive a new and singular one.

Following this conjecture, some questions and implications for the EFLT field arise. One of those questions has to do with the reasons why not all students used translanguaging practices when writing. Without any explanatory pretension, one hypothesis might be related to the way monolingual paradigms have sustained narratives that strictly separate the use of and forbid the interactions between languages. This gives rise to ask ourselves about how that separation is also a way to exclude emergent bilinguals from gaining access to knowledge. It is from questioning a widespread division between languages and between language and content learning that we as teachers can continue thinking about the ways we are setting the table for students to savor the world, to taste other dishes different from those supposed for them. In consequence, I believe we also need to remove the foundations of some knowledges already known, such as the consensus

on the idea that the purpose of learning a language is communication: A language is something more than a means of communication. It is evident that it allows communication, but it is also something else, it is authors, works, inventions, clippings of the world (Cassin, 2014, p. 46).

Another implication has to do with the problems in comprehension that translanguaging could not tackle well enough. In this way, I find it worth appealing to teachers' imagination to continue exploring other strategies that together with translanguaging practices can reduce the difficulties —sometimes overwhelming— that arise when reading. This is not about thinking that reading —in all its senses— should not entail difficulty but about conceiving ways through which students can affirm a capacity where there was before a statement of incapacity. As we know, not understanding much despite the efforts made and having to resort over and over to the dictionary may perfectly lead to feelings of frustration and self-disdain. It was in this direction that I chose drawings to illustrate the story, and somehow they helped. However, along with the lack of time to examine its effects, I feel I did not make use of them as richly as I could have done it. In addition, other resources were not even considered to be explored, something which I believe will depend on how future works make room for the irruption of the unexpected, of the non-thought.

Reflection

I would like to include here three things: a thought, a hypothesis, and a quote —in case they can be distinguished at all. As for the thought, I take as a point of departure Pierre Legendre's fragment with which I ended the preface since it puts the emphasis on the disturbing level of teaching, the fact that we have to intervene in human lives. This comes to say that although we would love to construct clear and full of love relationships with those human lives, it is never without contradictions and ambiguities that we face the possibilities of filiation

(Frigerio, 2016). That is precisely where I have tried to situate my concern for the common, not in the solution of those ambiguities but in the efforts to make them subject to elaboration so the world is not distributed in the way of leftovers. Working with children, among many other things, has been a demand to deal with my own psychic world so the ghosts of my childhood intrude as less as possible in the educational work of transmission.

Moving on, the pandemic, together with this year of practicum and research, have led me to formulate the following hypothesis, whose shortness is diametrically opposed to my subjective involvement in it: We do not theorize so much our world because of the thirst to know it better but because of the excuses it provides us to meet with others...

Finally, a quote of one of those who has been by my side these years, a present absence, as some people would call her:

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it, and by the same token save it from that ruin which except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and the young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world (Arendt, 1961, p. 196).

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