

Interview

Multilingual Education and Translanguaging Pedagogy in Indian Classrooms: Discussing Applications and Challenges with Jason Anderson

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Lina Mukhopadhyay conducted the current virtual interview with Jason Anderson on October 8, 2024. In this conversation, Anderson draws upon recent research and evidence of teacher practices from his own doctoral research to talk about multilingual pedagogies and situate translanguaging as a type of teacher-learner interaction where they draw from a single repertoire either in moments of spontaneity or in a planned manner or both. These instances are acts

of meaning negotiation as well as communication in class to facilitate learning. Furthermore, allowing learners to use their linguistic resources to express themselves is a way to provide social justice through language education. Teachers' role in using multilingual resources is as much an individual choice and endeavor as it is a systemic support without which it is impossible to sustain multilingual pedagogies in class.

Keywords: continuous professional development; multilingual pedagogies; multilingual societies; translanguaging pedagogy

1. INTERVIEW

Lina: Hello Jason! Thank you for agreeing to share your opinion and reflections on multilingual education based on your doctoral work and other related research in India in the last few years. Let me begin with my first question. How do you interpret the term ‘multilingual pedagogy’ and the current shifts in understanding the term ‘translanguaging pedagogy’?

Jason: To me, the term ‘multilingual pedagogies’ (I choose the plural form here) serves as a useful superordinate term, within which a range of ideas, pedagogies and systems (e.g., bilingual programs, plurilingualism, translanguaging, using the ‘L1’, etc.) can be discussed. It is also a useful term to introduce translanguaging practices to people who may find the term ‘translanguaging’ complex or intimidating. With regard to the phrase ‘translanguaging pedagogy’, this, for me, suggests a pedagogy in which both teachers and learners are not only able, but also encouraged, to draw upon their full ‘language repertoire’. This could include all and any languages they know, as required to facilitate

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learning; learning that goes beyond simply development of ‘L2 proficiency’ – as some SLA (second language acquisition) scholars often characterize it too narrowly – to include social and emotional learning, identity development and 21st-century skills, even in the second or foreign language classroom. Such a translanguaging pedagogy could include principled, planned practices, what Cenoz and Gorter (2021) call ‘pedagogical translanguaging’; for example, when a teacher plans to use the learners’ more enabled language or dialect to help them to understand a text written in English or Hindi through explanation, translation and mediation. Yet it can also include more spontaneous, responsive practices that are also frequent in many Indian classrooms – translanguaging moments, if you like.

Lina: Yes agreed! The term ‘translanguaging’ has received many interpretations and how it spans out as classroom practices is also very diverse. Would you like to comment on how your participant teachers made sense of it that you describe in your doctoral dissertation (2021) and subsequently in publications in 2022 to 2024?

Jason: Yes, of course. One of the things that my research on expert Indian teachers of English documented (Anderson, 2024) was that creating that translanguaging space in the classroom is crucial to ensuring that learners can help each other, themselves, or even the teacher to understand an idea or a word. Some of the most useful translanguaging happens in whispers between peers at the back of the classroom, or when a learner searches a notebook for a translation or explanation. Experienced, effective teachers are aware of this and allow it to happen. In this sense, translanguaging pedagogy is a fluid pedagogy that allows us to view the learners’ language competence as truly multilingual - not simply a competence that involves ‘switching’ between languages, but drawing upon them as a holistic, single repertoire.

Lina: Very interesting observation that peer interaction translanguaging happens quietly and can be used as a wonderful event to create space for translanguaging! Now moving on to a broader scope at the level of trilingual policy of India, how do you think the language policy has been interpreted and used in Indian classrooms? What has the power structure of language(s) used in class been like?

Jason: This question is essentially a historical one, and would ideally require a longitudinal answer, something that I am not able to offer. Certainly, accounts of classroom practice over the decades indicate that it has been interpreted in diverse ways, both between contexts or communities and within them. Most interesting to me as an exogenous observer is the fact that, so often, organizations (e.g., schools, curriculum authorities, textbook publishers) have interpreted the policy creatively to align with the practices that are seen as useful to facilitate whatever learning is valuable to a specific community - which languages an institution chooses to teach is often responsive to local

need and local politics, rather than national policy, especially in such a large, diverse country as India.

Lina: Your positioning as an ‘exogenous observer’ is very interesting as it helps us, Indian researchers to get another objective viewpoint of how using languages creatively and to suit learner needs is a valuable strategy and could be endorsed further. In this context do you feel that there has been a missed opportunity such that in spite of having the trilingual policy in India, language of instruction has sadly been envisaged as monolingual, the popularity of EMI model being a case in point?

Jason: Absolutely. The recent rapid rise in popularity of EMI in India is of grave concern, given that one of the few things that scholars on language-in-education policy agree on is that learners’ initial literacy development must be in their first language, or the closest possible alternative - even the British Council recommends against EMI in primary education in low- and middle-income countries like India (British Council, 2019). States like Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, which are moving towards EMI instruction from grade one risk not only the education of their children by adopting such a Draconian EMI policy, but also the welfare, well-being and livelihood of the people. Santosh Mahapatra and I recently wrote an article proposing a ‘multilingual-friendly’ alternative to EMI that we felt was both responsive to the new Indian National Education Policy (NCERT, 2020) and reflective of normal practices in Indian society both inside and outside the classroom. We called it the ‘Languages for Learning Framework’, and envisaged ways in which curriculum content can be made accessible and assessable in the widest possible variety of languages, not only those official languages sanctioned and emphasized in policy decisions, but all of the varied languages, dialects and varieties across India or any multilingual country (see Mahapatra & Anderson, 2023).

Lina: Yes, the framework Mahapatra and you (2023) have proposed has the possibility of mirroring the multilingual social reality of India as theorized by Mohanty (2019). However, to realize its potential in the classroom is of a tall order and we need to recognize how teachers have a pivotal role in its realization. So, what are your observations on the role of teachers (language and subject) in primary and secondary schools in utilizing language(s) for learning framework in class? Are they able to portray their ideology in using language for instructional and learning purposes?

Jason: This will likely depend on the individual teacher, their institution and what support they have. I prefer to talk about teachers’ beliefs and attitudes rather than ideology. While some teachers do seem to have a clearly developed set of ideas or principles informing their practices, in reality, many teachers actually have conflicting beliefs and attitudes, including conflict between the specific beliefs themselves and conflicts between beliefs and classroom practices. While research has consistently

supported the use of multiple languages by Indian teachers to facilitate learning (see, e.g., Durairajan, 2017), many teachers nonetheless feel conflicted about drawing upon other languages in the foreign language classroom. Research that we conducted a few years ago revealed evidence of what we called “guilty translanguaging” among several English teachers across India (Anderson & Lightfoot, 2021). The reason why many teachers experience a sense of guilt in not teaching English monolingually stems from a monolingual bias that may be individual or a societal assumption that the target language can be best learnt when it is presented monolingually. So, they wrongly think that English-only teaching is somehow more communicative or authentic. Yet this clearly contradicts what happens as soon as Indian learners leave the classroom - their complex translingual practices. I can’t think of anything less communicative or less authentic than stopping Indians from translanguaging in the classroom!

Lina: Yes, absolutely! Multilinguals in multilingual societies communicate very spontaneously and naturally using their multilingual language resources. Respecting this phenomenon in class is socially just and provides access to education for all. Now, let us move on to discussing a bit about the teacher opportunity for continuous professional development (CPD) for multilingual classrooms. Do you think Indian teachers in the urban poor, semi-rural and rural areas have had the autonomy to decide how to apply the plurilingual policy in their pedagogical practices? Have they been trained to deal with multilingual and/or translanguaging pedagogy in class? Is there a disconnect between what teachers feel they ought to do and what they can do in classes for purposes of knowledge transaction and application of knowledge?

Jason: There is, to my knowledge, very little training on using contemporary multilingual pedagogies in India. Unfortunately, many institutions of teacher education, particularly in subjects such as English, still promote and practice outdated monolingual pedagogies themselves, at least officially. School textbooks are often monolingual, even though the exam practice books that many learners prefer to use are multilingual. In Nagpur, Maharashtra, I worked with an expert teacher of English whose very large classes were full of students from one of the large slums in the city. Through her experience and wisdom, both she, and her institution, had learnt that these multilingual books provide more effective scaffolding support to learners to meet the exam requirements. While few of these learners left secondary education speaking fluent English, many of her students had very impressive lexicons in English, and all invariably passed their secondary school leaving exams, ensuring that they had the opportunity to continue studying. From an ethical perspective, teachers and institutions need the autonomy to make the right decisions so that their learners achieve the outcomes that they and their parents want from education. In that Nagpur school, all the parents I interviewed prioritized exam success. This may sound weird, or unusual (the tail of the exams wagging the dog of education), but is no different to parental aspirations in China, the UK or many countries worldwide where exams exhibit such a powerful

influence – it is an international reality today. Neither parents, nor teachers can control the exams, but they do need the autonomy to help learners to prepare for them as best they can.

Lina: I too agree that unless there is systemic support for teachers it is difficult to provide them with training or respect their decisions. And currently there is an undue focus of developing ‘test-wiseness’ instead of scaffolding language learning and allowing learner capacities to grow gradually as happens in the case of acquiring one’s mother tongue. Let us now focus on the role of language of instruction in language education. Given your vast amount of work with expert Indian teachers would you like to comment on teacher ideology or beliefs about language use in class? To what extent did you observe that teacher ideology/beliefs guided their choices in class, and can you give examples to elucidate this point further?

Jason: As I mentioned above, I would prefer to avoid the word ideology and refer instead to beliefs and attitudes. My research has shown that, both in India, and elsewhere, teachers vary a lot. For some, their beliefs and attitudes are broadly consistent with their classroom practices – what they say they do, they do. And for others, the relationship is more complex and depends in part on who they are talking to – I even remember myself as a novice teacher being reluctant to voice my own beliefs on pedagogy with colleagues and educators that I thought were more knowledgeable. The distinction is sometimes made between ‘espoused theories’, those that we tell other people (and even sometimes ourselves), and ‘theories-in-use’, those theories that implicitly guide our practice (Argyris & Schon, 1974). The research evidence on expert teachers largely supports the idea that they have greater coherence between their espoused theories and theories-in-use than less competent peers (Anderson, 2023; Anderson & Taner, 2023), and my work with Indian expert teachers of English certainly supported this. Despite the fact that the eight teachers I worked with exhibited wide variation in terms of the balance between English and other languages in the classroom, each had clear and consistent justifications for these practices - revealing something important about language teaching and expert teaching – that there are many ways to achieve appropriate outcomes. However, one thing that they all shared was the belief that learners’ languages need to be welcomed and encouraged in the classroom, even if, in reality, some of these teachers succeeded in getting high levels of English in classroom interaction (see Anderson, 2024).

Lina: It is very heartening to hear that the teachers whom you worked with in India have such strong beliefs about using and valuing learners’ multilingual resources in class. If we were to speak more specifically about language choices that teachers make in class, what are your observations on alternating between home languages and language of instruction in teachers of English (or EMI school settings) in India versus in the

United Kingdom? Is it realistic for teachers to cater to different home languages of learners who come from minority speaking communities or from migrant families? And at a macro level, what is your position on inclusive language education as a model to accommodate various home languages versus focusing on one or two dominant home languages in multilingual classrooms?

Jason: This is a multifaceted and complex question. It is very difficult to compare India, where multilingual practices have always been part of societal make up, and a country like the UK, where until recently it was essentially national policy to standardize and ‘monolingualize’ all learners, including speakers of Welsh, Gaelic, and non-standard dialects. Today, things are very different, and while we have a long way to go in the UK, I think many teachers are recognizing and valuing their learners’ diverse multilingual and ethnic heritages. If we were to visit a school in the city I live in, Coventry, we would find that many of the learners speak English as an additional language (32% in a primary school I visited recently), not their first language, and that there is quite a range of first languages in most classrooms (e.g., Pashto, Somali, Urdu, Ukrainian, Cantonese). Indeed, it is in such classrooms where scholars such as Ofelia Garcia and Li Wei have documented and theorized translanguaging pedagogies in the US and UK respectively. One of the most consistent findings across the translanguaging literature is the need to create what Li Wei calls a “translanguaging space” in the classroom (Li, 2011). As I mentioned earlier, this refers to the time and opportunity for learners to make use of their wider languaging repertoires to facilitate learning, both collaboratively and individually. Useful, free online guides have been produced by the City University of New York that may have some utility in Indian multilingual contexts (e.g., Celic & Seltzer, 2013). Teachers in the UK do have a thorough preparation for multilingual teaching pre-service, yet there is still surprisingly little support given on issues of multilingualism or how ‘EAL’ (English as an additional language) learners are supported. Hence, an organization called National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum provides a lot of help and resources (see NALDIC, 2025). Also, the Bell Foundation has developed some useful resources for EAL support (see The Bell Foundation, 2025). These resources might also be useful to some Indian teachers.

Lina: Your example from Coventry about possible language uses in a classroom and the sources you have talked about to support EAL learners through NALDIC are very useful. Perhaps these sources could be useful for Indian teachers if they are able to localize the materials and also have access to and training in using the web-based resources. Let us talk a bit about how teachers potentially use training they receive for multilingual pedagogy. Do you think there is some amount of teacher ‘uptake’ on multilingual practices in classrooms when they are trained to use strategies as translanguaging? Is it low/high/moderate? To what extent do you think they are able to sustain such practices

on a long-term basis? What kind of support would they need to shift their pedagogical practices?

Jason: The truth is, as we know from research across education, teacher uptake on any training intervention is varied, at best, and very limited at worst. This is not because teachers can't learn, or don't want to learn. It is because of the multiple, complex systems both within the teacher (their cognition, psychology, etc.) and around them (their peers, institutions, policies, textbooks). As leading researchers on introducing educational change, such as Michael Fullan (e.g., 2007), have always pointed out, there needs to be a good level of coherence between policy, curriculum (including textbooks and exams), the content of any 'training', materials and local expectations (e.g., institutional leaders, parents, etc.) for any educational change initiative to be successful. In this sense, carrying out 'one-shot' teacher training interventions is of little use, particularly if all of these factors aren't considered. My own research is based on the rationale that in many cases, particularly in the global South, it is not possible to create the alignment required for Fullan's recommendations to be met. The best that we can do, and arguably the best that anybody could do, is to look at what good teachers do in a specific context, document this and share it with peers who are likely to experience many of the same constraints and challenges. This is why I believe in teacher expertise research – it values competent professionals and what they do as feasible, appropriate and sustainable practices for their peers to learn from (Anderson, 2024, 2023). In West Bengal, for example, with the help of the AINET Teacher Association, Kuheli Mukherjee and colleagues recently implemented the POET (Professional Outreach for English Teachers) community of practice, within which experienced, capable and committed core community members provided a range of sustained, flexible opportunities for peripheral community members to benefit and learn from during the post-pandemic era (Mukherjee & Bassu, 2022; Mukherjee, 2024). This, to my mind, sounds much more like the kind of teacher education that in-service Indian teachers need as part of their continuous professional development (CPD), rather than top-down trainers telling them what to do. It is important to avoid seeing teachers as technocrats whose practices need to be 'shifted'; these practices need to be understood first and foremost and then explored in partnership with the teachers. Thus, when I do conduct training on multilingual pedagogies, my goal is always to create opportunities for teachers to describe, discuss, rationalize and justify what they do, because this enables them to see and compare their awareness of both their espoused beliefs and their theories-in-use, which is the starting point for enabling them to bring these together. I would never tell them what they *should* do in their classrooms, although I might lead a discussion on possible ideas to try out and report back on, perhaps through informal action research cycles.

Lina: In what ways can teachers be supported to maintain the ecology of languages in education? Is there a need for sustained CPD activities on multilingual practices in Indian classrooms?

Jason: I think first of all, teachers need to be given the space and autonomy to do what they think is best in their own classrooms. While some may feel that this is dangerous, the reality is that this is what teachers always do regardless of policy. Once the classroom door closes, they are in charge. Multiple studies on low-cost EMI education in India have revealed that in fact, in many EMI classrooms, teachers and learners translanguage extensively (see Erling et al., 2017), and only the materials are monolingual... at least until the learners make multilingual notes on them! But by giving this space, by giving them the right to do what they feel is best for their learners, we avoid hiding key questions about how we use languages in the classroom, and create a wider teacher community space for discussion of these issues. I understand that our teacher-colleagues working in Andhra Pradesh today are prohibited from using any language other than English in the classroom in many subjects. This will likely lead to covert, guilty translanguaging practices. I strongly suspect that if we were flies on the walls of primary or secondary classrooms there, what we would experience, both in terms of the external practices and the implicit cognitive activity, would be translingual. Yet, if we were to pay an official visit to one such classroom, we would probably see an English-only lesson with very little learner participation or learning – due to the ‘observer effect’. If I could make one such recommendation, it is that today India needs sustained support from its own multilingual experts (yourself and Geetha Durairajan at EFLU, as well as Ajit Mohanty, R.K. Agnihotri, etc.) who may succeed in convincing state-level policymakers in India to avoid committing the fatal mistake of assuming that a monolingual policy will lead to more learning either of language or curriculum content (Anderson, 2024, may also help here). This is particularly true today given that, as I understand it, more states in India are currently planning to implement such policies, despite the very clear and commendable recommendations of the new National Education Policy (NCERT, 2020).

Lina: To provide further support to teacher practices, I feel that parents also play a significant role. Do you think raising awareness of parents and engaging them to understand the ecology of language use in class is important? If yes, then how?

Jason: Yes, I feel this may help. It is somewhat different to the complex issue of teacher training and change. I remember once being asked to address a village community at a social event in rural Telangana. I chose to speak about the beauty of their local language and its importance in their learners’ education. My speech seemed to go down very well, and while some seem surprised that I wasn’t advocating English as the solution to all their problems, they were certainly receptive to my love of their language. I think parents need to understand the difference between correlation and causation in education – we see a correlation between learner proficiency in English and educational

outcomes across India - not because English causes these outcomes, but because those learners that do better also often have the more privileged opportunities that help them to learn English also. I think it would be extremely useful in states such as Telangana and Andhra Pradesh to conduct small-scale studies in which specific communities, after attending workshops that explore these issues, make their own decisions about their learners' education; pilot studies could then follow that would demonstrate that on the basis of a strong mother tongue initial literacy education, their children will likely achieve equal or higher educational outcomes than children who have been educated monolingually in English in comparable neighboring villages. Such studies could potentially convince local districts to advocate for the right for their children to study in healthy multilingual classrooms on the basis of a firm mother tongue initial literacy education. This would surely be a step in the right direction, in line with India's own embracing of its beautiful, and multiple, multilingual ecosystems.

Lina: Thank you very much Jason for this very engaging conversation and sharing your valuable insights about multilingual education, translanguaging pedagogy to support 'language for learning' of multilingual learners. Your comments on creation of a space where multilingualism and translanguaging can take place in class seamlessly are particularly very significant for language teachers. Additionally, you have advised that creating a multilingual space in class for languaging to take place safely is incumbent on teacher personal efforts as well as systemic support from the government and teacher education policy to provide CPD opportunities so that teachers can practice multilingual pedagogies effectively and improve language learning outcomes.

Jason: Thank you for inviting me.

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Jason Anderson (University of Warwick, UK) is a teacher educator, author, educational consultant and researcher, who works in both language teaching and mainstream education. He has supported teachers in over 30 countries worldwide, both pre-service

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