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Interview

Teachers' Identities, Ideologies, and Translanguaging Practices: A Conversation with Manka Varghese

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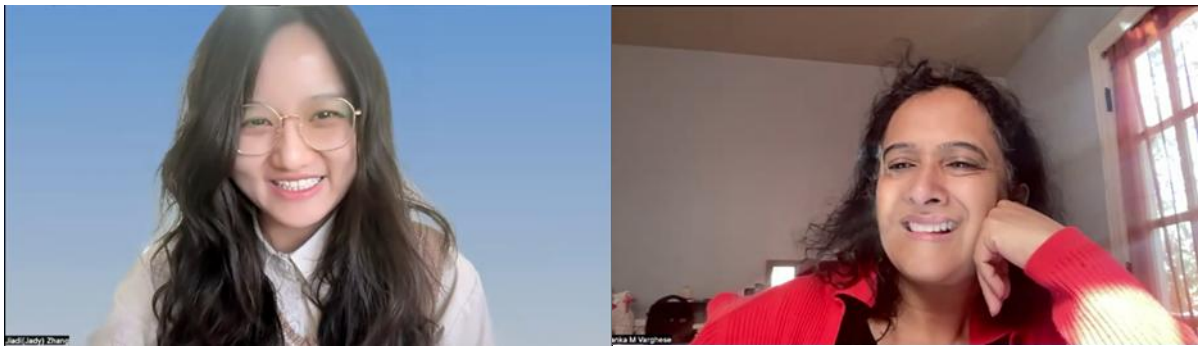
Jiadi Zhang conducted a virtual interview with Dr. Manka Varghese on April 16, 2025. In this conversation, Dr. Varghese (hereafter Manka) reflects on her transnational journey and identity as a South Asian woman who grew up in Italy and now works in the United States and shares her understanding of translanguaging—not only as a theoretical and pedagogical framework, but also as an everyday practice in bi/multilinguals' lives. Drawing on her rich teaching and research experiences, she discusses how race, language, and political consciousness intersect to inform teachers' identities and ideologies, and how teacher education programs can support teachers in implementing a translanguaging pedagogy through critical and ongoing self-reflections, practices, and discussions. Considering the current political tensions, Manka calls for a collective agency among educators, parents, and researchers to push back against monolingual language policies.

Keywords: teacher education; teachers' identities; teachers' ideologies; translanguaging

1. PERSONAL BACKGROUND



Jiadi: Hi Manka, thank you so much for joining this interview. As a South Asian woman who grew up in Italy and now works in the U.S., how would you see your transnational experiences and life realities in different countries shaping your own identity and your language ideologies?

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Manka: I'm happy to be here and part of this conversation[1]. To answer your question, I guess I had a bit of an unusual experience, just being South Asian and being raised in Italy. I think, like many people who have lived in the U.S., I definitely was a minoritized—a person of color, a woman of color—in Italy, especially at the time, which was from the early 1970s onward, when Italy was still a predominantly white-identifying country. I think that has shifted to some extent now. So that definitely shaped me. What was also a big factor for me was my own family. We know the role we play in the larger society—we interact with broader social structures, policies, and ideologies. In terms of languages, I grew up speaking my home language, Malayalam, which is an Indian language. I also obviously spoke Italian, and I attended a series of international schools where I spoke English as well.

Political ideology was also pretty significant in my life, especially through my family. My family was very left-leaning. Growing up in a country like Italy, where there was a strong leftist government alongside a more middle-of-the-road right-wing presence, being part of a leftist political orientation was part of the norm. I think that's different from the U.S., where—even then, and even now—that kind of political alignment is more unusual. But in Italy, it was aligned with the way I was raised. That was a really strong part of my identity growing up—understanding injustice in the world: racial injustice, social injustice. It was significant. We talked about those issues a lot in my family, and we also saw them play out in the broader society in Italy. Geographically, Italy is also close to the Middle East, various African countries, as well as Europe. So, you're sort of in the middle of a lot of crucial sociopolitical conversations and actions as well.

Jiadi: Thanks for sharing that. I can see that you grew up in a very multilingual environment. I wonder if your identity or your language practice changed after you immigrated to the U.S.

Manka: I think what was interesting is that one of the things that really changed for me was, even though in Italy there were a lot of conversations, especially in my family, around injustice, people didn't really talk about race at all. And in the U.S., there's so much centrality around race. You probably experienced that too, I would imagine. When I joined the graduate program at the University of Pennsylvania, I felt that the program at the time wasn't very critical. It has obviously changed over time—now there are scholars like Nelson Flores and María Cioè-Peña who are very critical and center conversations around race—but back then, I didn't really learn much about race in graduate school. However, when I got my job at the University of Washington, there was more conversation and scholarship around race, and I think that coincided with my personal experiences. Around that time, I had children, and I think when you're raising

[1] We present a verbatim transcript of the interview, with minor edits made by both Jiadi and Manka to improve clarity.

children, especially children of color, those issues become more apparent and significant in your life. I'd say that was probably the biggest shift for me.

I think learning about race has always been one of the great things about being in this country. Unfortunately, with what's happening now, those conversations are becoming more limited. But I do think that in the U.S., there is a long-standing dialogue around its history—territorial conquest, Indigenous peoples, and slavery. That kind of historical awareness and critical engagement hasn't been as prominent in other countries. For example, even though Italy was a colonizing force in different African countries, those histories aren't as openly discussed as they are in the U.S.

Jiadi: I can definitely relate to that—we rarely talk about race in China. When I started my graduate studies in the U.S., I began engaging in many critical discussions about race, which also became an important part of my research. Speaking of research, what made you interested in studying multilingual education and teaching education?

Manka: That's a really good question. I think it all really started when I began teaching English. After completing my undergraduate degree, I taught English in Italy. Then, when I started considering graduate school in the U.S., I realized that teaching English was something you could actually study and specialize in. So, I applied to a TESOL program, went through that program, and continued teaching English in the U.S. A lot of my interest came from a fascination with understanding my own teaching, my pedagogy, and how I developed certain beliefs and practices. Over time, I realized that I was also really interested in teacher education. So when I entered the Ph.D. program, my dissertation was developed to focus on a group of teachers who went through a professional development program to become bilingual teachers. I followed them and did research on what they were learning and how they were applying it in their practice. Through that process, I started to understand that a central issue for them was figuring out their bilingual teacher identities. That's really how things started for me.

2. TRANSLANGUAGING AS A THEORY, PRACTICE, AND PEDAGOGY

Jiadi: That's very interesting. So, you worked a lot with bilingual teachers, and you know the term, translanguaging. In recent years, it has captured the academic imagination and offered pedagogical and political inquiries to challenge language inequality and empower multilingual teachers and students globally. As a researcher, a teacher, and a teacher educator, how do you understand translanguaging?

Manka: I think translanguaging is something I grew up doing. But at the time, I didn't realize that's what I was doing. Translanguaging was a key part of my identity growing up, especially between English and Italian. When you go to an international school—at

least the one I attended—a big part of our identity was being able to translanguage between English and Italian. If you only spoke English or only spoke Italian, you wouldn't really be considered an insider in that school community. But because we were all there and grew up together, that way of using language became a shared identity that we've carried with us. And I think what's really interesting about translanguaging is that it's not just about linguistic forms—it's also about all the other aspects of communication: how we dress, the way we talk, the topics we discuss.

Jiadi: I definitely agree that translanguaging is not just a language issue, it's about culture, about identity, a lot of different aspects. I wonder how you see translanguaging as a theory and practice influencing multilingual education in the U.S. and worldwide.

Manka: We can see the influence of translanguaging across many teacher education programs throughout the U.S. and around the world. In the teacher education program I work in, here in Seattle at the University of Washington, it's a big part of what we do. We start by having teacher candidates reflect on their own translanguaging experiences, helping them become aware of what they've already been doing. Then, we support them in building on those experiences and drawing from them when working with their students in the classroom. We have a Master's program and a Ph.D. program, and many of our students come from outside the U.S. I think they often come to recognize, through the program, that even if they didn't previously have the language or concepts to describe it, they've already been engaging in translanguaging in their own teaching. Many of them take what they've learned here and bring it back to embed in their own curriculum and teaching practices in their home countries.

3. TEACHERS' IDENTITIES AND IDEOLOGIES

Jiadi: That's very fascinating. Based on your research, how do teachers' professional and personal identities influence their approaches to teaching with multilingual learners?

Manka: I do think one of the main strengths that emerges is when teachers share their own experiences with students. When they talk about their identities—whether it's their immigrant experience or their multilingual experience, or both—they can draw on those to connect with students and talk to them about their own identities. When teachers ask students to reflect on their multilingualism and their language practices, and they use themselves as models, that can be very powerful. It really helps students see their own experiences reflected and valued in the classroom.

Jiadi: How about monolingual teachers?

Manka: That's an interesting question. We definitely get monolingual teachers in our program, and we do a lot of different activities with them—like creating language

maps—to help them understand that we're all involved in different kinds of translanguaging, depending on the context, how we feel, who we're talking to, and where we're talking. Everyone uses different kinds of linguistic forms, and helping them become aware of that is really important. We also try to show that even if they don't speak what would be considered multiple "standard" languages, they can still find ways to draw on and support students' different languages and experiences in the classroom. We place a strong emphasis on collaboration with families in our program. One of my doctoral students is doing some really interesting work on having teachers co-designing literacy curricula with families. Families participate in these circles with teachers, and the teachers then draw on what emerges from those collaborations to inform their teaching.

Jiadi: Wow, that's very interesting! I am looking forward to reading that. I noticed that in your 2016 book chapter, *Language Teacher Educator Identity and Language Teacher Identity: Towards a Social Justice Perspective*, and some other journal articles, you pointed out the importance of using the term, raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa, 2015), to understand language teachers' racial and linguistic identities. Could you expand a little bit more on your understanding of teachers' language ideologies, raciolinguistic ideologies, and their relationships with teachers' identities? And how does the intersection of teachers' identities and ideologies shape teachers' translanguaging practices in multilingual classrooms?

Manka: I think that relates to what I mentioned earlier about teachers using their identities to connect with students in the classroom. That's something I talk about in one of my articles (Varghese & Snyder, 2018)—how teachers have always been doing that. For example, if we look specifically at Black teachers, I feel that historically, many Black teachers in this country have drawn on both their racial and linguistic identities together. They've used those identities to engage with students, relate to them, and incorporate that understanding into their curriculum. So I think that has been happening for a long time. What's different now is that we're starting to recognize that everyone does to some degree and is aware of drawing on it in different ways.

Jiadi: I definitely see that. And since you mentioned Nelson Flores earlier, I wonder if raciolinguistic ideologies is also something explicitly addressed in your program, and whether it connects with translanguaging.

Manka: For sure. I do think there's a sense that translanguaging can help break down some of those raciolinguistic ideologies—because, in many ways, it challenges existing hierarchies around languages. But I also think more and more people have been pointing out that we can't just assume that will happen. When you are using translanguaging or encouraging students to use translanguaging, it's important to talk

about the hierarchies that exist in society around those languages, which are associated with racial categories.

4. CHALLENGES AND COLLABORATIONS IN IMPLEMENTING TRANSLANGUAGING

Jiadi: That kind of critical conversation and reflection with our teachers is so important. Based on your research and teaching experiences with teacher candidates, have you encountered any resistance when encouraging them to adopt a translanguaging stance?

Manka: I have to be honest, I've seen less resistance over the years. I think part of that is because the ideologies that teacher candidates bring with them are changing. Over time, they're coming in with different perspectives, and they're also seeing more of these practices in classrooms. The reality is that translanguaging is happening more often, and people are becoming more open to it. Of course, it depends on the context. In Washington State, where most of our teacher candidates end up teaching, there tends to be more openness toward bilingualism and translanguaging. We haven't encountered much resistance, especially in elementary schools. I do think there's still some resistance in secondary education, particularly in world language classrooms. For example, teachers of Spanish, French, or Japanese often show more hesitation around translanguaging. That context is definitely interesting to explore further, to talk about how to address and challenge those tensions within world language education.

Jiadi: How do teacher educators equip teachers with pedagogical knowledge to implement translanguaging practices strategically and flexibly in different classroom contexts?

Manka: I think it really has to be built into teachers' own practice and their specific context. In our program, teacher candidates start working in the field early on—in their own classrooms. Over time, they spend more and more time there, and by their final quarter, they're basically in the classroom full-time. The key is having them actually implement translanguaging practices in real classroom settings and then reflect on the challenges and questions that come up.

We've also been fortunate to work on a grant for the past several years—myself and a few colleagues—where we've partnered with teachers who graduated from our program but have been teaching for a few years now. We've worked with three different cohorts: one that graduated five years ago, one four years ago, and one three years ago. We've stayed connected with them over time, offering support and facilitating peer learning opportunities. I think that has been one of the biggest ways to provide that understanding of how to use translanguaging pedagogies flexibly.

Jiadi: In many of your journal articles and edited books, you have highlighted the role of teachers' agency and identity development in the reconstruction of teaching practices. How do you see in-service teachers grappling with the complexities of implementing translanguaging practices, particularly within structural constraints that favor monolingual ideologies or language separation?

Manka: As I mentioned earlier, we're fortunate that, in Washington State, we haven't faced much structural resistance to translanguaging. But where we have encountered pushback, it's often in the area of literacy curriculum—and I think you, Jiadi, can probably relate to that, given your research focus. Sometimes, certain mandates around reading and literacy instruction limit how teachers can use translanguaging or even how they understand bilingualism, biliteracy, and multiliteracies in their classrooms. That's where we've seen constraints that make it harder for teachers to fully engage with these practices.

And I think some of the challenges definitely come from teachers' own resistance. Even when teachers say they believe in translanguaging and want to do it, we often still see that they're not fully implementing it in practice. We do a lot of video work with teachers, having them watch classroom videos, reflect on their own teaching, and provide feedback. That kind of self-reflection is really valuable. We also watch videos of other teachers together, which helps them learn from different examples and contexts. Another thing we've been doing is something called *studio days*. Through our grant, we've been able to visit a particular teacher's classroom, and we are lucky to have the funding to support other teachers to get a substitute. So they can come and watch this teacher work with kids, teaching with the kids. And we all sort of debrief together. That's very helpful.

5. REIMAGINING TEACHER EDUCATION FOR MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS

Jiadi: That sounds fascinating. You know, we've talked a lot about teacher education. I am curious, from your perspective, how can teacher education programs be reimagined to empower teachers to implement translanguaging practices to meet the needs of multilingual learners across disciplines? What collaborative efforts among researchers, teacher educators, and policymakers are needed?

Manka: I think it will be really interesting and challenging in the current political moment. I think there will be a big—it's already playing out—a big tension between the control of education in schools, between the federal government and the states. In this current political moment, it's really great that the U.S. Constitution gives states a lot of say in terms of education. Unfortunately, there are some states that are going to be aligned more with the current government in terms of how they view English, language, and other languages. But fortunately, there are also some states that are not going to

respond to that in the same way. So there might be, hopefully, some more possibilities. I think that is probably going to be a big part of what we continue to emphasize with teachers. I think all of us who work in teacher education, we've always worked to help teachers push back, right? We've always tried to help teachers build their own sense of agency and learn to push back. But now, I think we really have to do that even more. That will probably be the next level of what we're all going to be doing.

Jiadi: And what about future research? Do you have any advice or suggestions for emerging scholars, like myself, considering what the most urgent areas for future research in understanding teachers' ideologies, identities, and their translanguaging practices are?

Manka: I think one of the big things, like I was talking about before, is working with families. I think figuring out how to work with and partner with families, and bringing in their languages, practices, ideologies, and their own experiences into the curriculum and pedagogy would be a really big and important part of the work. I also think, especially because of the current political moment, that there's a real need for teachers to work together with others. So I think talking more about collective identity and collective agency will be really important.

Jiadi: Thank you, Manka! That was an inspiring conversation.

Manka: Thank you, Jiadi.

THE AUTHORS

Jiadi Zhang is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educator Preparation and Leadership at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. She is multilingual and speaks Mandarin, English, Korean, and Japanese. Jiadi's research interests include exploring translanguaging, critical biliteracies, teacher education, Asian American children's literature, and language ideologies.

Manka Varghese is a Professor in Language, Literacy, and Culture and Chair in Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum at the University of Washington's College of Education. Her research, teaching, and mentoring revolve around developing anti-oppressive frameworks and pedagogies in language teacher education, especially for teachers of multilingual students, which integrate teacher and student intersectional subjectivities and identities, theoretically and practically.

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