

Creating a translanguaging space through Language: Reflections on design as English Language Specialist in Vietnam

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Dongping Zheng

University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, USA

[<zhengd@hawaii.edu>](mailto:zhengd@hawaii.edu)

I am thankful for this invitation to say a few things about translanguaging. Since I just returned from Vietnam as an English Language Specialist for a translanguaging project, I thought it would be refreshing to situate my short note around the activities I created for translanguaging workshops in Vietnam.

The translanguaging project encompassed three phases. Phase I and Phase II were conducted online and the tangible product is our translanguaging pedagogy booklets for K-12 English language teachers in Vietnam. The translanguaging project is large in scale, but I will only mention names with whom I collaborated with directly. This serves as my first step to contextualize my stance on translanguaging. The inner circle of the team were Specialists Mary Shepard Wong and myself, plus our Vietnamese counterparts, Dr. Vũ Thị Thanh Nhã, Ms. Trần Kiều Hạnh VNU, and Dr. Le Van Canh. In light of the social phenomenological nature of translanguaging, I see the project as a distributed cognitive system (Hutchins, 1995), which also included but was not limited to the workshop participants, RELOs, Zoom-mediated collaborative activities, my first-person perspective on translanguaging, and my observer's experiences in Vietnam. It is the interactivity of all these microsystems that contextualize my stance and design. However, the theoretical positioning and activity design are of my own, so is my gratitude for the opportunity to work on this pioneering project.

At the beginning of each workshop, I used a responsive teaching method, from which I learned that translanguaging is mainly used to describe their teaching of English lexicon-grammar in Vietnamese. Teachers were confident in this aspect of translanguaging pedagogy, which aligns with grammar-translation techniques. Based on this understanding of teachers' main practices of translanguaging pedagogy, I focused on lecturing on translanguaging among students. More accurately, I lectured on and designed activities in service to creating a translanguaging space for all participants in any given environment, in this context, the English language classrooms in Vietnam.

In order to create a translanguaging space that allowed the social phenomenon of translanguaging inherent in multilingual societies to be practiced and take root in classrooms, I introduced four main constructs to help teachers understand translanguaging as a verb and take action on translanguaging practices: experiencing in languaging (Dewey, 1905), coordination (Cowley, 2019), taking a language stance (Cowley, 2011) and *xu*, a Chinese

concept that means continue, create and extend (Wang, 2016). In this short note, I will mainly focus on experiencing and languaging, without which, translanguaging would be a fashionable replacement for codeswitching, and learning of additional languages would not have a fertile ground for multilingual and multicultural becoming (Zheng, in review - b). Please refer to Zheng (in review - a & -b) for the theoretical explanation of the rest of the constructs.

Languaging is an activity that evolves language. In languaging, language is seen as a first-order activity, such as moving, feeling, acting, thinking, rather than language as an abstracta to be used. We experience the following actions at the same time: making, hearing, and imagining verbal patterns. Learners emerge as persons attuned to a second-order aspect of language (abstracta) (Cowley, 2019). This is languaging. It links the two orders, first and second, of activity. Languaging picks out “activities involving language: speaking, hearing (listening), writing, reading, “signing” and interpreting sign language, [...] activities that can be united by a specific superordinate verb” (Love 2017, p. 115). This languaging process is similar to Dewey’s postulates of immediate empiricism, in that if one wants to learn the word horse, it should be learned by experiencing “horse” in different functions, places and roles (Dewey, 1905).

Immediate empiricism postulates that things—anything, everything, in the ordinary or non-technical use of the term "thing"—are what they are experienced as. Hence, if one wishes to describe anything truly, his task is to tell what it is experienced as being. If it is a horse that is to be described, or the equus that is to be defined, then must the horse-trader, or the jockey, or the timid family man who wants a "safe driver," or the zoologist or the paleontologist tell us what the horse is which is experienced. If these accounts turn out different in some respects, as well as congruous in others, this is no reason for assuming the content of one to be exclusively "real," and that of others to be "phenomenal"; for each account of what is experienced will manifest that it is the account of the horse-dealer, or of the zoologist, and hence will give the conditions requisite for understanding the differences as well as the agreements of the various accounts. And the principle varies not a whit if we bring in the psychologist's horse, the logician's horse or the metaphysician's horse. (p. 115.) To experience “things” in a classroom would require teachers to provide time and space for students to *do* things. Material artifacts are one of the key affordances for students to experience things in addition to textbook information and knowledge points. To create a condition for students to experience languaging, coordinating activities can be designed based on Cowley’s explanation of the relationship between things and language (2019): Coordinating “depends on physical events, as people move, they say things, hear things, think things, notice things, imagine things, read things, etc.” (p. 484)

I will provide two examples of languaging space and time created in the workshops in Vietnam: Game play and material storytelling. Both activities were designed to engage teachers in experiencing languaging and translanguaging “in the wild” as a social phenomenon.

First, both activities instantaneously changed the lecture-driven affordances of the classroom into a place where participants could experience translanguaging through experiencing things in group play and storytelling. Group activities with “things” to manipulate affords coordination which is predictable for languaging and translanguaging incidences to occur (see Zheng 2012; Zheng et al., 2017, 2019; Cui et al., 2022). Participants also experienced periodicity of individual and independent learning when they read the game instructions, looked up words, and organized their own story narratives by moving artifacts around to a desired position.

Secondly, games provide a different set of learning opportunities. The board games we supplied were in English, for example, Werewolf, Ecosystem, Apple to Apples, and Emotional Rollercoaster America Trivia. Reading is a main action to gain information in addition to manipulating material artifacts. Participants needed to make meaning on their own and

coordinated with each other in both Vietnamese and English. This group play experience vividly demonstrated to the teachers that languaging is the basis for activity-based translanguaging, which is close to the multilingual sociolinguistic phenomenon described by Garcia and Li (2014) and Li (2018).

In addition, games have their own grammar and rules, and the listed games are culturally oriented to the United States, thus creating a space for additional sense-making opportunities for individuals during a group activity in English. Participants relied on each other's linguistic resources and dictionaries to figure out how to play, and shared their social emotions through a wide array of verbal and nonverbal modalities. They experienced all the translanguaging actions Li Wei talked about, such as translation, trans-semiotics, trans-modalities, and transformation.

Thirdly, material artifacts provided affordances for co-constructing narratives in both Vietnamese and English. Materials such as the four monk figurines (see Figure 1) have cultural relevance and cross-cultural connotations, and they can trigger sociocultural meaning situated in Vietnam. Thus, the material story-telling activity provided additional affordances for creativity, bilingual identity development, and co-construction of narratives, in addition to coordination between the individual narrative organization and group sense-making. Please see Figure 2 for an arrangement of different sets of artifacts that afforded the group's unique storytelling.



Figure 1. Artifacts brought to the workshops for storytelling activities



Figure 2. A finished arrangement of artefacts by a group from which they told their co-constructed story

In summary, the translanguaging spaces I introduced in Vietnam formed an action-based pedagogy (van Lier, 2004) that respects students' home language practices and their bilingual becoming. These activities given to 200 workshop participants across Vietnam, proved to be effective from my observation and dynamic assessment. In the future, design-based research (e.g., Barab & Squire, 2004; Rodríguez, 2017; Zheng, 2012) can be carried out to provide a more systematic implementation, exploration, and examination of a translanguaging pedagogy. Cultural relevance and significance arising from K-12 students' translanguaging activities in designed classrooms and society may offer new accounts of translanguaging contributive to both pedagogy and phenomenology. This can be done in Vietnam and by interested researchers and educators elsewhere. I welcome dialogue and collaboration.

About the Author

Dongping Zheng, associate professor in the Department of Second Language Studies at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, has a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology from the University of Connecticut. She embraces ecological perspectives in her applied work and is a board member of *The International Society for the Study of Interactivity, Language, and Cognition*. ORCID ID: [0000-0002-8725-1034](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8725-1034)

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