

Translanguaging and Flexible Bilingual Practices in Preschool Education: Strategies and Social Dynamics

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Abstract

Compared with bilingual education for adolescents, preschool bilingual education has historically received less research attention. This study focuses on constructing a structured translanguaging space for preschool children and has flexible bilingual practices to support children's adaptation to a new language learning environment. A translanguaging space is defined as an environment that integrates diverse linguistic systems, cultural norms, customs and belief systems. Within this space, children utilize language as a resource, their mother tongue is valuable to learn new content and a second language. Flexible bilingual practices refer to pedagogical approaches that enable bilingual teachers to design and implement developmentally appropriate activities that bridge the mother tongue and second language. Through such approaches, children's second language learning progress is accelerated, and they become more willing to express their own minds. Providing strategies to facilitate children's second language learning for teachers and scientific guidance for children to learn a second language. Moreover, this study contributes to bridging the gap between theoretical perspectives on translanguaging and their practical application in early childhood education. It also highlights the importance of creating inclusive and low-anxiety learning environments to support young learners' linguistic and socio-emotional development.

Keywords

translanguaging, preschool bilingual education, flexible bilingual practices, second language acquisition, classroom interaction

1. Introduction

With the trend of globalization, parents increasingly recognize the importance of children's verbal learning, and more parents hope their children will become true bilinguals and develop the ability to adapt to new environments [1]. However, fewer studies have focused on second language acquisition in young children compared to adolescents. This article specifically addresses second language acquisition in young children, aiming to identify effective learning methods and create a supportive environment for second language acquisition. In practice, children often struggle with distinguishing their mother tongue (L1) from a second language (L2) [2], which leads parents to hesitate about whether enrolling children in bilingual preschool is a viable choice. Additionally, teachers face challenges in constructing a bilingual learning environment for children. To address these issues, this essay reviews existing research to explore how educators can design effective lessons and implement key principles of bilingual teaching. It also provides practical advice for

diverse families to help children adapt to a new language learning environment. Three core research questions guide this study: 1. How can we reduce the reluctance of young children to speak a second language in an unfamiliar environment? 2. How can children comprehend abstract vocabulary in a foreign language? 3. How can bilingual educators adopt strategies to teach kindergarten-aged children effectively?

2. Theoretical Background

Traditionally, second language education was framed through a monolingual lens, drawing rigid distinctions between L1 (mother tongue) and L2 (second language). For decades, the Strict Language Separation Model dominated the field, enforcing clear boundaries between languages in instructional settings. However, contemporary scholarship [3-5] has challenged this monolingual bias, advocating for a paradigm shift toward viewing bilingualism as a cohesive, dynamic socio-cultural practice rooted in lived experience. Translanguaging space, as conceptualized by Li [3], refers to an ideologically constructed yet socially tangible space where interlocutors draw up their full linguistic repertoires, personal history, experience and socio-cultural contexts to co-construct meaning. This space fosters the negotiation of bilingual identities and values, with fluid and ever-shifting boundaries. This theoretical framing aligns with Ritzer's, the McDonaldization of Society, as strengthened interactions among individuals from varied cultural backgrounds and customs foster fresh prospects for innovation, entrepreneurship, and creative development. Translanguaging practices, in this context, become a means for individuals to legitimize their socio-cultural identities within these interconnected spaces Building on this, Ofelia García explicitly contrasts two approaches to bilingual education: Strict Language Separation Model: This model conceptualizes bilingualism as a sum of discrete linguistic systems ($1 + 1 = 2$), where two languages are strictly separated by time, space, or topic in the classroom. And support that two languages require separation strictly by time, space, or topic in the classroom [6,7]. Flexible Bilingual Practice Model: This model frames languages as integrated resources, allowing teachers to flexibly combine the use of two languages as complementary information, openings, or extensions of subject matter--with careful control to avoid unregulated language mixing. This study employs this theoretical framework to trace the dynamic process by which teachers transition from strict separation pedagogies to flexible bilingual practices in their instructional contexts.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Theoretical Perspectives

Linguistic study has long been dominated by a monolingual bias, which takes monolingualism as the normative or default model of language. By contrast, bilingual and multilingual practices, including code-switching, cross-linguistic influence and language mixing, have frequently been misinterpreted as indicators of linguistic deficiency, confusion or incomplete language development [7]. Under this traditional view, the mother tongue is even regarded as an obstacle to knowledge acquisition when learners use a second language. García and Kleifgen [8] argue that emergent bilinguals' home languages should be recognized as valuable cognitive and linguistic resources, rather than obstacles, in second language instruction. Regarding theoretical frameworks, Zhang-Wu [9] centers her analysis on superdiversity theory and translanguaging, advocating a language-as-resource perspective that rejects framing non-standard languages as drawbacks. Palviainen et al. [10] ground their research in the Flexible Bilingual Education Model, which breaks with the principle of strict language separation and emphasizes the flexible language use in instructional contexts. Dikilitaş et al. [11] draw on translanguaging space theory, positing that learners' linguistic repertoires constitute an integrated system through which meaning is co-constructed via multimodal approaches. Van der Wilt et al. [12] rely on social-communicative competence theory, identifying peer interaction as the key mediator linking social preference and language proficiency.

3.2 Classroom Practices

Classroom Practice is the core section of bilingual practice in preschool, so choosing different instructional strategies has a direct effect on children's language development and learning experience. This section adopts a pedagogical dimension to compare and analyze different pathways in classroom practice. Interactional strategies serve as the primary vehicle for promoting language acquisition and social interaction in preschool

bilingual classrooms. Existing studies depict interactive strategies through both micro-level qualitative analysis and macro-level quantitative analysis. Dikilitaş et al. [13] construct a logical framework for creating classroom interactive spaces at the micro level, arguing that the core of interactional strategies lies in building dialogic scaffolds for comprehensible input. Through techniques such as follow-up questions, retelling, and responsive feedback, teachers can create low-pressure opportunities for young children, while balancing the proportion of bilingual use and adaptation to children's language development levels. Van der Wilt et al. [12] adopt a quantitative approach to characterize the pathways of social interactions. Their longitudinal tracking reveals that structured group interaction strategies (e.g., cooperative games and task-based dialogues) significantly enhance preschool children's bilingual expression frequency and accuracy. This research quantifies different interaction types and studies the different influences of language development in young children. A comparison of the two studies highlights the practical tension in preschool bilingual interaction strategies: micro-level qualitative research reveals the dynamic nature of interaction, while macro-level quantitative research provides valid and verifiable data to support teachers in designing tiered interactive activities. Reflective pedagogical strategies drive the optimization of bilingual teaching practices. Taking the preschool setting as the core context, Palviainen et al. [10] systematically illustrate how teacher reflection shapes pedagogical strategies. This research identifies three core steps in preschool bilingual teachers' reflection: reviewing teaching activities, assessing children's language development, and adjusting pedagogical strategies. Teachers reflect on bilingual language use, interaction design, and children's participation to continuously optimize teaching approaches and accommodate diverse learners' bilingual learning abilities. In Dikilitaş et al. [11] research, teachers initially believed that English instruction should be delivered entirely in English, regarding children's native language as a confounding factor and deliberately restricting its use. However, through reflective practice, educators recognized that rigid monolingual separation essentially deprives young learners of the chance to use their linguistic systems to comprehend new knowledge. Therefore, reflective pedagogical strategies not only establish a critical link between classroom practice and instructional improvement but also provide an operational pathway for the professional development of preschool bilingual teachers. Furthermore, collaborative bilingual instruction promotes teachers' identity (re) construction. In the context of shifting from strict language separation to flexible bilingual practices, teachers gradually develop a dyadic identity through co-teaching and reflective practice, which further supports the implementation of flexible bilingual pedagogies [11].

Translanguaging resource integration strategies are essential for systematically connecting children's mother tongue and second language in the classroom, centering children's full linguistic repertoires as core resources for bilingual learning rather than teaching the two languages in isolation. Combined with Dikilitaş et al.'s [11] study on preschool bilingual classrooms in Turkey, translanguaging resource integration strategies include two core layers: The first approach is instructional cross-language: Teachers purposefully allocate Turkish (native language) and English (second language) in teaching materials and task design. Through intentional code-switching, they establish learning scaffolds to help children understand the second language through their native language. The second approach is interactive cross-language: Teachers create open opportunities for language switching, supporting children's autonomous use of both languages to express ideas and co-construct meaning, without imposing strict single-language output requirements. In terms of practical divergence, traditional preschool bilingual pedagogy often holds a misconception of prioritizing the second language and excluding the native language, treating the mother tongue as a distractor that disrupts children's holistic linguistic experience. Translanguaging can act as a linguistic tool to promote flexible bilingual use even in monolingual contexts, as young learners are in a continuous stage of linguistic development and require developmentally appropriate resources [12]. This strategy has been widely implemented in preschool settings, for example, through cross-language integration in game-based activities such as bilingual picture book reading and role-playing games, enabling children to acquire the second language within familiar native-language contexts while preserving their linguistic and cultural identities.

3.3 Methodological Approaches and Limitations

Zhang-Wu [9] adopts a macro-sociolinguistic perspective, situating her discussion within a higher education context. With the growing number of international students for whom English is a second language, language policies, power dynamics, and ideological norms shape students' access to and deployment of linguistic resources, rather than moment-to-moment classroom interactions being the sole focus. Palviainen et al. [10] focus on preschool bilingual teachers' reflections and conclude that teachers should be sensitive to

individual children's needs, shifting from initial language separation to flexible bilingual practices. Dikilitaş et al. [11] explore how to design interactive spaces in bilingual preschool classrooms, with a micro-level focus on language arrangement to support children's cross-language alternation. Van der Wilt et al. [12] establish a quantitative research framework for investigating social interaction in early childhood settings. Grounded in social competence and communicative competence theory, the study operationalizes children's social preference through peer-nomination sociometry and uses statistical analysis to examine the bidirectional relationship between social preference and oral communicative competence. The findings indicate that social preference significantly predicts subsequent oral communicative competence, whereas the reverse predictive effect is not supported. Moreover, this relational pattern remains stable across children's first and second preschool years, with dialogic classroom talk identified as a moderating factor. The study acknowledges limitations, including limited longitudinal evidence on developmental links, while providing a replicable methodological framework for quantitative research on young children's social interaction. To sum up, the three dimensions of instructional strategies encompass three aspects: interactive, teacher reflection and resource integration. The system reflects the core characteristics of preschool bilingual classrooms: interactional strategies build a classroom language interaction space; reflective pedagogical strategies drive instructional optimization; and translanguaging resource integration strategies reconstruct young children's language learning and achieve coordinated development of the mother tongue and second language. Meanwhile, different researchers employ distinct methodologies in qualitative versus quantitative approaches and micro-level versus macro-level perspectives, which introduce contextual limitations and research gaps to be addressed in subsequent sections. Obviously, researchers adopt diverse methodological designs. Zhang-Wu [9] uses to investigate Chinese students studying in the United States across diverse contexts, conducting comprehensive inquiries to ensure data authenticity and objectivity. Palviainen et al. [10] compare teacher reflections to identify common issues and bilingual educational practices among five teachers; however, data derived from teacher reflections carry a degree of subjectivity. Dikilitaş et al. [13] employ an exploratory qualitative design [14], collecting data through multiple qualitative tools. And combining linguistic and ethnographic methods--including observations, field notes and interviews to analyze language practices. Van der Wilt et al. [12] carry out a longitudinal quantitative study to examine the directional relationship between oral communicative competence and social preference in early childhood classrooms, as well as the role of dialogic classroom talk in this relationship. These studies share common limitations. Most participants are recruited from high-resource bilingual preschools, whereas average preschools often lack teachers qualified for bilingual instruction and reflective practice. Furthermore, researchers tend to use ethnography, interviews, observations and field notes which restricts sample size and limits the generalizability of findings. In particular, interviews and self-reflection rely on subjective self-reports, lacking objective empirical data.

4. Discussion & Synthesis

In terms of key insights for young L2 learners, the four studies present distinct yet mutually supportive perspectives. Zhang-Wu [9] argues that L1 serves as a resource rather than a barrier to language and puts forward the language-as-resource orientation. Although focused on university students, this perspective provides important theoretical support for L1 use among young learners. Palviainen et al. [10] propose a flexible practice model that regards languages as integrated resources, enabling teachers to combine two languages adaptively according to instructional contexts, for instance, using L2 for physical activities with simple instructions while relying on L1 to explain more complex concepts. Dikilitaş et al. [11] further expand the scope of strategic language use, suggesting that L1 can serve as a tool to support conceptual understanding and to build Instructional and interactional translanguaging spaces. Van der Wilt et al. [12] approach the topic from a social angle, confirming that peer social preference significantly predicts later L2 oral proficiency and offering empirical evidence for enhancing language learning through social interaction. By synthesizing these findings, three evidence-based instructional principles can be identified. First, L1 should function as a flexible scaffold rather than a barrier to L2 learning. Given young children's limited cognitive and linguistic capacity, strict language separation often causes confusion and anxiety. Allowing targeted L1 use helps clarify meaning, ensures comprehension, and builds confidence. This principle is consistent with the language-as-resource perspective and challenges the traditional monolingual bias that views language separation as the only legitimate approach. Second, learning depends on embodied and gradually scaffolded interaction. Young L2 learners cannot absorb abstract language through passive input alone. They need multimodal support such as gestures, demonstrations, step-by-step linguistic challenges, and gentle code-switching to connect L1 and L2.

Such scaffolding makes input comprehensible, encourages active participation, and matches young children's natural learning styles. Third, social interaction is a core catalyst for language development. As confirmed by Van der Wilt et al. [12] and Dikilitaş et al. [13], positive peer relationships and low-anxiety translanguaging spaces create opportunities to L2 practice. Van der Wilt et al. [12] further validate the unidirectional association between social preference and L2 oral proficiency, demonstrating that positive peer relationships serve as a core facilitator of linguistic development rather than a secondary outcome of language acquisition. This work thus complements the other three studies by remedying their limited attention to social factors.

5. Conclusion

The present study explored how to facilitate the understanding of abstract second language words among learners and how teachers can guide students to develop the courage to speak a second language. The results indicate that bilingual preschool teachers should construct a translanguaging space for young children, a space that fosters strong connections among children from diverse backgrounds, enabling them to communicate their cultures, beliefs and attitudes effectively. Furthermore, the findings suggest that teachers should shift their teaching model from a strict language separation approach to flexible bilingual practices. The mother tongue should not be regarded as a disadvantage in second language learning; instead, it should be a valuable tool to facilitate the understanding of second language abstract words. Teachers are advised to flexibly integrate the use of two languages in accordance with specific teaching contexts and requirements. These findings provide practical implications for bilingual teachers in adjusting their teaching strategies, particularly in terms of arranging language use in classes and constructing effective translanguaging spaces to assist young children in comprehending abstract second language words. However, the present study has several limitations. First, it is constrained by a small sample size and a case study design, which limits the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the preschools involved in the study are typically high-cost institutions, further restricting the universality of the findings. Therefore, further studies are recommended to include more public preschools and recruit participants who represent typical bilingual learners, so as to enhance the external validity of the research results.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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