



# Translanguaging as an agentic pedagogy for multilingual learners: affordances and constraints

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## ABSTRACT

Translanguaging offers a new perspective on language learning by affirming and leveraging the diverse language practices that make up learners' unitary language repertoire as resources for their learning. Despite the potential pedagogical benefits of translanguaging, English-only policies are still prevalent in many language classrooms. Even when translanguaging is welcomed into the classroom, the conflicting attitudes of teachers, students and families pose ideological constraints on translanguaging which restrict learners from selecting and utilising features from their whole translanguaging repertoire. Guided by translanguaging and sociocultural theory, this study examines the tension between the affordances of student-led translanguaging in a Grade 5 Malaysian classroom with an English-only policy, and the constraints to learners' use of translanguaging. This paper reports on the results of a sociocultural critical discourse analysis of learners' peer interactions while engaged in collaborative learning, and interviews with 31 learners. The findings indicate that learners used translanguaging agentively to support one another's language learning, build rapport, resolve conflict, assert their cultural identity, and draw on knowledge across languages. However, learners' use of translanguaging was constrained to an extent by their teacher's and peers' language policies and practices, parental discourses about linguistic capital, and societal discourses on ethnicity, nationality, and marginalisation.

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## Introduction

Multilingual learners have access to a diverse range of cognitive, linguistic and semiotic resources, which are a cumulation of their language competencies, academic histories, prior knowledge, and lived experiences. A major strand of research on second language learning has focused on the importance of drawing on learners' diverse multilingual resources through translanguaging (e.g. Baker, 2011; Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Cummins, 2007, 2017; García, 2009; García et al., 2017; Martin-Beltrán, 2014). The theory of translanguaging posits that multilingual speakers draw on the features of their diverse language repertoires in a dynamic, flexible and functionally integrated way to convey and construct meaning, make sense of their experiences, and gain understanding

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and knowledge (Canagarajah, 2011a, 2011b; García et al., 2017; García & Lin, 2016; García & Otheguy, 2020; Hua et al., 2020; Otheguy et al., 2018; Li Wei, 2018). A translanguaging pedagogy involves teachers integrating the diverse language practices of students in the classroom to create more equitable learning opportunities (García & Li Wei, 2014). Despite the potential cognitive, linguistic, affective and social affordances of translanguaging in the classroom (e.g. Creese & Blackledge, 2010; García & Wei, 2014; Martin-Beltrán, 2014), teachers in many second language contexts continue to implement English-only policies in their classrooms (Carroll & Sambolín Morales, 2016). These English-only practices could be a response to macro- or meso-level policies that require teachers to separate languages, or a result of teachers' own language ideologies. Even when translanguaging is welcomed into the classroom, the conflicting and complex attitudes of teachers, students and families towards learners' language use in the classroom may pose further 'ideological constraints on translanguaging' (Daniel & Pacheco, 2016, p. 654) which may restrict learners from drawing on their entire language repertoire.

Although English-only policies and practices are prevalent in many educational contexts, Canagarajah (2011a) argues that translanguaging cannot be completely restrained because it is a naturally occurring phenomenon for multilingual learners. Li Wei and Wu (2009) write that translanguaging is 'the most distinctive behaviour of the bilingual speaker; there is no better behavioural indicator to show that a speaker is bilingual than when s/he is using two languages simultaneously in social interaction' (p. 193). There is an abundance of evidence to show that in classrooms where there are multilingual learners, learners move between their languages naturally (García & Li Wei, 2014). According to Canagarajah's research (2011a), acts of translanguaging occur with minimal pedagogical effort from the teacher. Even in classrooms with English-only policies, learners were found to still use translanguaging. Several studies have found that learners exercise their agency in resisting the English-dominant norms of the classroom and creating their own space in their interactions where their home languages could be used (e.g. Henderson & Palmer, 2015; Pacheco, 2016; Rajendram, 2019). The purpose of this study was to examine the affordances of learners' use of translanguaging in English-only contexts, and the external factors that could potentially constrain their translanguaging practices, with the aim of providing recommendations for a translanguaging pedagogy that would enable learners to draw on their full translanguaging repertoire. The research questions guiding this study were: (1) What are the potential pedagogical affordances of learners' use of translanguaging in an English-only classroom policy context? and (2) What are the potential constraints on learners' use of translanguaging in the classroom?

## **Theoretical framework**

This research was grounded in a theoretical framework of translanguaging and sociocultural theory (SCT). The term 'translanguaging' was first coined by Cen Williams (1994) in Welsh (*trawsieithu*) to refer to the pedagogical practice of alternating between English and Welsh for receptive and productive purposes, for example, reading in English and writing in Welsh. When the term was first translated into English by Baker (2011), it was defined as 'the process of making meaning, shaping experiences, gaining understanding and knowledge through the use of two languages' (p. 288). This definition has since been

extended by many scholars to account for the complex language practices of multilinguals, and for pedagogical approaches that draw on those practices (García & Kano, 2014). Lewis et al. (2012) build on Baker's (2011) definition of translinguaging by adding that in translinguaging, 'languages are used in a dynamic and functionally integrated manner to organise and mediate mental processes in understanding, speaking, literacy and not least, learning' (p. 1). Cenoz and Gorter (2020) distinguish between pedagogical translinguaging which is 'a pedagogic theory and practice that refers to instructional strategies which integrate two or more languages' and spontaneous translinguaging which refers to 'the reality of bilingual usage in naturally occurring contexts where boundaries between languages are fluid and constantly shifting' (p. 2). The definitions of translinguaging described above maintain a perspective of languages as distinct and separate entities, even if the languages are related to each other (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020).

Another perspective on translinguaging put forth by scholars such as García and Otheguy (2020) is based on the premise that 'named languages' are social and political constructs. García and Otheguy (2020) propose that all users of language have a 'unitary linguistic system that they build through social interactions of different types, and that is not compartmentalized into boundaries corresponding to those of the named languages' (p. 25). For Otheguy et al. (2015), when learners translanguage, they deploy features from their unitary linguistic repertoire without careful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of their named languages.

Regardless of their definition of translinguaging, most translinguaging scholars agree that bilingual and multilingual learners use their linguistic resources through an ongoing and dynamic process of meaning-making (e.g. Canagarajah, 2011b; Cenoz & Gorter, 2020; García & Li Wei, 2014; Lewis et al., 2012). Throughout this process, an individual learner's linguistic repertoire is negotiated in relation to specific contexts and purposes for language use (Kaufhold, 2018). Since these negotiations combine the personal and social dimensions (Li Wei, 2011), translinguaging involves both individual agency and social collaboration. This is consistent with SCT which treats the linguistic repertoire of an individual as a resource for their learning while giving special consideration to the social and interactional context in which the learning occurs (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Wertsch, 1985). From a sociocultural perspective, learners' language practices can be understood in relation to the affordances and constraints in a particular context (da Silva Iddings, 2018). Affordances refer to 'what is available to the person to do something with' within the learning environment (van Lier, 2004, p. 91). van Lier's (2008) concept of affordances also relates actions to social context, and learners' actions are believed to be 'mediated by social, interactional, cultural, institutional and other contextual factors' (p. 171).

Bringing together translinguaging and SCT, I posit that translinguaging creates various affordances and opportunities for learning during students' collaborative social interactions. Collaborative learning involves a group of students 'working together on specific collaborative learning tasks ... to mutually construct and maintain a shared conception of knowledge' (L. Lin, 2015, p. 17). Collaborative learning, rooted in SCT, is a pedagogical approach involving students working together in small groups to use their collective skills and knowledge to achieve a common goal (L. Lin, 2015). While cooperative learning is typically more teacher-structured, prescriptive and targeted (Oxford, 1997),

collaborative learning is group-structured rather than teacher-structured as students are responsible for organising and dividing the work among themselves, and the teacher takes on the role of facilitator and guide (L. Lin, 2015). When a translanguaging space is created collaboratively through learners' dialogue during collaborative learning, they can draw on their shared knowledge, experiences, and multilingual repertoires to support one another cognitively, socially, and linguistically in a way that expands their individual and group learning (García & Li Wei, 2014; Martin-Beltrán, 2014). I propose that expertise within these collaborative contexts is distributed because all learners are empowered to take on the role of language experts when they are able to use all the language practices and features in their linguistic repertoire.

The translanguaging process is a cognitive as well as a social activity as it is informed by the unique sociocultural contexts that learners are situated within (Martin-Beltrán, 2014). Since learning cannot be seen independently of the culture in which a learner is a member of (Bakhurst, 1995), Garza and Langman (2014) assert that more research should study the translanguaging practices of students from a sociocultural perspective, paying close attention to the sociocultural environments in which students are situated. My research is a step in this direction, as it studies the affordances of translanguaging from the perspective of learners who use it in their collaborative interactions, while also examining how their discursive practices are shaped and at times constrained by factors both within and beyond their classroom.

## **Materials and methods**

### ***Research site and participants***

The research reported in this study was approved by the University of Toronto's Research Ethics Board. This study took place in Selangor, a central state in Peninsular (or West) Malaysia. Malaysia is a multilingual and multicultural country where 137 named languages and dialects are spoken (World Atlas, 2018). Approximately 68.6% of the Malaysian population is made up of the *Bumiputera* group (which in Peninsular Malaysia mostly consists of the Malays, and in East Malaysia consists of various Indigenous groups). Malaysian-Chinese make up 23.4% of the population, and Malaysian-Indians make up 7.0% of the population (Malaysia Department of Information, 2017). The remaining 1% of the Malaysian population consists of non-Malaysian residents and foreign workers from countries such as Indonesia, Philippines, Bangladesh, Thailand, and Cambodia. The research site for my study was a public primary school in Selangor – *Bukit Mawar* (Rose Hill) National-Type Tamil Primary School. The official language in Rose Hill was Tamil, and English is taught four times a week as a second language from Grade 1 onwards. The focal participants for the study were 31 students (19 girls and 12 boys) from one Grade 5 (ages 10–11) classroom in Rose Hill. Most learners in this classroom came from upper middle-class families. Their parents were educated professionals who worked in high-paying positions such as engineers, lecturers, lawyers, business executives, and bank managers.

Like most schools in Malaysia, students in Rose Hill are streamed into classes yearly based on their achievement in their year-end final examination which assesses their performance in all their subjects (e.g. Malay, English, Tamil, Math, Science, Moral, Visual Arts).

The students in this Grade 5 classroom had an upper-intermediate level of proficiency in English. All the students in the classroom were Malaysian-Indians who spoke in Tamil as their home language, and were learning Malay and English as their second languages in school. In both primary and secondary schools in Malaysia, each subject is taught by a different teacher. The English subject teacher of the classroom was Ms. Shalini (pseudonym), who had taught at Rose Hill for 26 years. Ms. Shalini is also a Malaysian-born Indian who speaks the same three languages as her students. However, Ms. Shalini enforced a strict English-only policy and constantly reminded the students in her class that they were not allowed to use any languages other than English when speaking to her or to their peers, and engaging in classroom activities and tasks. If she heard any student using Tamil or Malay, she would stop them by calling out, 'English only!'

Despite enforcing an official English-only policy in this classroom, however, Ms. Shalini had observed that students continued to use languages other than English in class, mostly when they were interacting with their peers during small group activities. For the purpose of this research, I asked for Ms. Shalini's consent to observe and record the learners' group interactions in order to study the reasons for their use of translanguaging in this manner, and its potential affordances in their learning. Because of the close collegial relationship we had established when I taught in Rose Hill prior to the study for five years, Ms. Shalini welcomed me into the classroom to observe the learners for 6 months. As I used a naturalistic case study design, the teacher and students were not told to do anything differently. Ms. Shalini continued to remind her students of the English-only policy for the duration of the study, while most students continued to interact with their peers the way that Ms. Shalini described they usually did (i.e. translanguaging during their peer-to-peer interactions).

## **Data collection**

### ***Information about Ms. Shalini's English lessons***

This research was conducted over the period of 6 months during Ms. Shalini's English lessons in that Grade 5 class, which took place four times a week (two 1-hour lessons, and 2 half-hour lessons each week). Ms. Shalini's English lessons were structured around thematic units from the Standard Curriculum for Primary Schools (KSSR) Grade 5 textbook. Examples of these units include Malaysian Folk Tales, Money Matters, Tales from Other Lands, Safety Issues, and the Digital Age, Friends from Around the World, and Pollution, with each unit usually taking two weeks (eight lessons) to complete. In most lessons, there was a collaborative activity related to the topic and focus for the day, and students worked in the same groups of 3–5 each time. Collaborative learning involves a group of students 'working together on specific collaborative learning tasks ... to mutually construct and maintain a shared conception of knowledge' (L. Lin, 2015, p. 17). Collaborative learning, rooted in SCT, is a pedagogical approach involving students working together in small groups to use their collective skills and knowledge to achieve a common goal (L. Lin, 2015). Examples of the collaborative activities carried out in Ms. Shalini's class included writing and performing poetry, writing stories, reports and essays, reading and answering comprehension questions, creating posters for food products, planning, rehearsing and presenting dramas, creating and solving puzzles, giving directions on a map, discussing current events, and reading and recreating a graphic novel.

### Data sources

The primary data sources for the study consisted of 50 video-recordings of students while they worked together in groups of 3–5 on the various collaborative activities outlined above. A mini camcorder and two voice recorders were placed in each group's table to capture learners' interactions both in video- and audio-form. These recordings were transcribed using the *Inqscribe* transcription software, and I used conventional orthography to represent their speech in English and Malay, and Tamil script to represent their speech in Tamil. The following transcription conventions are used when presenting the data (Table 1).

In response to Neokleous' (2017) call for more research that captures the voices of young learners, I also interviewed all 31 learners in the class to elicit their perspectives on translanguaging. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the learners in their collaborative small groups, as learners indicated they would be more comfortable being interviewed together instead of individually. During these interviews, I asked them questions about their feelings and perceptions towards their teacher's classroom language policy, their feelings about the languages they spoke, their language choices in and outside the classroom, and the reasons for their language choices across these different contexts. I considered these interviews as a form of member-checking, that is, the process whereby the data and analysis are presented to the participants to give them the opportunity to confirm, deny, or clarify the researcher's interpretation of the data, thus making the analysis more credible (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Thus, I also showed or read out to learners excerpts of their interactions during various collaborative learning activities, and prompted them to talk about the reasons for their use of Tamil, English and Malay during these activities, and the role that the languages played in their collaborative process and product. Since I speak the same three languages as the learners (English, Tamil and Malay) and share the same Malaysian-Indian background, they felt comfortable using all three languages during our interviews. This, along with the rapport I had built with the learners throughout the study, allowed me to obtain rich perspectives from them.

### Data analysis

The methodology used to analyse the data from the larger study was sociocultural critical discourse analysis (SCDA) (Rajendram, 2019), which drew on principles from sociocultural discourse analysis (SDA) (Mercer, 2004) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). SDA is a methodology for analysing classroom talk that differs from 'linguistic' discourse analysis because it focuses less on the linguistic

**Table 1.** Transcription conventions.

Transcription Convention	Meaning
()	Words in round parentheses provide the English translation of Tamil/Malay
< >	Words in angle brackets provide the context of the interaction or the non-verbal actions that were carried out
[ ]	Words in square brackets indicate added words that were not part of the original quote
UPPER CASE	Emphasis on a word

aspect of spoken language, and more on its functions for the pursuit of joint activity (Mercer, 2004, p. 141). It aims to understand how spoken language is used by learners as a tool for collective thinking and the joint construction of knowledge. SDA is based on a sociocultural view of second language learning as occurring through learners' participation in social interaction rather than solely through the internal mental processes of the individual learner (Block, 2003; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). Lewis and Moje (2003) argue for a sociocultural approach that extends traditional notions of SCT by considering relationships of agency, power and identity, and how these elements can shape learning and knowledge production. In keeping with their suggestion, I incorporated the three procedures of analysis associated with Fairclough's (1995) CDA framework into the analysis of the interviews: *description*, *interpretation*, and *explanation*.

The SCDA in this study was conducted in two stages. The purpose of the first stage of was to find out the affordances of translanguaging in students' learning. The primary data sources for this stage of analysis were the 50 transcripts of learners' collaborative interactions, and the unit of analysis was a speech act, which Cohen (2004) defines as 'an utterance which serves as a functional unit in communication' (p. 302). The length of the speech acts ranged from a string of words to complex sentences. I analysed 4389 speech acts across the 50 transcripts inductively by creating a code to *describe* the specific function that act served within the context of the collaborative activity. This produced a final list of 100 functions, which were then grouped into categories according to the broader affordances they served in the collaboration: cognitive-conceptual, planning-organisational, affective-social, and linguistic-discursive (Rajendram, 2019).

Although in theory, translanguaging challenges the social construction of named languages and the dichotomies between them, in practice, translanguaging 'often acquires material substance as national 'languages'' (García, Seltzer, et al., 2018, p. 64). Translanguaging does not ignore the fact that schools exist in societies with dominant and subordinate languages, and that the practice of language education inevitably involves the use of these languages (García, Menken, et al., 2018). As the learners in my study were situated within a sociocultural context where proficiency in the dominant languages of English and Malay was seen as a marker of overall language ability (with Tamil often being side-lined), I believed that it was important to make visible the diverse linguistic practices and rich features of these learners' translanguaging repertoires. For this reason, I also identified the 'translanguaging constellations' (i.e. the language features or combination of language features in learners' repertoires) (Duarte, 2019) that was used in each speech act and counted the frequencies and percentages of speech acts that occurred through each constellation. The seven translanguaging constellation categories in this coding process were (1) English, (2) Malay, (3) Tamil, (4) English and Malay, (5) English and Tamil, (6) English, Malay and Tamil, (7) Malay and Tamil.

The second stage of analysis, which focused on *interpreting* the purposes and affordances of translanguaging, and *explaining* the factors influencing learners' use of translanguaging in the classroom, drew on data from my interviews with the learners. While reading through the interview transcripts, I highlighted pertinent quotes from learners that explained their use of translanguaging during their interactions, and grouped together quotes that addressed similar points or issues into broad themes. In line with Mercer's (2004) SDA approach and Fairclough's CDA (1995) framework which both aim to examine the relationships between learners' discourse and the sociocultural,

institutional, and historical contexts in which their discourse occurs, I paid close attention to responses that indicated their personal discourses related to translanguaging, and the broader discourses around language from their teachers, parents, community, and society. Throughout this process, I moved backwards and forwards between the data from the classroom video recordings, interview transcripts, and my own observational notes to triangulate the emergent themes from the interviews with information from the other sources. To preserve the authenticity of learners' language use, the quotes and excerpts from learners' classroom interactions and interviews are presented below in their original form, without any changes made to their grammar, syntax or vocabulary.

## Results

### *Affordances of learners' use of translanguaging in the classroom*

The analysis of learners' classroom interaction data revealed that learners used translanguaging agentively during every collaborative small group activity they engaged in, despite the teacher's reminders for them to use only English. Larsen-Freeman (2019) suggests that agency is not a property of an individual's mind. Rather, it is relational and must be seen in relation to the social world in which the learner is situated. Larsen-Freeman adds that 'agency is always related to the affordances in the context, and thus inseparable from them' (p. 65). Consistently, the results of the analysis show that many learners felt empowered to use translanguaging despite the classroom English-only policy as a result of direct encouragement by their peers, for example, 'தமிழில் சொல்லு (Say it in Tamil)' and 'Melayuயில் சொல்லலாம்' (You can say it in Malay).

In all 50 transcripts that were analysed, various translanguaging constellations were used by the learners during their collaborative group work. 66% of the 4389 speech acts that were analysed in the SCDA were carried out through a combination of English and Tamil, English and Malay, Malay and Tamil, or English, Malay and Tamil. The use of these translanguaging constellations fulfilled important cognitive, conceptual, linguistic, discursive, social, affective, planning and organisational functions that supported their individual and collective learning (Rajendram, 2019). The interviews with the 31 learners corroborated the findings of the SCDA and yielded four themes related to the cognitive, linguistic, social, and cultural affordances of translanguaging. Learners indicated that their use of translanguaging provided them with these affordances in their learning: (1) supporting one another's language learning, (2) building rapport with peers and resolving conflict, (3) asserting their cultural identity and preserving their culture, and (4) drawing on knowledge and making connections across languages. The use of the Malay language in the quotes below is represented through the words that are italicised, while the use of the Tamil language is represented through the Tamil (தமிழ்) script.

### *Supporting one another's language learning*

The results of the SCDA showed that learners used translanguaging strategically and intentionally in order to scaffold one another's language learning and fulfil linguistic-discursive functions. Linguistic-discursive functions are those that focus on learning and using the linguistic structures and discourse required to complete the task, and



supporting peers' linguistic and discursive knowledge (Rajendram, 2019). Examples of these functions are provided in Table 2.

The excerpt below provides an example of the use of linguistic-discursive functions to support their group members' language learning through translanguaging. During the activity captured below, a group of learners were working on writing questions using interrogative pronouns (e.g. who, whose, what, which). Sarala attempted to use the 'to-whom' structure in her suggested question, but did so incorrectly. The excerpt demonstrates how Sarala's peers used translanguaging to support one another's linguistic knowledge, and how the use of translanguaging led to Sarala being able to suggest a grammatically accurate question using the 'to-whom' structure.

Sarala:	To whom you give the necklace ...
Monisha:	To whom DID you give the necklace
Kesha:	தமிழில் யாரிடம் நீ அந்த சங்கிலியை கொடுத்தாய் (In Tamil, it's to whom did you give the necklace?)
Tina:	Necklace என்ன செய்வாங்க? (What do you do with a necklace?)
Kesha:	நம்ப இது போல போடுவோமே, அது தான் (When we put it like this, that's what it is) <demonstrating the action of putting a necklace around her neck>
Monisha:	தங்க சங்கிலியை பற்றி எழுதலாமா? (Should we write about a gold necklace?)
Kesha:	யாரிடம் நீ அந்த தங்க சங்கிலியை கொடுத்தாய் (To whom did you give the gold necklace)
Sarala:	தங்கம் Englishலே எப்படி சொல்லுவாங்க? (How do you say தங்கம் [gold] in English?)
Kesha:	Gold
Sarala:	தங்கம் சங்கிலி ... gold சங்கிலி ... Gold necklace (தங்கம் சங்கிலி [Gold necklace] ... Gold சங்கிலி [necklace] ... gold necklace)
Sarala:	To whom did you give the gold necklace

**Table 2.** Examples of linguistic-discursive functions carried out through translanguaging.

Functions	Example of learners' translanguaging interactions
Explaining grammar rules/vocabulary usage	Tanuja: My friends is like ... Divya: Friends le -s வராத, ஒரு ஆள் தானே (There's no -s in 'friends' because it's just one person)
Providing the translation of a word/phrase/sentence	Bavani: The Malay is <i>maklumat pemakanan</i> , in English is the nutritional information (In Malay it's <i>maklumat pemakanan</i> [nutritional information], in English it's nutritional information)
Correcting one's language use based on peers' feedback	Naveen: iPhone is importable ... Guna: Importable இல்ல, PORTABLE (Importable is incorrect, it's PORTABLE) Naveen: Ah, PORTABLE, iPhone is portable ...
Providing information/examples to help peers understand new vocabulary	Monisha: Bracelet என்ன செய்வாங்க? (What do people do with a bracelet?) Kesha: அப்ப நான் உன்கிட்ட அதைதான் கேட்கணும்னு நினைச்சேன் ... necklace என்ன (I was just thinking of asking you the same thing, what a necklace is) Monisha: நம்ம இது போல் போடணும், அதே தான் (When we put it like this, that's what it is) <demonstrating the action of putting something around her wrist>
Showing peers examples of target language use in books/other materials	Manickam: <i>Kepada siapakah</i> , இப்படி. இங்க பாரு, to whom did you give (Like this, <i>kepada siapakah</i> [to whom]. Look here, to whom did you give) <showing his peer examples of interrogative pronouns in their Malay and English textbooks>
Modelling to peers what to say/how to speak during a presentation	Tarun: எப்படி சொல்லணும், welcome, my name is Bavani. எல்லோரின் பெயர் சொல்லு (This is how to say it, 'Welcome, my name is Bavani,' then say everyone's names)

Monisha: ஆமா correct answer (Yes, correct answer) <nodding her head at Sarala>

During the interviews, learners confirmed that their use of translanguaging was to support their peers' language learning. Learners stated they used 'Tanglish, Tamil and English mix up' when they had questions about the meaning of difficult or unfamiliar words to their peers. Describing her language choices, Thiva explained that she usually used Tamil to ask her group members about words she did not know, 'எனக்கு தெரியாத வார்த்தை நான் கேட்கும் போது, நான் தமிழில் பேசுவேன்' (When I'm asking about words I don't know, I'll speak in Tamil). Many learners explained that they translanguaged to help their friends who were having difficulties understanding words, phrases or sentences in English. According to Silvia, 'If one sentence my friend didn't understand, if I tell in English, she cannot understand the word. If we can explain in Tamil, then only she can understand and she will improve her language.' Kishor suggested that his group's use of translanguaging was intentional, as they would plan to use translanguaging strategically to support their peers, 'If somebody don't understand English, so we start, we do the plan, we plan first we talk in Tamil, then 50% English 50% Tamil. Somebody can't understand English, we talk in Tamil with them.'

Learners who were at the receiving end of this translanguaging support from their peers confirmed that it helped them to understand the lesson content better, learn new vocabulary, and be able to perform tasks on their own. For example, Rubin emphasised that:

இப்போ நான் என் கூட்டாளிகளுடன் Englishலெ ஒரு வார்த்தை என்ன கேட்டா, தமிழில் சொல்லவாங்க, அது அர்த்தம் டான் நான் புரிந்துடுவேன். (Now if I ask my friend what an English word is, he will explain it in Tamil, so I'll understand the meaning of the word).

Similarly, Kartik spoke about how his peers' support had helped him make progress in his language learning:

எனக்கு புரியில்லைனா, நம்பளுக்கு சொல்லி கொடுவாங்க, தமிழில் meaning சொல்லனோம். இப்போ வந்து கொன்னு நல்ல English தெரியும். அடுத்த காலம் நானே சொல்வேன். (If I don't understand something, they will teach me, they will explain the meaning in Tamil. I'm a little better at English now ... soon I'll be able to explain it myself.)

Learners also suggested that translanguaging established a mutually supportive relationship in their collaborative groups as there were times when they received support from their peers, and times when they themselves provided the same type of support to their group members. Elango alluded to the reciprocal nature of scaffolding that was provided through translanguaging when he stated that:

நம்பளுக்கு என்ன புரியில்லைனா நம்ப வந்து friends கூட share பன்னிக்கீலாம். நம்பளுக்கு எடாவது words புரியில்லைனா Englishலெ, அப்படினா, நான் Pravin கேட்பேன், மற்ற நேரத்திலே Pravin கேட்பார். (If we don't understand something, we can share it with our friends. If I don't understand anything in English, I'll ask Pravin. Other times, Pravin will ask me).

Confirming this, Elango's group member, Pravin, explained that 'Sometimes ... he [Elango] will help me to memorize the Tamil words. Sometimes he also don't know some words, he will ask me.'

Several researchers and educators position translanguaging as ‘fulfilling a scaffolding function offering temporary bridges between languages which allow pupils to build links between official instruction languages and between home and school languages’ (Duarte, 2020, p. 12). The way that scaffolding was taken up in the interactions of learners in this study suggests that translanguaging was not just a temporary bridge to English proficiency for them; neither was it a rigid structure to be removed when no longer needed. In contrast, the type of scaffolding that learners provided each other had the element of continuity (van Lier, 2004; Walqui, 2006) because learners used translanguaging repeatedly throughout every task, regardless of their progress in the task. Learners’ translanguaging went beyond using one language to develop another. Rather, they continuously expanded their multilingual repertoire as a whole by adding new language features (e.g. vocabulary, meaning, sentence constructions) to it, and inventing and reinventing new language functions and affordances through a continuous process of meaning-making (Carroll & Sambolín Morales, 2016; Mazak, 2017). Although learners gained knowledge and grew in confidence through the scaffolding provided by their peers, there always remained an element of interdependence between learners as they continually supported each other through the use of their home languages during different tasks.

### ***Building rapport with peers and resolving conflict***

The SCDA of learners’ interactions revealed that they used translanguaging to accomplish affective-social functions, which were functions that focused on building rapport, engaging peers in social interactions, providing socio-emotional support, and assisting one another (Rajendram, 2019). Examples of these functions are provided in Table 3.

In the interviews with learners, building rapport and resolving conflict were among the reasons cited by learners for their use of translanguaging in their collaborative groups. When asked why they chose to use languages other than English despite the English-only policy in their class, learners explained that translanguaging made their collaboration more enjoyable as it established a friendly atmosphere within the group where everyone felt ‘very comfortable’ and ‘very happy’ with their friends. According to Tanisha, ‘If we mix the languages, it will be more fun and enjoyable. We will enjoy the subject.’ My observations of learners as they worked together supported their accounts of how

**Table 3.** Examples of affective-social functions carried out through translanguaging.

Functions	Example of learners’ translanguaging interactions
Joking with peers/expressing amusement at peers’ ideas’	Suren: I know, அறிவு கெட்டவளுக்கு watch செய்யலாம் (I know, we can make a watch for people who don’t know anything) Pravin: பரீட்சைக்குத் தேவை வரும் (We’ll need it for our exam) <everyone laughs>
Correcting peers’ actions/resolving conflict	Tanuja: சண்டை வேண்டாம், okay? (No fighting, okay?) <when two group members begin to argue>
Encouraging group effort/collaboration among group members	Tanuja: ஒரு group உ ஒன்னா செய்யனும் (We should do it together as a group)
Complimenting peers for their work/drawing peers’ attention to it	Thiva: Tanuja அழகா எழுதுதே (Tanuja is writing beautifully)
Expressing one’s emotions/empathising with peers	Tanuja: எனக்கு எரிச்சலா இருக்கு (I feel frustrated) Divya: ஏன் எரிச்சலா இருக்கு? (Why do you feel frustrated?)
Asking for peers’ help/offering to help peers	Nareesh: உங்ககிட்ட நான் help பன்னட்டா? (Shall I help you?)

translanguaging helped them build more cohesive groups and resolve conflict among group members.

Additionally, learners from groups which used translanguaging very widely conveyed during their interviews that the group work was not controlled or led by any one individual. Instead, everyone participated and led the group equally, which created greater rapport among group members. As Tilly stated enthusiastically, 'All of us must lead, everybody can participate.' The following excerpt presents an example of the collaborative participation among the learners in one of the small groups. Prior to the interaction below, the progress of the group was slow as learners seemed hesitant to suggest any ideas. It was only after Kishen encouraged Tanuja to make her suggestion in Tamil that she agreed to take on a role in the task. This led to Risha suggesting that each group member could work on one sentence each, and all of them then began participating actively in the collaboration using translanguaging. Here, the use of translanguaging was essential for creating positive interdependence, equal participation, and individual accountability, all components of successful collaborative learning (L. Lin, 2015):

- Tanuja: நீ எழுது (You write it)  
 Kishen: பரவாயில்லை you write (Never mind, you write)  
 Tanuja: எனக்கு idea வரவில்லை (I don't have an idea)  
 Kishen: உன்னுடைய வாக்கியம் சொல், நான் Englishலியே சொல்லுவேன் (say your sentence in Tamil, I'll say it in English) <as Tanuja seems hesitant to express her idea in English>  
 Kishen: நீ தமிழிலியே idea சொல், நான் translate பன்னவேன் (Tell me your idea in Tamil, I'll translate it)  
 Tanuja: Okay நான் ஒன்னு செய்வேன் (Okay, I'll do one)  
 Risha: சரி எல்லாரொம் ஒன்னு ஒன்னு செய்யலாம் (Okay, we can each work on one)

Learners also explained that they used Tamil instead of English whenever they wanted to joke around in their groups. For example, Elango explained that 'When we talk in Tamil, funny. Joke in English won't be funny, like one word in English won't be funny, but if you tell it in Tamil, will be funny.' Interestingly, I observed that although Ms. Shalini encouraged her students to speak in English only, she would very translanguage herself to add humour to her lessons and liven the classroom atmosphere whenever she sensed that learners were disengaged. Ms. Shalini explained that she used Tamil to make jokes because 'In Tamil, certain jokes are very sharp so it will go to them. In English, it's very surface only, but the meaning is very deep in Tamil.' This finding resembles the results of Rosiers et al.'s (2018) study which showed that in the context of a school with a policy that did not allow learners to use other languages in the classroom, teachers switched from the target language to learners' home language for socio-emotional purposes such as talking more informally to learners about their shared experiences.

### ***Drawing on knowledge and making connections across languages***

The analysis of learners' interactions also suggested that translanguaging helped them to accomplish certain cognitive-conceptual functions, which are functions that focused on understanding the concepts and content related to the task, and the exchange of information and ideas (Rajendram, 2019). Examples of these functions are provided in Table 4.

Accordingly, a significant theme that arose in the interviews relates to the role of translanguaging in helping learners to draw on their knowledge and make connections across

**Table 4.** Examples of cognitive-conceptual functions carried out through translanguaging.

Functions	Example of learners' translanguaging interactions
Asking for/providing factual information related to the topic	Harini: Water pollution எப்படி வரும்? (How does water pollution happen?) Tanushri: Water pollution happens when the rubbish goes into the water
Providing/drawing peers' attention to information in books/texts/other materials	Bavani: Here expiry date, here is <i>maklumat pemakanan</i> (Here's the expiry date, here's the nutritional information) <pointing out parts of a real food label to her peer during an activity where they have to create their own food label
Making a suggestion related to the content of the task'	Nisha: Okay, we take a phone, ஒரு ஜாமான் இப்ப தெரியலனா, அந்த ஜாமான் ஒரு இடம் GPS-ல் மட்டும் கண்டுபிடிக்கலாம் (Okay, we take a phone, if we don't know where an object is, we can use the GPS to find it) <inventing a new gadget based on an existing one>
Demonstrating to peers how to answer a question/solve a problem	Vetri: Three thousand போட்டு, thousand minus பன்னு, அப்போதான் balance தெரியும் (Write three thousand, then subtract a thousand, that's how you will know the balance) <while showing his peer how to do a math calculation>
Discussing cause and effect relationships/pros and cons of an idea/ action	Amira: Rule இல்லனா, accident நடக்குது (If there are no rules, accidents will happen)
Working out/explaining the answer to a question/solution to a problem	Vijay: Bank-ல் முப்பது வெள்ளி போட்டேன், parents fifty வெள்ளி கொடுத்தேன, dictionary எப்படி வாங்க முடியும்? (If I put thirty dollars in the bank, give fifty dollars to my parents, how can I buy the dictionary, too?) <during an activity requiring learners to create a budget with a hypothetical allowance of \$100> Amira: Dictionary இருவது வெள்ளி குறைவா இருந்தால் வாங்க முடியும் (If the dictionary is less than twenty dollars, you can buy it)

the different named languages or language practices in their repertoire. Several learners talked about the reciprocal relationship between the languages and suggested that translanguaging helped them to think about concepts and ideas in one language and express them in another, thereby allowing them to draw on knowledge from a unitary language repertoire. Learners such as Riya explained that they always used a mix of Tamil and English because it helped them to first think through and write down ideas in Tamil, and then work together to translate their ideas into English, 'First we think and talk in Tamil, then reply in English.' The process of transferring ideas across the languages in their repertoire seemed to improve learners' understanding of the content in all three languages (Malay, English, Tamil). As Keshma emphasised, '... because we use three language also, we can learn all three'.

Although the learners in this class were not able to use translanguaging in their writing as their final written work needed to be submitted in English, they demonstrated agency in seeking out information from multilingual books, texts, and other materials, and this helped them to gain new knowledge from sources in different languages and apply it to their English language tasks. For example, learners searched for and watched multilingual videos or videos in English with subtitles in English or Malay (see Figure 1) in order to get information in Tamil or Malay on a new topic on the environment, and they applied that knowledge in their English writing tasks. They also brought in bilingual food labels from home (see Figure 2) and referred to the information on the labels to help them understand and use terms such as *energy*, *nutrition*, *protein*, *carbohydrate* and *ingredients* correctly. This corroborates the results of studies which suggest that translanguaging helps learners to develop a fuller understanding of subjects such as mathematics and



**Figure 1.** Learners watching multilingual videos online to get information on a new topic.



**Figure 2.** Examples of bilingual food labels.

science because it allows learners to interweave their linguistic and cultural resources with cross-disciplinary content (e.g. Karlsson et al., 2018; Lewis et al., 2012).

***Asserting cultural identity and preserving culture***

Several of the linguistic-discursive, affective-social and cognitive-conceptual functions emerging from the SCDA of learners’ translanguaging interactions demonstrated that they associated their use of other languages, particularly their use of Tamil, with their Malaysian-Indian identity, cultural knowledge and traditions. Examples of these functions are captured in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Examples of learners' translinguaging interactions related to culture.

Functions	Example of learners' translinguaging interactions
Talking about one's personal life/ interests/ events not related to the task	Lingkam: பன்னிரண்டாம் மாசம் India போறேன். அங்கே temple போறேன் (I'm going to India in December. I'm going to a temple there.)
Getting ideas and information for the task from local/popular culture	Harini: We can do our presentation like in the பேசு தமிழா பேசு TV show (We can do our presentation like in the Speak, Tamilian, Speak TV show < a popular Tamil language television show in Malaysia>)
Suggesting a topic/idea for the group to work on	Tarun: நம்ம ஒரு story போடுவோம் லா, நம்ம வாழ்க்கை நடந்தது போடுவோம் (Let's create a story, let's write about what happened in our lives) <while creating a script for a drama> Bavani: Ah! தீபாவளி பற்றி பேசுவோமா? (Ah! Shall we talk about Diwali?)
Looking for answers/ideas/information in books/texts/other materials	Riya: இந்த book பாய்க்கலாம் (We can use this book) <flipping through the trilingual Hindu prayer book in Figure 3 to get information for a writing task on the topic of family traditions>

Despite the teacher's constant reminders for learners to use only English during their group work, learners still used Tamil widely while working together. To justify their use of Tamil, many learners asserted during their interviews that 'I'm a Tamilian,' and referred to Tamil recurrently as their 'mother tongue', 'mother language', and 'own language'. Tanisha related during her interview that although she had to speak in Tamil very quietly so that her teacher would not overhear her, it made her feel 'happy, because Tamil is our mother language'. Like Tanisha, Silvia emphasised that 'Tamil is important because Tamil is mother tongue ... mother tongue means my grandmother, mother, father, grandfather all speak Tamil.' The theme of Tamil being a generational language was present in other learners' interview responses as well. Meena talked about Tamil being 'our generation language' and Tilly emphasised that 'Tamil is my பரம்பரை மொழி' (Tamil is my ancestral language). Learners also connected speaking in Tamil with preserving their culture. For example, Meena explained that 'Then only we can bring our culture [into the classroom], then only we won't forget our culture, so I think Tamil is important.'

In my classroom observations, I observed that despite the English-only policy she usually implemented, Ms. Shalini would speak in Tamil or Malay herself whenever she wanted to make references to aspects of Indian or Malaysian culture, for example, to talk about Hindu beliefs, Indian festivals, or popular Malaysian food. Ms. Shalini also used age-old Tamil proverbs when she wished to convey cultural knowledge and values, or give advice to her students. Her rationale for using Tamil for these purposes was as follows:

Some Tamil proverbs, in Tamil they will understand them better. I don't need to explain too much because they've already learned this in Tamil, so they can keep it in their head, they will learn it more. They feel it more, because it's their mother tongue.

A limitation of the study is that it did not systematically investigate learners' language use in domains other than their oral language. Future studies could explore the potential benefits of translinguaging in other areas such as writing, as well as the types of activities and materials that create affordances for translinguaging. The findings reported in the broader study from which this paper is drawn (Rajendram, 2019) suggest that in addition

to translanguaging verbally, learners also used non-verbal acts such as pointing, gesturing and nodding to affirm their peers' use of translanguaging and to support one another's learning. Two examples of this are seen in the sub-section on *Supporting one another's language learning*, where learners used a combination of verbal and non-verbal acts (e.g. demonstrating the meaning of the words 'bracelet' and 'necklace' through gestures). However, it was beyond the scope of this study to document and analyse all of the multimodal semiotic systems that were included in learners' translanguaging repertoire. There is a call for studies that expand translanguaging beyond a strictly linguistic repertoire, and explore how learners use their multilingual, multimodal, multisemiotic and multisensory resources in their learning (García et al., 2017; Li Wei & Ho, 2018). Thus, a potential area for research on translanguaging relates to how multilingual learners combine features of their verbal language with non-verbal communication, such as gestures, touch, visual cues, objects and sounds when interacting with others as part of a holistic and integrated communicative repertoire.

### **Constraints to learners' use of translanguaging in the classroom**

Although most learners resisted the classroom English-only policy by using translanguaging agentively during their small group collaborative interactions, the quantitative SCDA analysis of their interactions for the broader study (Rajendram, 2019) revealed that they did not use all the named languages in their repertoire (Tamil, English, Malay) equally, although they had similar levels of proficiency in all three languages. In addition, there were certain small groups in which translanguaging was used less frequently overall. The interviews with the learners provided me with the opportunity to ask them about this, and their responses revealed that there were factors constraining their use of translanguaging, including the teachers' and peers' classroom language policies and practices, parental discourses about linguistic, economic, and cultural capital, and societal discourses on ethnicity, nationality, and marginalisation.



**Figure 3.** Trilingual (English, Malay, Tamil) Hindu prayer book used by learners in class.



***Teacher's and peers' classroom language policies and practices***

Ms. Shalini's language policy and practices were factors that constrained several learners' language choices as well as the opportunities to translanguage that were afforded in some groups. During an interview with Ms. Shalini, she explained that her intention for requiring learners to speak only in English was to improve their English language proficiency. Ms. Shalini also felt pressured to use English-only instruction in her class because of the expectations placed upon her by district- and board- level administrators. Ms. Shalini related that in several mandated professional development courses she had attended, teachers were shown videos of 'native speakers' and encouraged to try to speak the same way while teaching. Ms. Shalini acknowledged that she did not feel very confident about her own English language abilities, and she believed that by requiring her students to speak in English, she could help them build up the confidence that she felt she herself lacked.

While most learners decided to translanguage agentively despite Ms. Shalini's constant reminders for them to 'use English only' or 'don't speak in Tamil', several learners complied with her English-only policy because they felt that it was meant for their own good. For example, Yashwin explained that 'Teacher scold us for speak in Tamil because we must know how to speak English fluently, that's why.' Yashwin and a few other learners also took it upon themselves to enforce Ms. Shalini's English-only policy in the small groups they were in. These learners tended to dominate discussions and make most of the decisions regarding the task, thereby resulting in a non-collaborative atmosphere. In these groups, there was far less social talk among group members, and the tone of conversation was more serious and matter-of-fact. When there were misunderstandings between group members, they were often resolved in an inequitable manner as the enforcer of the English-only policy would typically have the final say in the conversation. The following excerpt demonstrates how the policing of language by one learner led to individualistic rather than joint decision-making in the group.

- Tina: Four four வா? (Is it four < in a group>?)  
 Sarala: Eh அப்படி நம்ப நான்கு பேர் (So that means the four of us are together)  
 Elango: எனக்கு ஒரு chance கொடு lah, to write (Please give me a chance to write)  
 Kamini: Speak in English!  
 Sarala: Okay you pick lah < asking Kamini to pick who gets to write the group's answers>  
 Tina: Who's the leader of group?  
 Kamini: Me of course < no one disagrees with her, so Kamini proceeds to decide on the topic and does most of the writing herself>

In the example above, Kamini restricted her peers' language use by directing them to speak in English when they were discussing their group roles, and she also went on to claim the position of leadership and make all the decisions pertaining the task. This seemed to be a recurring pattern in groups where one learner would regulate the language use of their peers. Learners whose language use was restricted in this way expressed frustration at not being able to express their ideas and contribute to the group. Meena voiced her dissatisfaction that 'If we say we want to share, Suren don't let us because he only must tell all the creativity in English, his idea only must use for the group work. That's what I don't like. He didn't take our idea.' When I asked learners what the atmosphere was like in groups with an English-only policy, Guna reported that, 'Some people won't talk much < because of the policy>, but they have talent.'

While some learners tried to use English as much as they could to comply with Ms. Shalini's English-only policy, other learners admitted that speaking in Tamil came naturally to them. For Silvia, it was inevitable to use Tamil because it was the language she felt most comfortable in, 'Teacher says like that to improve our English, but sometimes we speak in English, and unfortunately the Tamil words will come. We feel more comfortable in talking Tamil.' Although some learners demonstrated their creativity in drawing on the affordances of translanguaging, for example by using bilingual dictionaries that were hidden under their desks (see [Figure 4](#)), they confessed that having to use Tamil discreetly made them feel like they were doing something wrong and prevented them from demonstrating the full extent of their knowledge. Voicing her opinion on her teacher's English-only policy, Kamini contended that it masked the students' true abilities, 'I feel sad ... Every student was very clever. We have lot of talents, but they all [teachers] don't know our talent.'

### ***Parental discourses about linguistic, economic, and cultural capital***

Another factor that constrained some learners' use of translanguaging was their parents' discourses regarding the status and importance of different languages. The socioeconomic and educational background of the parents seemed to correlate with their attitudes towards languages, and the discourses about language that permeated their homes. Most learners reported during the interviews that their parents usually spoke to them in English and placed a greater emphasis on English than on Tamil or Malay because of the linguistic, economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1993) associated with it. Several learners whose parents held senior management jobs recalled their parents' advice to them that proficiency in English would be their best pathway to a good career. According to Prashant, his parents constantly remind him that 'When we go to work, they'll interview us in English, so it's an important subject. If we don't know English, they won't let us work there. Every company uses English, they won't use Tamil, so I talk in English.'



**Figure 4.** A learner using a bilingual dictionary discreetly.

Another common theme in learners' accounts of their parental discourses was that of English being the only language that would give them 'international' experiences such as being able to work and live abroad. Yashwin stated during his interview that his father who frequently travelled abroad for work encouraged him to pay special attention to English because of its international standing compared to Tamil and Malay, 'My father said Tamil means you can speak with all the Tamilians, and then Malay means we can speak whole of Malaysia, but English means we can speak international.' The same belief about English was expressed by Prashant's parents who also travelled extensively for work:

My parents will talk in English, so I'll talk more in English, because if you want to become an international player or talker language, you must know English. If you talk another language, we don't know nothing. America all don't know Tamil. America, London all know English only, so we'll talk English.

Learners seemed to internalise their parents' views about English, and the expectations placed upon them to speak in English in order to become more 'American' or Westernised:

With my mother I speak in English. She wants me to go to foreign when I grow up so she wants me to talk like American. She always train me to talk like American. She will tell me to talk in English because we can speak to people from other countries, we can talk with Americans English ... I want to marry an American. (Kamini)

Although parental discourses played a significant role in influencing the attitudes of learners towards English, some learners continued to experience an internal conflict when it came to using Tamil and Malay due to the competing discourses around them. For example, while Kamini felt the need to speak more English so that she could fulfil her mother's expectations of her, she acknowledged that she also did not want to forget Tamil as it was an important part of her culture. Thus, she confessed feeling conflicted about her language choices in the classroom, 'I know she [my mother] wants me to talk English and improve, but I'll be tension like that.' Kamini's realisation about the importance of Tamil stemmed from her close relationship with her grandmother who only spoke to her in Malay and Tamil, 'My grandmother speaks in two languages, Bahasa Melayu [Malay language] and Tamil. She wants me to talk in Bahasa Melayu and Tamil because then only I won't forget those languages.' Accordingly, Kamini occasionally used Malay and Tamil during her interactions with her group members.

### ***Societal discourses on ethnicity, nationality, and marginalisation***

Norany and Shuki (n.d.) suggest that the implication of using a translanguaging approach in Malaysian education is that 'Bahasa Malaysia [Malay] and English will have equal prominent status' (p. 1). However, the findings of this research suggest that learners did not perceive or use all the languages in their translanguaging repertoire equally (Li Wei & Ho, 2018), particularly when it came to Malay. The SCDA of learners' interactions revealed that while they used Tamil very widely while translanguaging, they used Malay very infrequently, despite being proficient in both languages. As evidence of this, the statistical analyses that were conducted on the transcripts of learners' small group interactions as part of the larger study (Rajendram, 2019) showed that 64.1% of learners' translanguaging

constellations included Tamil, whereas only 3.2% of their translanguaging constellations included Malay. Learners' interview responses suggested that this infrequent use of Malay was tied to societal discourses around ethnicity and nationality, and their feelings of being marginalised as a minority ethnic group.

During British colonial rule in Malaysia, Malaysians were demarcated into socio-economic roles by language, race and ethnicity. The colonial legacy of the British has continued to cause divisions among Malaysians, whereby all Malaysians are still required to identify with a single race and ethnicity, despite their linguistic and cultural diversity. Language policies in Malaysia have also historically been used to strengthen the position of the Malay language in the spirit of post-independence nation-building. The designation of Malay as the official language of Malaysia and the official medium of instruction in national primary schools resulted in the relegation of Tamil-medium schools to 'national-type' primary schools which do not have the same status or funding as their Malay-medium counterparts (Ibrahim, 2018). Furthermore, Tamil-medium schools are not allowed to function at the secondary or tertiary level, which has resulted in the Tamil language and Tamil speakers being sidelined in educational contexts. Various economic policies such as the New Economic Policy (NEP) implemented in 1970 to provide affirmative action to the Malays have also inadvertently legitimised class discrepancies and created an unequal distribution of wealth and status between the ethnic groups in Malaysia (Kenayathulla, 2015), and weakened the socioeconomic and political position of Malaysian Indians. This has put race relations between the Malays and Indians on edge, triggering riots, racially charged incidents, and ethnic tensions (Sipalan, 2018). For example, at the time of the study, ethnic relations had been strained by the use of the term *pendatang* (foreign comer) by nationalist groups as a pejorative term to describe Malaysian-born Chinese and Indians (e.g. M. M. Lin, 2015), and by calls for Malaysian Chinese and Indians to *balik Cina* (go back to China) and *balik India* (go back to India) (e.g. Singh, 2013).

When asked during the interviews how they felt about learning Malay, most learners conceded that they needed to do well in Malay regardless of how they felt because it was their only way of gaining access to secondary and higher education, 'We must pass BM [Malay] so we can go to university' (Naveen). They also recognised the value of Malay for getting employment more easily, especially civil service jobs which require proficiency in Malay. Although learners acknowledged the importance of Malay and could speak in Malay proficiently, their interview responses suggested that they did not consider Malay to be their own language. For example, while talking about her reasons for not using much Malay, Kamini referred to Malaysia as 'their [Malays'] country' and Malay as 'their language', thereby distancing herself from the language. Other learners, despite doing well in their Malay classes, felt that they would never be able to speak in 'normal Malay' because they were not Malays. Pravin admitted that he did not use much Malay both in and outside school because he was afraid that he would be teased and looked down upon if he did not speak Malay the same way the Malays did, 'I don't like Malay because if you tell the wrong word to the Malay people, they will bully us, tease us like that. If we say something wrong, they will keep in their heart, "These Tamil people don't know how to speak in Malay" like that.'

The concerns voiced by learners echoed sentiments that were prevalent in the media at the time of the study regarding the fraught relations between the various ethnic groups

in Malaysia. These findings highlight the importance of recognising that although translanguageing should ideally involve the use of learners' linguistic repertoire without regard to individual named languages, this 'does not mean that the learner is not aware of the political connotations or the structural constraints of specific named languages' (Li Wei & Ho, 2018, p. 35). Learners in this study saw themselves as racialised others in relation to their Malay counterparts because of the raciolinguistic discourses (Rosa & Flores, 2017) surrounding them, and this restricted the use of their whole translanguageing repertoire. Thus, teachers need to be critically aware of the complexities of learners' language choices and the political and social constraints to translanguageing, so that they can work with learners to mobilise *all* their language practices despite those constraints.

## Discussion

The goal of a translanguageing pedagogy should be to create sustainable language practices which thrive in functional relationships with other speakers (Otheguy et al., 2015). The findings of this research have shown that collaborative learning provides a supportive space for learners' language practices to thrive relationally through translanguageing. In small groups where multiple languages were used copiously by all group members, learners felt empowered to exercise their agency in translanguageing for the purposes of supporting one another's language learning, building rapport, resolving conflict, asserting their culture and identity, and drawing on their knowledge and abilities across the named languages in their repertoire. In contrast, in groups where learners' use of translanguageing was constrained, there were limits in the type of interactions between learners, and the affordances of these interactions for individual and collective learning. Compared to the groups where there was a joint translanguageing space, learners in groups where an English-only policy was enforced by a peer could not as easily make use of their cognitive, linguistic and semiotic resources in the context of their collaborative tasks. Although the teacher's English-only classroom language policy influenced the language practices of a few learners who policed the language use of their peers, most learners demonstrated their agency in re-shaping their social context through their use of translanguageing (Pacheco, 2016). These learners resisted the English-only policy of their teacher and peers, found creative ways to access multilingual materials, and used their multilingual repertoire in inventive and flexible ways to fulfil a wide range of functions that enhanced their individual as well as collective learning. This supports the findings of other research (e.g. García et al., 2011; Henderson & Palmer, 2015; Li Wei, 2011) which has demonstrated the agentive ways that students create translanguageing spaces for themselves despite their classroom policies or dominant monoglossic norms.

Consistent with the unitary perspective of translanguageing, this research demonstrated that throughout their interactions, learners engaged in a continuous process of selecting and mixing different features of the three named languages in their repertoire, and 'soft assembling' these features in novel ways to suit the immediate task (García & Leiva, 2014). Examples of these were when they combined words in English and Tamil while adhering to the morphological rules of English (e.g. 'television பாரீக்கிறாணிங்' – watching television), changed the pronunciation of the word 'orange' in English so that it had the same meaning as 'five' in Tamil (ஐந்து) while writing a riddle, and creating varieties of what they called 'Tanglish' and 'Manglish' through their use of different

translanguaging constellations. However, this research also suggested that there were external factors that restricted and created divisions between the named languages in their repertoire. Thus, while it is imperative that educators acknowledge and embrace the various benefits of learners' agentive translanguaging, educators need to also be critically aware of the constraints to learners' translanguaging. Although translanguaging theory aims to challenge and deconstruct the demarcation and hierarchy of named languages in society (García, 2019; Otheguy et al., 2015), in reality, multilingual learners may not use all the named languages in their repertoire equally in all situations, or to an equal level (Li Wei & Ho, 2018).

This research revealed that there were factors which dissuaded learners at times from using all of their named languages during their collaborative interactions in the classroom. Learners' sociocultural and political context had a significant impact on their attitudes towards translanguaging and their beliefs about languages, identity and race. Although learners acknowledged and saw evidence of the numerous benefits of translanguaging for their learning, their beliefs about the relative importance of each language were influenced by discourses around the linguistic, socioeconomic and cultural capital of English (Bourdieu, 1993). Like their parents, many learners believed that proficiency in English would provide them with greater educational access, social advantage, and economic mobility. Some learners reproduced these ideologies in both subtle and explicit ways by enforcing an English-only policy during their interactions with their peers, policing the language use of their peers, or choosing to use more English than other languages in their own speech.

Learners' language choices were also shaped by discourses of ethnicity and nationality, and the political and ethnic tensions surrounding them. Learners took up and responded to their parents' discourses on the linguistic capital of English, and the political and racial discourses tying language to ethnic tensions and marginalisation by foregrounding certain languages in their language repertoire and eschewing others. This points to the complex intersections between language, ethnicity, power and ideology, and provides evidence that language use can never occur in a vacuum as it is deeply embedded within a sociocultural milieu (Walqui, 2006). Thus, rather than assuming that translanguaging will look and function the same across various social, cultural and political contexts, translanguaging researchers need to carefully consider the distinctive features, affordances and constraints of translanguaging in any given context.

### **Implications for policy and practice**

The findings of this study hold important implications for educational policy and practice. If the aim of a translanguaging pedagogy is to empower learners to access *all* their language resources, it is not enough just to provide a translanguaging space for learners to use their home languages and develop their language expertise on their own (García & Lin, 2016; Turner & Lin, 2020). Teachers need to help students to 'learn to do translanguaging' (García & Lin, 2016, p. 132) so that their translanguaging repertoire expands to include *all* their language practices and semiotic resources. Rather than resisting learners' agentive use of translanguaging, teachers can use pedagogical scaffolding to help learners to harness the full affordances of their translanguaging repertoires. This requires both teachers and learners to have a critical awareness of the factors that may act as

barriers to translanguaging, such as the historical, cultural, ideological, political and social factors influencing their language use, the official policies that give different status to different languages, and the unofficial and hidden policies both in and outside the classroom that shape their attitudes towards languages. Even when languages other than English are included in a policy or programme, the choice of languages may reflect dominant neoliberal ideological assumptions about which languages matter the most economically and socially (Bale, 2016). Teachers need to help learners interrogate and challenge these implicit or explicit biases about languages so that they are empowered to use their full translanguaging repertoire. Parents' tacit beliefs about language and their home language policies and practices may also influence the language use and ideologies of their children. Some parents equate English-only instruction to successful school participation (Daniel & Pacheco, 2016), and this could hinder their children from drawing on their home languages in the classroom. Parental engagement is essential to the effectiveness of a translanguaging pedagogy because learners need to be surrounded at home by discourses that are consistent with a translanguaging stance. Therefore, teachers should build classroom-home partnerships, for example by inviting parents and guardians into the classroom to talk about their languages and cultures, read multilingual books to learners, or even conduct language learning activities. This would be particularly helpful in classrooms where teachers do not share the same languages as their learners.

It is important to recognise that the macro, meso- and micro-level language policies in many English language teaching contexts may present a barrier to a translanguaging pedagogy by promoting English at the expense of other languages, creating a separation and hierarchy of languages in different social and educational spheres, or by placing restrictions on teachers and learners through medium-of-instruction language policies. The responsibility for implementing instructional strategies to meet the needs of multilingual learners should not be left to individual teachers; explicit policies are needed at the school, district and provincial levels to support the use of learners' home languages in the classroom (Stille et al., 2016). Educational policymakers must consider how classifying students into the social and political categories of language, race, and ethnicity contradict the translanguaging approach to language education. They need to advocate for equitable policies that promote multilingualism as a norm, and create official structures and resources within the education system for a translanguaging pedagogy.

Wiley and García (2016) recommend that adopting a translanguaging lens in language policy and planning would require three changes: (i) conceptualising language as the ability of a speaker to deploy their entire linguistic repertoire without adherence to socially and politically defined language boundaries, (ii) seeing the learning of an additional language as a continuous rather than linear process, and (iii) replacing the notion that only the target language should be used in instruction with teaching practices that leverage learners' entire linguistic repertoire. This study suggests that it may not be possible for learners to translanguage without adherence to the social and political constructs of named languages due to the various institutional and ideological constraints discussed in the paper. Thus, the enactment of a translanguaging lens in language policy and planning, as recommended by Wiley and García (2016) above, would require changes to official policies that stratify educational institutions, and the students in it, into categories based on named languages.

At the micro-level of the classroom, teachers as policymakers (Menken & García, 2010) can 'contest or temper those top-down policy mandates by paying more attention to fluid, multilingual, oral, contextualized practices at the local level' (Hornberger & Link, 2012, p. 245). This study has shown the important role that students can play in moving language policies from the ground up through their agentive use of translanguaging (O. García, personal communication, July 17, 2019). Although learners are certainly capable of using translanguaging independently and collaboratively, they can benefit from the teacher's strategic use of pedagogical translanguaging. After seeing evidence of the cognitive, conceptual, linguistic, discursive, social, affective, planning and organisational affordances of translanguaging from the broader research associated with this study (Rajendram, 2019), Ms. Shalini began moving away from her English-only policy and became more open to using a translanguaging approach that was consistent with how her students were using translanguaging with their peers. Thus, I recommend that an effective translanguaging pedagogy should be a two-way, dynamic and participatory process that is both teacher- and learner- directed. While teachers should be intentional in designing strategic lessons based on the principles of translanguaging, these should be informed by and responsive to the ways that learners naturally and spontaneously use their translanguaging repertoires (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017). Teachers need to be flexible and open to making shifts to their lessons based on the existing language practices of their learners. Their pedagogical scaffolding should focus on teaching learners how to harness the full affordances of their linguistic repertoires in order to deepen their understanding and extend their knowledge. By observing learners' natural translanguaging practices, teachers can plan pedagogical activities to make learners more critically aware of their language practices and ideologies, and help them develop the metalinguistic and metacognitive ability to use their entire translanguaging repertoires agentively across a wide range of learning activities and contexts.

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