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Translanguaging as a Multilingual Practice: Supporting Young Learners' Language Development in Digital EFL Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Translanguaging has received considerable scholarly attention as a pedagogical approach that allows learners to use their entire linguistic repertoire rather than restricting them to a single target language. Despite this expanding interest, its implementation in digital English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, particularly with young learners, remains largely unexplored. Since most of the literature currently published concentrates on formal secondary and tertiary contexts, there is still a substantial knowledge gap regarding how translanguaging as a multilingual method supports young learners to improve their language development in technology-mediated learning settings. This study aims to examine how translanguaging practices have been discussed in relation to young learners' language development in digital EFL classroom settings. Adopting a qualitative literature review design, the study analyzes previous scholarly publications focusing on translanguaging, multilingual practices, and digital language learning among young learners. Thematic analysis is used to identify recurring patterns, perspectives, and pedagogical implications related to multilingual interaction and language development in digital learning environments. The findings demonstrate that translanguaging, when purposefully integrated into digital EFL instruction, can improve vocabulary acquisition, strengthen learners' communicative confidence, and enhance overall linguistic engagement in the digital learning context.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Digital technology's explosive growth has significantly transformed how English is taught across every educational level, including early childhood education. In today's educational landscape, English language instruction is increasingly incorporating interactive videos, instructional apps, online learning platforms, and other digital media to enhance teaching and learning activities. Technology-mediated classrooms have gradually replaced learning environments that were traditionally focused on in-person contact. Nevertheless, such conditions also present particular challenges, especially for

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young learners who are still in the early stages of linguistic and cognitive development (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2021).

In many EFL contexts, English-only instruction is still commonly considered the most effective teaching approach. As a result, learners' native tongue is frequently seen as a barrier to learning English. In fact, in order to comprehend classroom instructions, terminology, and learning concepts offered throughout the session, young learners often need extra linguistic support. Teaching language to young learners should take into account their cognitive and emotional states, including providing opportunities for them to express themselves through the linguistic resources they possess (Ariyan, 2022). Therefore, more flexible and responsive pedagogical approaches are needed to address learners' linguistic needs in digital EFL classrooms (Faudi et al., 2023).

Translanguaging is one method that has attracted increasing scholarly attention in language education. According to García and Wei (2018), translanguaging allows students to generate meaning and facilitate communication by flexibly using their whole linguistic repertoire. This method views languages as interconnected linguistic resources that work together during the learning process rather than as separate systems. Fang, Zhang, and Sah (2022) further emphasize that translanguaging represents a shift toward more multilingual and inclusive language education, where learners' linguistic identities are recognized as valuable assets in the classroom.

Previous studies have demonstrated that translanguaging can positively contribute to English language learning. The use of translanguaging has been found to support learners' comprehension, increase classroom participation, and facilitate meaning-making processes in multilingual learning contexts. Machimana and Genis (2024) found that translanguaging helps multilingual learners develop understanding and express their identities through the flexible use of diverse linguistic resources. In addition, Tai and Li Wei (2021) explain that translanguaging practices in digital learning environments can support learner interaction and communication through the integration of language, visual elements, and other multimodal resources.

Despite the rising quantity of research on translanguaging in language teaching, the majority of studies continue to focus on secondary and higher education settings. Huang and Chalmers (2023), through their systematic review, revealed that young learners remain underrepresented in translanguaging research compared to other educational levels. In addition, many previous studies have mostly examined translanguaging in face-to-face learning environments, while research investigating its implementation in digital EFL classrooms is still relatively limited.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to explore how translanguaging supports young learners' language development in digital EFL classrooms. Through a review of previous studies, this research examines the role of translanguaging in supporting comprehension, classroom participation, and multilingual interaction in technology-mediated language learning environments.

2. METHODS

This study was conducted through a qualitative literature review focusing on recent discussions of translanguaging practices among young learners in digital EFL classrooms. A literature review is considered appropriate because it aims to synthesize existing knowledge, identify recurring findings, and explore current discussions regarding

translanguaging practices in technology-mediated language learning environments. Literature reviews enable researchers to develop a comprehensive understanding of a particular topic by critically examining and integrating findings from existing research (Snyder, 2019).

2.1 Data Sources

The data for this study consist of academic publications discussing translanguaging, multilingual education, young learners, and English as a foreign language (EFL) learning in digital environments. Data sources included peer-reviewed journal articles and other scientific publications relevant to the research focus.

The literature was obtained through searches of various academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, ERIC, and other reputable scholarly sources. This review primarily focuses on publications published between 2021 and 2026, while several foundational studies were also included to strengthen the theoretical framework of the study.

2.2 Search Strategy

The search process utilized a combination of keywords related to the research focus, such as translanguaging, young learners, digital EFL classrooms, multilingual education, online language learning, technology-enhanced language learning, and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). In the initial stage, articles were selected based on their titles, abstracts, and keywords. The selected studies were then reviewed more deeply to identify findings and perspectives related to translanguaging in digital learning environments.

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Several criteria were established to guide the selection of studies. The publications had to discuss translanguaging in language education contexts, particularly those related to young learners, multilingual practices, or digital EFL learning environments. Only peer-reviewed publications written in English were included in this review.

Studies were excluded if they focused exclusively on higher education without discussing implications for younger learners, addressed bilingualism without reference to translanguaging practices, or lacked sufficient relevance to digital EFL learning environments. Publications that did not provide clear methodological or theoretical contributions were also excluded from the analysis.

2.4 Data Analysis

The selected literature was analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that facilitates the identification, organization, and interpretation of recurring patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher identified recurring themes and findings related to translanguaging practices, including language

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comprehension, classroom participation, learner engagement, multimodal interaction, and pedagogical implications in digital EFL classrooms.

The thematic analysis also enabled the researcher to compare similarities and differences across studies, identify common trends, and highlight areas that remain underexplored within the current body of research.

2.5 AI Tools

ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Gemini AI were used solely to assist in refining academic language and improving manuscript structure. These AI tools were not used for research design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of results, or the formulation of scientific conclusions. All scientific content, research findings, and the final version of the manuscript were independently reviewed, verified, and approved by the authors, who bear full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the published work.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Translanguaging as a Linguistic Resource for Young Learners

The studies reviewed consistently show that translanguaging plays a crucial role in supporting young learners in digital EFL classrooms. Translanguaging allows learners to draw on their entire linguistic repertoire to facilitate meaning-making, comprehension, and interaction in the classroom. In this context, learning does not force learners to always use English as the target language. García and Wei (2018) argue that learners do not use separate, limited language systems that switch predictably between L1 and L2. Instead, learners utilize an integrated multilingual repertoire, selecting cross-linguistic features according to their communicative needs (Krevelj, 2020).

Several studies indicate that translanguaging contributes positively to language comprehension. Tai and Li Wei (2021) found that young learners who were allowed to discuss English materials using their native language demonstrated better understanding of reading and listening tasks. Similarly, Kohnke and Moorhouse (2021) argue that translanguaging functions as a form of cognitive scaffolding, particularly in digital classrooms where learners often face limitations in interaction and contextual support. Through the use of their native language, learners can understand instructions well, negotiate meaning, and participate more confidently in classroom activities.

In addition to comprehension, translanguaging also increases learner participation and communicative confidence. Studies reviewed in this research show that multilingual interaction encourages young learners, especially those with lower English proficiency, to engage more actively in discussions and collaborative tasks. Machimana and Genis (2024) found that learners who were permitted to use their home language participated more frequently in explaining, questioning, and responding during classroom interaction. Young learners often rely on multilingual resources to support language comprehension (Makalela, 2015). These findings suggest that translanguaging creates a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for young EFL learners.

Overall, the reviewed studies collectively suggest that translanguaging supports young learners' language development by facilitating comprehension, encouraging communicative interaction, and enabling learners to construct meaning through both linguistic and multimodal resources. Although several reviewed studies were conducted

in general EFL classroom settings, their findings remain relevant to digital learning environments because translanguaging also serves as a supportive strategy for language development, learner interaction, and meaning-making across various educational contexts.

3.2 Translanguaging in Digital and Multimodal Learning Environments

The shift of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction to digital platforms, which expanded rapidly during the COVID-19 pandemic, has since led to a variety of hybrid and distance learning models across many education systems, creating new conditions for translanguaging practices. Kohnke and Moorhouse (2021) observed that learners in online classrooms often used chat features, breakout rooms, and peer discussions to negotiate meaning using both English and their home language. Digital platforms provide opportunities for multimodal translanguaging practices (Fang et al., 2022; Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2021). These practices helped learners maintain engagement and reduced anxiety when participating in digital learning tasks.

Multimodal digital tools have expanded the range of semiotic resources available to young EFL learners during translanguaging. García and Wei (2018) emphasize that translanguaging in digital contexts often occurs through the integration of multiple semiotic resources rather than through language alone. Young learners frequently combine visual and linguistic elements to support understanding and communication during online learning activities.

Multimodal translanguaging also contributes to meaning-making processes among young learners. Fang, Zhang, and Sah (2022) found that children often combined gestures, images, home-language explanations, and English expressions simultaneously when completing digital literacy activities. Such practices support learners who may not yet possess sufficient English vocabulary to express complex ideas fully in the target language. Therefore, multimodal translanguaging enables learners to bridge linguistic limitations while continuing to develop English proficiency. Despite these benefits, several studies also identify challenges in implementing translanguaging in digital EFL classrooms. Teachers may experience difficulty balancing home-language use with English learning objectives, particularly in contexts where English-only policies remain dominant. In addition, unequal access to digital technology may limit learners' opportunities to engage in multimodal interaction. These issues demonstrate that the effectiveness of translanguaging depends not only on learners' linguistic practices but also on institutional support and classroom design.

3.3 Challenges and Limitations of Translanguaging Implementation

The implementation of translanguaging pedagogy in EFL classrooms faces a range of institutional, ideological, and practical constraints that the reviewed literature addresses with varying degrees of depth. Teacher beliefs about language and learning represent the most consistently identified constraint. Machimana and Genis (2024) found that South African primary school teachers expressed ambivalence about translanguaging even when they observed its comprehension benefits, because they were uncertain whether permitting home language use would be perceived as a failure to maintain academic standards. This ambivalence reflects the continued dominance of monolingual

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ideology in teacher professional culture, even where multilingual practice is pedagogically defensible and empirically supported.

Teacher training programs in many national contexts do not prepare EFL teachers to work with learner linguistic repertoires in a principled way. Where translanguaging is addressed at all in pre-service or in-service teacher education, it is often framed as an emergency scaffold for struggling learners rather than as a systematic pedagogical resource for the whole class. This framing limits teachers' willingness to design translanguaging into mainstream EFL tasks and contributes to the inconsistency of translanguaging practice across classrooms in the same school (Wei & García, 2022). The gap between the theoretical sophistication of translanguaging research and its uptake in EFL teacher practice is substantial and represents a meaningful limitation on the extent to which the benefits documented in research translate to classroom outcomes at scale.

Institutional constraints compound individual teacher beliefs. In EFL settings where curriculum frameworks mandate English-only instruction, where examinations assess English production exclusively, and where school leadership treats home language use as evidence of poor program quality, teachers who understand translanguaging face structural pressures that research literature has not adequately addressed. Fang et al. (2022) acknowledge that many of the translanguaging practices they documented in Chinese primary schools occurred informally or semi-covertly, in peer interaction rather than teacher-led instruction, suggesting that the classroom evidence for translanguaging may underrepresent the degree to which it is already occurring outside formal pedagogical sanction.

A limitation of the existing research base that this review must acknowledge is the relative underrepresentation of young learners, particularly children aged six to ten, in translanguaging research. The majority of studies on translanguaging in EFL settings draw on data from secondary school or tertiary learners, and the body of evidence specifically focused on primary-level young EFL learners remains comparatively thin. The studies reviewed here, including Machimana and Genis (2024) and Kohnke and Moorhouse (2021), make important contributions to this gap, but the evidence base for translanguaging among children below age ten in digital EFL contexts remains underdeveloped. Research designs that can capture young learners' in-the-moment translanguaging processes, particularly in digital environments where interaction occurs across multiple platforms simultaneously, present methodological challenges that the field has not yet addressed comprehensively.

The digital dimension introduces additional research limitations. Most studies on translanguaging in digital EFL classrooms were conducted during the pandemic period, when learners and teachers were adapting rapidly to online instruction under conditions of considerable stress and resource constraint. The translanguaging practices documented in that context may reflect emergency accommodation rather than considered pedagogy, and longitudinal research tracing translanguaging practice in stable digital or hybrid EFL programs is still largely absent. Huang and Chalmers (2023) note this temporal limitation in their own study and call for research designs that track translanguaging across academic years to assess its cumulative effects on English development.

3.4 Pedagogical Implications for EFL Teachers

The evidence synthesized across these studies supports a set of pedagogical directions for EFL teachers working with young learners in digital classrooms, though these directions require adaptation to local contexts, learner age, curriculum requirements, and available technology. The most foundational shift is reconceptual: teachers need to move from treating the learner's home language as an obstacle to treating it as a resource that can be deliberately mobilized in service of English learning goals. This does not mean abandoning English as the primary instructional target. It means recognizing that young learners build toward English through their full linguistic repertoire, and that pedagogy which ignores or suppresses that repertoire is less effective than pedagogy that uses it (Wei & García, 2022).

In practical terms, EFL teachers can design tasks that create structured space for translanguaging at specific points in the learning sequence. Activities such as collaborative discussion, multilingual brainstorming, visual-based tasks, and digital storytelling may provide opportunities for meaningful language use while maintaining English learning goals. A writing task might permit learners to brainstorm or outline in their home language before composing in English, a strategy documented in several of the reviewed studies as supporting both content quality and English expression (Fang et al., 2022). It requires intentional sequencing that positions home language use as a bridge toward English engagement.

In digital EFL classrooms, teachers can leverage platform affordances to support structured translanguaging. Breakout rooms in video conferencing tools provide natural peer interaction spaces where home language use in discussion is both pedagogically appropriate and practically difficult to restrict. Assigning translanguaging-friendly tasks to these spaces, such as collaborative planning phases or peer explanation activities, allows teachers to use the platform structure rather than fight against it. Similarly, chat functions and asynchronous discussion boards can be designed to invite multilingual responses, where learners post in their home language and are asked to provide an English summary or translation as part of the task (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2021). This approach makes translanguaging visible and assessable rather than informal and covert.

Teacher professional development is essential in supporting the implementation of translanguaging pedagogy. Teachers need sufficient understanding of multilingual practices and digital learning strategies to create more inclusive and linguistically responsive EFL classrooms. Machimana and Genis (2024) found that teachers who had participated in structured professional development on multilingual pedagogy reported less ambivalence about home language use and were more willing to experiment with translanguaging task design. By adopting flexible language practices, educators can better support young learners' language development and engagement in contemporary digital learning contexts. Several scholars emphasize that translanguaging can create more inclusive multilingual classrooms (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022).

4. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the importance of translanguaging as a multilingual practice that supports the language development of early childhood learners in digital EFL classrooms. The reviewed studies indicate that translanguaging enables learners to draw

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upon their entire linguistic repertoire to facilitate comprehension, strengthen classroom participation, and boost confidence in communicating during English language learning activities. The use of students' first languages serves as a meaningful support that helps young learners navigate linguistic and cognitive challenges in digital learning environments.

These findings further suggest that digital and multimodal learning spaces offer broader opportunities for translanguaging practices through the integration of text, visual elements, audio, body language, and multilingual interactions. These multimodal resources enable young learners to construct meaning more effectively while remaining actively engaged in the learning process. At the same time, this study identifies several challenges related to teacher beliefs, institutional language policies, and unequal access to digital technology, which may affect the implementation of translanguaging pedagogy in an EFL context.

Overall, this study suggests that translanguaging should no longer be viewed solely as an informal classroom strategy or a temporary support mechanism, but rather as a validated pedagogical approach capable of creating a more inclusive, flexible, and linguistically responsive digital EFL classroom for young learners. Therefore, EFL teachers and educational institutions are encouraged to adopt more balanced language practices that recognize the educational value of students' multilingual resources in supporting meaningful language development in the digital age.

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