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Translanguaging as a Counter-Narrative in EFL Practice

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Abstract

While concerns over inequalities of multilingualism – a real phenomenon in multilingual countries due to the positive attitudes toward English as a global language – should not be overlooked, there are occasions especially in a classroom context where multilingual speakers defy the exclusive use of English, and instead creatively mix the English language with their own mother tongues, resulting in translingual Englishes (Dovchin, Sultana & Pennycook, 2016). In this paper, I will show that despite the strict imposition of the English-only-policy in schools in Indonesia – a source of inequalities in learning and teaching in the country – both students and teachers manage to surreptitiously translanguage their interactions using varied linguistic codes for achieving successful communication in a class interaction. I see their translingual Englishes as a strategic practice initiated by the teachers to not only open up a space for them to reveal their real multilingual identities, but also to legitimize these identities. Finally, in teacher-dominated classrooms where students often keep silent and are unwilling to initiate a conversation and to argue over a controversial issue, translanguaging is a pedagogically useful practice for encouraging students to negotiate tensions that might occur in their effort to grapple with their learning of English. Thus, a focus on the 'unequal' in the classroom also leads to uncovering translingual spaces where efficient teaching and learning are facilitated, and multilingual identities affirmed.

Keywords: *EFL, Multilingualism, Tanslanguaging*

INTRODUCTION

The flurry of interest in learning the English language in Indonesia is motivated primarily by its increasingly vital role as a medium of communication in the context of the economic integration of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. The ASEAN Road Map has made it clear that English will be the lingua franca of ASEAN (ASEAN Road Map, 2009). For example, The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Roadmap contains this action: "Support the citizens of Member States to become proficient in the English language, so that the citizens of the ASEAN region are able to communicate directly with one another and participate in the broader international community" (p. 69; see also statements on pages 68 and 111). Thus, proficiency in English has been deemed essential for the majority of Indonesian, so that they can interact with other members of ASEAN countries.

In fact, in anticipating the ASEAN integration, the Indonesian government initiated a move known as "international pilot project state-run schools" that obligatorily required schools to use English as a medium of interaction. The word "international" here means several things (see Sugiharto, 2015): 1) the use of the English language as the sole medium of instruction and interaction in schools, (2) the use of imported curricula and textbooks (mainly from the U.K., the US, and Australia), and (3) the assessment and certification system approved and legalized by the schools affiliating in these countries. Interestingly while the campaign of the English-Only policy nationwide through the "internationalisation" of the state-run schools has been inveighed and opposed by local educational practitioners and local education pundits via a legal action, the government has been adamant and insisted on endorsing the policy. Clearly, all of these indicate that Indonesia suffers from what Krashen (2006) dubs "English fever" – an overwhelming desire to learn and acquire English.

The orgy of the English fever in school contexts still lingers, further elevating the status of the English monolingual ideology, and denigrating the multilingual reality of the classroom. Yet, with the critical awareness of the scholars from the peripheries, intellectual moves to counter the dominance of this ideology is beginning to gain traction. One such a popular move is the unveiling of the notion of translanguaging in EFL contexts. A plethora of studies on translanguaging in pedagogy have affirmed that in classroom language practices where multilingual speakers are allowed a greater latitude to deploy their own linguistic repertoires,

communication is greatly facilitated, and communicative success is highly likely to be attained (see Garcia & Li, 2014).

This paper shows that while a great number of schools in big cities in Indonesia are avidly promoting the importance of English as a medium of school instruction and imposing the English-only policy, which can create linguistic inequities and hierarchies, there are occasions that happen in classrooms where teachers and students manage to surreptitiously translanguage their interactions using varied linguistic codes for achieving successful communication. This is a strategic practice initiated by the teachers to not only open up a space for them to reveal their real multilingual identities, but also to legitimize these identities.

Schools as Site for the Perpetuation of Linguistic Inequities

As I have argued elsewhere (Sugiharto, 2015), the dominance of English has seeped not only into governmental and cultural institutions (macro-societal), which create a power imbalance in issues related to education in general and English language education in particular, but also into schools (micro-societal), thus providing further evidence of linguicism in action (Phillipson 1992; Tupas, 2015) or of linguistic hegemony experienced by the periphery communities in their daily lives (Canagarajah 1999).

Phillipson (1992) identifies three important arguments which are used to legitimize English linguistic imperialism in the wider context of a hierarchy of languages. They encompass the English-intrinsic argument (i.e., the appeal of the nature of the English language) or what English *is*; the English-extrinsic argument (i.e., the use of both material and immaterial resources derived from the center countries whose language is English) or what English *has*; and the English-functional argument (i.e. the potential of English in dealing with modern and globalized world) or what English *does*. All of these three arguments are often used to justify and legitimize the promotion and relevance of English in educational policymaking in Indonesia.

Furthermore, these arguments have been powerful in enticing non-native speakers of English to passionately study the language and view it as offering more merits than demerits. A survey conducted by Djiwandono (2005) has evidently demonstrated that Indonesian parents showed no hesitance in sending their kids to schools that offer English lessons due to the above three arguments proposed by Phillipson. Interestingly, parents under study hardly perceived any advantages in learning English even at early ages.

While English is not a second language for the majority Indonesians (i.e., not used as an additional language in interaction among them), it is through schools that the process of domination and Western ideological reproduction (through language teaching) is most tangible. An instance of this is the strict imposition of the English-only policy in in- and out-class interaction between teachers and students, and between students themselves. There are cases where students are proscribed to speak in their mother tongues in school, and are poked fun by friends when responding in their home language(s) or mixing languages while conversing in English. Resorting to home language(s) while interacting in English may give the impression of not being linguistically proficient in English. In other words, language mixing is seen as linguistic deficit. Despite the fact that this instance is not as extreme as that occurring in one of the private schools in the Philippines where one student was transferred to another school for using Ilocano, one of the major languages in the country (Tupas, 2015), it indeed exemplifies the enactment of the "structure of linguistic dominance and discrimination" happening in everyday life (p. 118).

Linguistic Inequities in multilingual Indonesian society: Voices of Concern

The strong desire to acquire English through formal education has been considered causes of concern among language scholars in Indonesia. Since their early ages children have been sent to schools where English is the main medium of instruction. Parents are eager to do so in the hope that their offspring can acquire English proficiently at an early age. Even at home, they compel their children to converse in English rather than in the national language (i.e., Indonesian), let alone in their indigenous languages. Without a doubt, most Indonesian young children now, especially those from opulent families living in the urban areas, are proficient in English and use the language in their daily interactions with peers and parents.

Local language scholars, however, have expressed concerns over the surge of interests in acquiring English in the early years of formal schooling. They fear that the spread of English in urban, and even in rural areas, poses perilous threats to both the national language (i.e., Indonesian) and hundreds of indigenous languages. With the absence of a government policy requiring that local languages be used as a medium of instruction in schools and with the endangered status of the country's vernacular languages, members of the Indonesian Linguistic Society nationwide have made the following recommendation:

In the past decades, home languages have suffered from a loss of transmission to younger generations. Many youth are no longer able to speak their mother tongue, even though learning the mother tongue provides a child's earliest opportunity to develop their academic potential as well as increasing their aptitude in learning additional languages. We the members of the Indonesian Linguistics Society pledge to pay special attention to the mother tongue languages spoken in our respective regions, to encourage their use, and to help the transmission of these languages to younger generations through education, research and community service.

The Indonesian Linguistic Society is not arguing against the use of English. Rather, the recommendation was aimed at promoting the use of mother-tongue based education and research among both teachers and researchers. This requires at least two things. First, effective mother tongue-based teaching needs supporting facilities such as locally made curricula, the availability of school textbooks and other books written in the students' native languages, and well-trained local language teachers. Second, local linguists and local teacher researchers are encouraged to write research reports in their native languages, not necessarily in the national language. This can help document and sustain the survival of local languages. Despite these well-intentioned recommendations, English continues to be a darling language among students and parents. Its evocation as a prestigious language that guarantees a bright future for those who master it makes English as a "must-buy" commodity offered by the market. English Language Teaching (ELT) practices has been seen as playing a pivotal role in perpetuating the English language as a global commodified language worthy of mastering. This proves the fact that "raciolinguistic ideologies" (Flores & Rosa, 2015), under which the monolingual ideology is grounded, still predominates in foreign language education scholarship. The prevalence of these ideologies means the continuation of the marginalization of racialized and minoritized communities, as well as the widening of the abyssal thinking in language education. Against this raciolinguistic ideologies and abyssal thinking, scholars from the peripheries have proposed a counternarrative that attempts to erase the linguistic hierarchies (see the manifesto of this in García, Flores, Seltzerc, Li, Otheguya & Rosa, 2021, p. 206). In the next section, I discuss the counternarrative that has of late been gaining popularity in foreign language education.

TRANSLANGUAGING AS A COUNTER-NARRATIVE

Translanguaging, the notion originally derived from the Welsh term *trawsieithu* (William, 1994), has now gained prominence in applied linguistics and in particular in English language teaching. It is important to note that translanguaging is not just a value-free pedagogical term used to designate the crossing or mixing linguistic boundaries. Amid the strong hegemonic grip of the English monolingual ideology in ELT wordlwide, advocates of translanguaging have made it clear that the term has a political bearing (Garcia, 2019; Li, 2022; Li & Garcia, 2022; Wang, 2022). Garcia (2019) has argued that as a political stance, translanguaging has "the potential to decolonize our conception of language" (p. 162). With the vehement promotion of the standard language used in a formal education setting, the notion of translanguaging has helped us radically shift our perspective from the prevalent valorization of named and standard language to the appreciation of the emerging language varieties. In its strong version, translanguaging challenges the former vantage point in order to elevate the latter.

Li (2022) has recently stridently pronounced that translanguaging is a political stance which can counter grand narratives – the most prominent of which are native speakerism and standard English – brimming over in ELT practices worldwide. This suggests that translanguaging as a relatively novel emerging counter-narrative in the EFL scholarship aims at "challenging the nationalistic assumptions of named languages and raciolinguistic ideologies that contribute to the institutionalization of linguistic and social inequalities" (Li, 2022, p. 175). In a similar vein, Li and Garcia (2022) contend that translanguaging has decolonizing potential when applied in foreign language education. As translanguaging practice acknowledges and even encourages students' diverse linguistic, cultural and ideological background to be reactivated in the classroom, this leads to the opening of spaces (i.e., translanguaging spaces) "where bilingual learners can use the linguistics and semiotic repertoire freely and flexibly and question and challenge the standard language and named language ideologies…"(Li &Garcia 2022, p. 322).

Finally, Wang (2022) sees translanguaging as an important decolonizing approach to the teaching of English in EFL contexts. Viewing translanguaging as "a new ontological orientation towards language and language use" (Wang, 2022, p. 3), he employs translanguaging framework as an analytical tool to integrate indigenous epistemologies into

the mainstream English language teaching contexts. The value of such an approach, as Wang (2022) emphasizes, is that it helps teachers to "critically examine their prescribed teaching approaches by taking a decolonial stance to nurture a paradigm shift towards transformative translanguaging" (p.17).

All these intellectual movements are meant not to disparage the values of the dominant ideology in ELT practice, but to disrupt the idea of named and standard language valorized by this ideology and erase the linguistic hierarchies that often marginalize and demote linguistic practices of racialized and minoritized multilingual speakers. In so doing, the politization of translanguaging practice is aimed at creating the cognitive justice among multilingual speakers.

Translanguaging Practice in the Classroom: Defying the English-Only-Policy

Despite the fact that schools can be used as a potential site to perpetuate the hegemonic forces of English, they (especially classrooms) can nevertheless be a safe site for defying the imposition of the exclusive use of English. This is made possible if initiatives to mix languages is taken by the language speakers. In this section, I will illustrate how both teachers and students in a classroom resort to mixed linguistic practices as they struggled to make meanings intelligible and sustain the interaction among them. The point here is to show that despite the imposition of the English-only-policy in the school contexts, the fact that multilingual speakers are resourceful in deploying their linguistic repertoires by languaging different linguistic codes is undeniable.

Extract 1

Students	: No.
Teacher	: Let me give the example. (*writing on the white board*) We have three examples of sentences. And … it belongs to coordinating conjunction. …belongs to subordinating conjunction. The last one … From the first sentence which one is the conjunction?
Students	: And.
Teacher	: The second?
Students	: Because.
Teacher	: The last?
Students	: Ehm.
Teacher	: What is the difference of the three of them? …Example one, example two, example three.
Students	: *sama*
Teacher	: number one the idea is the same. The second?
Students	: The reason.
Teacher	: Reason. The last?
Students	: *Nggak tahu*.
Teacher	: Look at this sentence. Neither Joe and Steven study Math. They are studying English.
Students	: (*murmuring*)
Teacher	: *Tidak satupun, bukan Joe bukan Steven yang belajar Matematika.* Because they are *mereka belajar Bahasa Inggris.*
Students	: Ooo

(Taken from Hutami, 200, p. 68)

In Extract 1, the teacher gives an example of the compound and complex sentences to the students, introducing to them the English coordinator and subordinator. While the teacher uses English almost exclusively, and the students also respond in English, the latter eventually shifts to Indonesian "sama" (the same) and "nggak tahu" (I don't know) in responding to the questions in Line 11 and Line 15, respectively. Though still insisting on using English to make his explanation clearer, the teacher finally gives up explaining in the language, and translanguages to Indonesian instead. The students respond by saying "ooo" indicating their understanding about the explanation. It is obvious here that relying on exclusive English for making the explanation intelligible to the students will pedagogically do more harm than good. Teacher's messages can only efficiently and effectively be conveyed through the deployment of the students' native language. Thus, the role of the students' native language in this respect cannot simply be overlooked. As Li (2022) has correctly pointed out "the knowledge already acquired through the learners' first and/or prior learned languages also plays an important role in foreign-language-medium education" (p.173).

Extract 2

Teacher	: *Kalimat aktif*. Now how you try to make active into passive. The form, general form. The object become the subject in passive, OK. So the object here Math becomes the ….Math is studied by … So the object becomes and the *pola umumnya* verb form*nya* verb *tiga atau* Past Participle. Past Participle and then the use of you call 'be', to be why the 'to be' *nya* is not was? Why not 'been'? Come on. *Kenapa kok is, bukan was?* Why not were? Pat?
Pat	: Because it's verb one.
Teacher	: Because it's verb one. Look at the tense. Tenses is influenced by. *Jadi kalimat passive dalam pembentukkannya berbeda dengan Bahasa Indonesia. Kalau Ibu membuat kue. Kapan Ibu membuat kue? Kemarin Ibu buat kue. Kemarin Ibu buat kue. Akan membuat*

In Extract 2 the teacher continues the discussion on the use of passive sentences by assuming that the students might have and have not known about the concept. Interestingly, he did this by shuttling or translanguaging from English to Indonesian and then to English again. As can be seen from the flow of the specific communicative event here, the mix of the two languages makes the communication go smoothly. After briefly explaining the pattern of a passive sentence in both English and Indonesian, the teacher asks a question to a student named Pat, in Indonesian ("Kenapa kok is, bukan was?", Why is is, not was?) in order to discover whether she has understood what he has just explained. Rather than use English exclusively, the teacher prefers to use Indonesian so as to create what Li (2011) calls a "translanguaging

space". This space draws the students' attention that mixing linguistic codes is a strategic way for meaning negotiation. Furthermore, creating a translanguaging space in a classroom has liberatory effects in that "learners can benefit from *these* complementary effects that different deployed resources bring which in turn facilitate negotiations and understanding" (Hui-Ching Lin & Leung, 2023, p.3) [italic added]. The significance of translanguaging space as a liberatory linguistic practice is elucidated by Li (2018) as follows:

A space that is created by and for Translanguaging practices, and a space where language users break down the ideologically laden dichotomies between the macro and the micro, the societal and the individual, and the social and the psychological through interaction. A Translanguaging Space allows language users to integrate social spaces (and thus 'linguistic codes') that have been formerly separated through different practices in different places (p. 23).

The two extracts above suggest that the creation of translanguaging space makes the communicative flow go smoothly and the messages delivered by the interlocutors intelligible to the hearers. Thus teacher's deployment of linguistic repertoires in the trasnlanguaging space is indeed a strategic practice for both the students and teacher himself to achieve communicative purposes as desired, and even to negotiate tension that might occur in communication. This is because "translanguaging…creates the possibility that bilingual students could use their full linguistic and semiotic repertoire to make meaning, and…"that teachers would 'take it up' as a legitimate pedagogical practice" (Garcia & Li, 2014, p. 67-68). Desired communicative goals can be successfully accomplished through translanguaging space language users "bring together different dimensions of their personal history, experience and environment, their attitude, belief and ideology, their cognitive and physical capacity into coordinated and meaningful performance" (Li, 2011, p. 1223). As we see in extract 1 students' short reply using the interjections *ooo* clearly indicates their understanding about the messages conveyed to them. Using English exclusively may not guarantee intelligibility.

As Pennycook (2014) has argued "Communication becomes possible not because we adhere to global or even regional norms, but because language users are able to bring their communication into alignment with each other" (p.1). What is more, as we also observe in the extracts, teacher adeptly shuttles between different linguistic codes to make sense of what he explains in the classroom. The shuttling between the different linguistic codes here can also be seen as a way for a "translanguaging space" to allow students to make use of their own

linguistic and semiotic repertoires at their own disposal. As part of translingual practices translanguaging can be continuously encouraged as a strategic practice for supporting the goal of foreign language education.

CONCLUSION

I have shown in this article that despite the mushrooming of so-called "international" schools offering English as a medium of instruction as well as concerns over the linguistic inequity amid the fetish of English learning, schools in addition to becoming a site of perpetuating linguistic inequity, can also be a potential site for defying the imposition of language hegemony. Such a subversive act is made possible by the teachers' initiative to mix linguistic codes, thereby opening translanguaging spaces in classroom interaction. Thus rather than treating this translingual practice as deficient – an assumption emanating from a raciolinguistic ideology – we need to promote it as a strategic way for facilitating a decolonialization process in language education.

The illustration of translanguaging practices in the classroom shown above attests to the fact that any educational policy which tends to adopt a monolingual bias cannot elide the fact that multilingual speakers are resourceful speakers who always actively shift between different linguistic codes, styles, and discourses. Multilingual speakers can intuit their inherent multilingual beings by deploying their own linguistic repertories. That is, they have what Li (2018) calls "translanguaging instinct", which can be (re) activated when the communicative tasks demand language speakers to do so. As Li (2018) says "As people become more involved in complex communicative tasks and demanding environments, the natural tendency to combine multiple resources drives them to look for more cues and exploit" (p. 25). This is tantamount to what I shall call "multilingual intuition" which is always inherent in language speakers and always get reactivated as they try to accomplish a complex communicative task. In other word, these speakers are resourceful speakers. And, as language classroom is a site where people engage in communicative activities, it is our tasks, to cultivate this resourcefulness. As Pennycook (2014) has rightly pointed out, "Developing *resourceful speakers* is surely what we are aiming at in language education" (p. 15) [italics in original].

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