

## ACCOMMODATING LEARNERS' MULTILINGUAL CAPABILITIES IN AN ENGLISH FIRST ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Article Info	Abstract
<b>Article History</b> Received: June 2022 Revised: June 2022 Published: July 2022	<i>Debatably, in South Africa, there is an absence of a consensus about a teaching method that can inform multilanguage usage for English first additional language learners in the Further Education and Training phase. This study argues that translanguaging can be the latest all-embracing approach in language policy and assessment needed to substitute previous linguistic practices that treated languages as separate entities in a globalized world. The study aims to determine how group work promotes learners' different multilingual capabilities among learners in an English first additional language context in the Further Education and Training phase. It took place in a multilingual Grade 11 classroom. For this qualitative study, only 24 Grade 11 learners were used as participants in 4 focus groups for data collection. The results indicate that engaging in group work increases the time English first additional language learners spend actively using their home languages with their peers. Learning English within mixed linguistic groups, learners often draw on their existing languages to learn and to communicate with their teachers and peers. Therefore, distinguishing language upbringings as a reserve might produce positive results in the classroom when teaching English to English first additional language learners as learners showcase their identities in collaboration with their contemporaries. Group work creates a space where translanguaging can easily take place and it is a good exemplification of the power processes that underlie the classroom as learning becomes learner-centric. It was concluded that group work can serve as an enabler for translanguaging, harnessing learners' different multilingual capabilities for a better understanding of their work.</i>
<b>Keywords</b> Translanguaging; Multilingualism; Group work;	
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### INTRODUCTION

In numerous educational settings around the world, teachers seem to put a lot of effort into 'silencing linguistic diversity' (Pulinx, Piet Van & Orhan, 2015.). On the other hand, learners in an English first additional language (EFAL) learning context in South Africa put lots of energy into evading school regulations and using their home languages nevertheless. All this energy might be used much more resourcefully by taking full advantage of learners' multilingual capabilities as resources for task performance in an EFAL setting.

The recent cornucopia of lapping terminology has influentially affirmed the paradigmatic shift from monolingualism to plurilingualism in language education and sociolinguistic research (Canagarajah, 2011). While in the past a monolingual approach was considered the right path to follow in teaching foreign languages, due to the effects of increased globalisation and the global spread of multilingualism, a new approach to teaching is called for. Nowadays, educational practices are frequently carried out in a bilingual or multilingual setting, where traditional approaches and methods often become obsolete and need to be redefined or reformulated to meet the learners' needs. Among these new concepts, Wiley and García (2016) remarked that translanguaging unambiguously calls for elastic instructional approaches in

foreign language teaching, and in the context of this study, it is an EFAL setting in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase in South Africa. In brief, translanguaging refers to the process of using one's full linguistic repertoire 'to gain knowledge, to make sense, to articulate one's thoughts and to communicate about using language' (Li, 2011).

When it comes to teaching a foreign language, teachers are faced with the challenge of determining which teaching strategies and approaches are most suited to the needs of a particular class. To adapt teaching methods to the changes that have occurred over the last few decades, educational researchers have identified the need for new teaching norms and methods that take into account the distinctiveness of the classroom, including the learners' backgrounds, linguistic skills, and proficiencies (Nagy, 2018). Although new methods are not always simple to implement for a variety of reasons like a lack of materials, an insufficient number of classes and a curriculum that must be followed, teachers are nonetheless expected to implement learner-centric approaches that embrace the specific individual linguistic needs of the language learner (Nagy, 2018).

The past decade has seen increased scholarly interest in interaction as a learning tool and a means of analysing learner identities in multilingual classrooms (Kibler, 2017). For this reason, this study focuses on group work as a way of accommodating learners' multilingual capabilities in an EFAL classroom in the FET phase in South Africa. This study recognises multilingual diversity as an untapped resource and proposes harnessing the multilingual competencies of students to overcome hurdles in misunderstanding questions set for individual assignments, through group work. Group work has been used extensively as an active learning methodology for students to gain a deeper understanding of content but has to a lesser degree been used to explore how learners gravitate towards translanguaging when working in groups (Ramchander, 2020)

In this study, group work is branded also by the varied use of the linguistic and identity repertoires of the learners, notably by translanguaging or the use of lexical and syntactical items from more than one language to attempt an activity in an EFAL context in FET phase in South Africa. It is envisaged that this study will help EFAL teachers to be better equipped and supported to deal with diversity in their classrooms considering the learners' different linguistic backgrounds in an EFAL setting in the FET phase.

In this study, group work as a teaching approach is entrenched in the principle of Ubuntu. In endorsing the conceptions of Ubuntu axiom 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' Mbigi (1997:36) observed that: In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create, or produce the individual; for the individual depends on the corporate group ... Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: 'I am, because we are; and since we are therefore I am'. According to Ngubane and Makua (2021), what Mbigi is arguing for is that in African cultures, an individual is incomplete without the group and the group is not privileged over the individual. In essence, equity is central to Ubuntu (Ngubane & Makua, 2021).

The study aims to determine how group work promotes learners' different multilingual capabilities among learners in an English first additional language context in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase. The research question of this study was: Does group work help in accommodating learners' different multilingual capabilities in an English first additional language context in the Further Education and Training phase?

### *Literature Review*

Languages have traditionally been thought of as existing in separate compartments, or as “two solitudes” (Cummins, 1979), within bi/multilingual learners' minds. In his theory of Linguistic Interdependence, Cummins posited that linguistic or metalinguistic practices learnt in one language could be transferred to another (Cummins, 1979). For example, if a child is familiar with finding the main idea of a text in one language, that child will be able to transfer that competency to a new language. While this theory destabilises the idea that languages are stored completely separately in the brain, it relies on the assumption that a bilingual person has a dual linguistic system and transfers competencies between those systems (Vogel & Garcia, 2017).

The term “translanguaging” was originally used to describe a pedagogical practice of moving flexibly between different input and output languages in Welsh revitalisation classrooms (Williams, 1994). In this situation, the changing of the language is strategic and deliberate instead of spontaneous. The initial aims of translanguaging are to employ the stronger language to help learners to develop the weaker language in order to contribute to the balanced development of the learner's two languages (Tai, 2021). However, recent translanguaging literature has paid attention to teachers' deployment of multiple linguistic resources for scaffolding. The findings of the studies (e.g., Zano, 2022; Zano, 2021; Zano, 2010; Vogel & Garcia, 2017) typically indicate that the teachers encourage learners to draw on their multilingual and multimodal resources in the classroom, which consequently can facilitate the learners' development of multilingualism.

Lewis, Jones and Baker, (2012) note that translanguaging in education refers to using one language in order to reinforce the other, in order to increase understanding and in order to augment the pupil's activity in both languages. Translanguaging theory, in relying on a conceptualisation of bilingualism as dynamic, argues that there are not two interdependent language systems that bilinguals shuttle between but one semiotic system integrating various lexical, morphological linguistic features besides social practices and features individuals embody (e.g., their gestures, their posture), as well as those outside of themselves which through use become part of their bodily memory (e.g., computer technology) (García, 2016).

To support teachers' understandings of translanguaging as pedagogy, Celic and Seltzer's (2011) *Translanguaging Guide for Educators* offered translanguaging strategies that help facilitate more effective learning of content and language by bilingual learners. Designed as a collaborative professional learning resource for bilingual and monolingual teachers of emergent bilingual learners, their guide outlines how teachers can create classrooms that intentionally integrate learners' home language with English as part of their lesson planning. Selected specific translanguaging strategies include collaborative group work in negotiating content in any language and sharing in English, brainstorming in any language and writing in English, previewing in home language and collaborating in any language, listening in English and discussing in any language.

Rather than turning one language “off” and turning another “on,” translanguaging suggests that we creatively integrate all semiotic resources to communicate (Wei, 2017). Translanguaging, therefore, provides opportunities for individuals to conceive of languages not as independent but as facets of the same adaptive system (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; García & Li, 2014). It can be understood as bilinguals' ability to navigate social spaces in ways that transcend named languages (Fallas Escobar, 2019). That is, translanguaging goes beyond common understandings that describe bilingualism as double monolingualism and instead construes multilingual speakers ‘not so much as the sum of two (or more) complete or incomplete monolinguals but rather as specific and fully competent speaker-hearers who have developed a communicative competence that is equal but different, to that of monolinguals’ (Grosjean, 1996:21).

Translanguaging was used to create moments of less language separation, as the alternation of languages in different phases of one single language class. Baker describes this process in the following way: 'To read and discuss a topic in one language, and then to write about it in another language, means that the subject matter has to be processed and "digested" (2011:289). The principle chosen by the teachers for this was to provide new input in the language in which pupils were less proficient and then have pupils discuss content and language with peers in another language (Duarte & Jellema, 2017:23).

This is a departure from previous conceptualisations of bilingualism. The traditional cognitive theory of bilingualism called the "Separate Underlying Proficiency" model, argued that bilinguals had two separate language systems in their minds that corresponded to nationally sanctioned, standard, named languages, such as English, Sesotho, Shona, etc. The theory posited that only exposure to and instruction in a second language, and not instruction in a first language, would lead to proficiency in L2 (Vogel & García, 2017).

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## RESEARCH METHOD

This study was designed as a qualitative research project. It took place in a multilingual Grade 11 classroom. None of the participants was a native speaker of English. For this qualitative study, only 24 EFAL learners in Grade 11 were used as participants. The researcher requested parental consent for their children to participate in this study. The researcher also requested assent from learners to participate in this research. The participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity for participating in this study. These learners were stationed at one high school in South Africa. In 4 groups of 6 each (identified as FG1-FG40), the learners shared how group work helps in accommodating learners' different multilingual capabilities in an English first additional language context in the FET phase. The focus group structure was chosen with the purpose of soliciting work that therefore reflected how the participants came to a consensus in their representations of their ideological positions, rather than individual perspectives.

Before the participants took part in the focus group discussion, they were informed of the general aim of the study, which is 'aims to determine how group work helps in accommodating learners' different multilingual capabilities in an English first additional language context in the Further Education and Training phase.' The qualitative data for this study were analysed using content analysis. The interpretative analysis reduced the volume of information and identified significant patterns. The researcher analysed the participants' responses by finding links and similarities in the responses and coded them appropriately. Then, the researchers abridged and positioned the results into themes.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Research Findings

According to Creese and Blackledge (2015:33), teachers who implement translanguaging practices in their second language pedagogy "can incorporate the complex, mobile language repertoires and identities of their learners, and in so doing, enhance learning". This of course does not mean that "anything goes" and that teachers should oversee standard target language constructions. Learning English within mixed linguistic groups, learners often draw on their existing languages to learn and to communicate with bi/multilingual teachers and bi/multilingual learners. Therefore, distinguishing language upbringings as a reserve might

produce positive results in the classroom. To cement the above, the participants had the following to say:

*We rely on our backgrounds, that is, the language we are used to is the one that we use in group work to deal with newer information and understand the given work much faster. FG 2.*

*When we are introduced to a new topic while we work in groups, for us to understand it, we make use of the languages, which we speak in our locations with our families and friends. FG3.*

At school, students create their identities in collaboration with their contemporaries. Blommaert and Varis (2013:157) define "identity repertoire" as "the way we deploy linguistic resources during an interaction, primarily through performance and negotiation". This identity repertoire carries with it a standing that has an impact on relationships and learning with peers, particularly in small groups. Because "in modern times, a group of two or more languages, rather than a single language, often meets a society's and an individual's fundamental needs in terms of communication, cognition, and identity" (Aronin & Hufeisen, 2009:105), the classroom can help students prepare for future linguistic diversity. To corroborate the above, the participants had this to say:

*Our identities or roots are in our mother languages like Ndebele, Setswana and Sesotho. As we share in groups, we are just at home when sharing in languages that remind us of our roots. FG4.*

The translanguaging continuum is a technique for reflecting on instructional and curricular decisions that ensure that all children can participate equally in groupwork linguistic practices in the classroom. This is consistent with Fraser's (Fraser & Honneth, 2003) emphasis on "participatory parity," which refers to cultural norms that provide all members of a social group with the capacity and environment to engage on equal footing. Recognition is one of Fraser's recommended dimensions, which comprises honouring varied identities and cultures in ensuring that everyone has equal footing as complete partners in the social interactions established within a community. The following excerpts serve to confirm the above:

*Working in groups is good for us because, apart from helping each other in the given English language task, we also learn to appreciate the different home languages that we will be using to complete the given though the work will be written in English. FG1*

*We have different backgrounds based on language, therefore, we have to respect these differences as we work in groups for one is more comfortable say with Sesotho than isiZulu. After all, these languages are equally important in our learning. FG2*

Representation in the curriculum is necessary for students to see that the knowledge and accomplishments of their communities are worthy and that they will also be able to influence their social milieu (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Even if multilingualism has a larger meaning in more current theories, and even if it serves societal needs, nature and nurture require the support of the cultures around them (Franceschini, 2009: 28). For these reasons, the participants had this to say:

*There are times when the teacher insists that we must use English only in class depending on the task we will be dealing with. But, when we are working in groups, we use our home languages, which represent our culture, especially isiZulu and Sesotho, which are mainly used in this community. FG1*

Group work creates a space where translanguaging can easily take place and it is a good exemplification of the power processes that underlie the classroom. This type of work usually takes place in a special space in the classroom, not under the direct and constant control of the

teacher. The theatrical metaphor from the sociologist Ervin Goffman with front and back stage spaces allows us to see the differences between the spaces in direct control by the teacher (front stage) and others where the “rehearsals” and group work take place (back stage) (Goffman 1959). In these semi-free spaces, the teacher has no direct and/or constant control, and inequity and empowerment can be exacerbated in group spaces. To corroborate the above, the participants had this to say:

*When working in groups, our English teacher does not ‘over interfere’ with our discussions, thus we over rely on our mother tongue to explain the work at hand. We are in charge of the show, that is why we use languages we are most comfortable with to explain or describe the work at hand. FG3*

*The teacher is hardly in our midst or group to caution us when we depend on other languages and remotely use English to complete the task. Usually, if it is the teacher in charge during the lesson, and we mostly use English. Now, in his absence, we feel independent and permitted to use our home languages to explain an English task. FG4*

Translanguaging in group work is different from translanguaging in front space. When students work in small groups, a different space is created, one where students feel safer. Most definitions agree that “safe space” is not a teaching technique but “one way of thinking about the educational endeavour [...] encouraging the idea that classrooms and learning should be stress-free” (Redmond, 2010:4), comfortable and unthreatened (Cooper, 2013); learners are free to express their thoughts, beliefs, opinions, experiences, and creativity (Barrett 2010); feel secure to take risks, explore their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours (Holley & Steiner 2005); and have opportunities for cognitive and linguistic engagement in the classroom (Arreguín-Anderson, 2015). To cement the above, the participants had the following to say:

*Working in a group makes us feel very comfortable as we freely express ourselves in our home languages. It is so intimidating to share our ideas in front of the whole class; we prefer sharing in groups to sharing with the whole class. We have confidence when using both our mother tongue and English as we work in groups to do the task. No need for fear when sharing information with a few group members. FG2*

*We don't feel at home and relaxed to share with the class because they will be judging us based on our English expressions, grammar and pronunciation. In the end, they might label you for mispronouncing an English word. This will hardly happen in groups because, mostly, we will be using both English and our home languages to share our ideas with others. FG4*

Codeswitching for interpreting is perhaps the most obvious case of ‘doing languages’. It is one example of a group work language teaching and language learning activity. These activities must be based on the notion that there is one ‘language’ to learn and another that has already been mastered, and that a more ‘knowledgeable’ peer will assist in the learning process. Even Banda (2018:213) showed that group discussions in English, Xhosa and both languages allowed all learners to participate and translanguage in order to find the solution to a task. Importantly, the author points out that such translanguaging-based group work has another advantage, that is, it “provides peer-learning opportunity as the less proficient in English learn from the more proficient learners”.

These assertions resonate with the following:

*There is enjoyment as we work in groups and we freely use English and our home languages in the sentences without caring about grammar as long we make sense of those sentences. After all, the teacher won't be over-monitoring our group's progress throughout the lesson. FG3.*

*To be better speakers of English, we tend to use both English and mainly Sesotho in the same sentence to explain a point in our group discussions. FG1.*

Khubchandani (1997, as quoted by Canagarajah 2013: 40) identifies two main tools experienced speakers use in their translanguaging practice: Synergy and serendipity. Synergy is described as "the creative agency subjects must exercise in order to work collaboratively with the other participant to achieve intersubjective meaning" (Canagarajah 2013: 41), or the readiness to put forth one's own effort to jointly build meaning. Serendipity, on the other hand, "involves an attitudinal readiness to accept deviations as the norm" (Canagarajah 2013: 40), or openness to dealing with input that deviates from the standards and a readiness to react intuitively to whatever new standards the other may provide. According to Canagarajah (2013: 73), translanguagers have a "collaborative disposition," which is observable, for example, in examining co-participants' responses to verify knowledge and delivering their indication of familiarity during other speakers' turns. This finding is echoed in the following excerpts:

*As we work in groups, we respond differently to questions thrown at us. Some prefer just using gestures like nodding their heads sideways to indicate disapproval while others might just open their mouths to imply surprise. FG3*

*Communication can be verbal or not verbal. It is not everyone who would contribute words in a group because some depend on gestures especially when they hesitate to express themselves in English. But still, we make meaning out of that. FG2*

Another major group of interactional strategies is what Mauranen calls "proactive work" (2006: 135). This is the work that the speaker does to help the listener understand while also achieving a higher level of assurance in terms of the others' knowledge. Spontaneous clarification, restatement, or paraphrasing, understanding and confirmation checks, unsolicited self-repair, and working to construct an utterance with an interlocutor, such as pausing for insertion of candidate words, are all examples of proactive effort. Overall, increasing redundancy seems to aid understanding. Because of these proactive strategies, self-repair appears to be more common than other-repair and other-repair often takes the form of suggestions rather than corrections. For this reason, the participants had this to say:

*Sometimes the words we use to correct each other, an outsider might think we are rude to each other. This normally happens when we use our home languages to correct the other or to give them some clue so that they reach the correct answer. FG1*

*We use other words like synonyms to simplify the words for fellow group members or rephrase certain statements for them in our home language as we do the given task. FG4*

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). All this is reported as follows:

*This is our platform to prove that we can use our languages to understand an English task. When working in groups, we are family and as we interact, we enjoy referencing our home languages and the dominant one here is Sesotho. FG3*

*When working in a group, we use our home languages to ask for explanations, examples of a sentence where we can use the given words, tenses, meanings of words and other related reasons. FG 2*

## Discussion

The study has revealed that learners using EFAL have an identity and culture to promote as they complete English tasks in groups. At school, learners have an identity and culture that are co-constructed between themselves and their peers. As Blommaert and Varis (2013) state, the way we deploy linguistic resources during an interaction, mainly through performance and negotiation, is our “identity repertoire” (p. 157). This identity repertoire brings along a status that affects interactions and learning with peers, especially when one interacts in small groups

The findings have shown that the participants were against the dominance of English. This is in line with several studies that have found that learners exercise their agency in resisting the English-dominant norms of the classroom and creating a space in their interactions where their home languages could be used (Rajendram, 2019). Group work is one of the platforms used by learners to create spaces for their social interactions using both English and their home languages in sharing ideas about a given English task.

The study has highlighted that learners use the home languages to help group members understand with ease. This finding is in line with Lucas, Villegas and Freedson-Gonzalez (2008) who propose a ‘linguistic responsive climate’ in which pupils can support each other in their native language. In a similar vein, Sierens and Van Avermaet (2014) propose ‘facilitating functional multilingual learning’ as a strategy for responding to linguistic diversity at school: bilingual pupils help each other during independent group work. In this particular setting, there is no need to alter the curriculum or to employ bilingual teachers, so this way of working can be implemented in every class with at least two learners sharing the same mother tongue.

The study reveals that learners enjoy working independently of the teacher. Teaching EFAL requires a learner-centric pedagogy, and group work is ideal here, thus allowing the learners to translanguague with ease. Learning with ease implies that their environment does not stress them. Instead, it boosts their confidence. Most definitions agree that “safe space” is not a teaching technique but “one way of thinking about the educational endeavour [...] encouraging the idea that classrooms and learning should be stress-free” (Redmond, 2010, p. 4), comfortable and unthreatened (Cooper 2013); students are free to express their thoughts, beliefs, opinions, experiences, and creativity (Barrett 2010); feel secure to take risks, explore their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors (Holley and Steiner 2005); and have opportunities for cognitive and linguistic engagement in the classroom (Arreguín-Anderson 2015).

The results reveal that understanding of a given task is enhanced when learners share a task in groups using their home languages to master an English group activity. Perhaps, this is not startling, considering the collaborative nature of translanguaging as a feature of bi-/multilingual discourse, researchers highlight collaborative learning through group activities as a factor that facilitates pedagogical translanguaging (Martin-Beltrán 2014). Even Ramchander (2020) observed tertiary-level students in South Africa working on assignments in English and concluded that “when multilingual students engaged in group work, there was a tendency of gravitation towards translanguaging which resulted in students having a better understanding of assignment questions” (p. 74).

The study has revealed that the dominance of English in an EFAL teaching and learning setting has been challenged. In the South African context, English is operating in a multilingual environment. Even Goodman (2017, p. 63) reports that “the English-only ideology competes with a multilingual reality, and in the context of classroom group work, the multilingual reality prevails”. The identity and linguistic repertoire of learners in an EFAL settings are fully deployed in their home environment, while in the school, this is limited. Gómez Fernández (2016) reports that in some instances, learners’ home languages are ignored or stigmatised. However, the study has revealed that language is identity and identity is culture, thus the two are inseparable. That is where group work as a teaching technique in an EFAL becomes handy

in complementing learners' home languages (identity and culture) and English in mastering any given task when learning English.

In group work, collaborative tasks which do not engender competition are particularly successful in satisfying learners' need for bonding and in enabling a shared sense of achievement, as long as individual students are not dominating in the task. Additionally, teachers' feedback plays a role in recognising when subgoals are reached. Generally, "it may be hypothesised that activities which allow for these factors to come into play are more likely to result in sustained engagement than those which do not" (Crookes & Schmidt 1989: 234). This means that interest in a task and attention paid to the task is more long-lasting if learners perceive a task to meet their needs and if it aligns with their values. Thus, information on whether learners perceive a task as relevant will be valuable in judging how well motivation is sustained throughout a task.

## CONCLUSION

The study shows that time is now ripe for EFAL teachers to 'dive' into a (more) multilingual sea by letting learners in group work. Understandably, teachers are often reluctant to have learners engage in group work for various reasons. These reasons range from classroom management to doubts about the language learning potential of such an approach. Time spent in group arrangements, the lack of controlled output and fear that learners might learn each other's mistakes are tangible and realistic motives behind teachers' reluctance to have learners engage in group work in class. However, this study has revealed that EFAL learners can hugely benefit from a gamut of interactive activities for language learning, and group work is one of them in providing a social, interactive platform for EFAL learners. Perhaps, instead of dismissing group work as an effective tool in EFAL learning, it becomes imperative for the EFAL language teacher to strategically group the learners; it is also obligatory to explain to the learners how to work in these groups effectively. This entails having them reflect on the meaning of collaborating with others and providing clear expectations about their participation in these groups, such as listening actively to peers, building on their contributions, providing constructive feedback, and staying focused on the work.

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