

A Study on Translanguaging Practice for Improving EFL Students' Intercultural Competence in College English Classroom

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Abstract: This qualitative study investigates how translanguaging functions as a mediating tool in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) classrooms to foster Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). Employing a multiple-case study design, the research collected data through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis across two university-level EFL courses in China. The analysis reveals two core findings: first, translanguaging acts as a vital cognitive-semiotic scaffold, enabling students to bridge lexical-conceptual gaps and facilitate metalinguistic dialogue for co-constructing understanding of complex content. Second, it materially constitutes the classroom as a “Third Space,” serving as a key resource for students to negotiate hybrid scholarly identities and articulate nuanced, empathetic intercultural stances. The study concludes that strategic translanguaging is integral to developing ICC, as it mediates both the cognitive and socio-affective dimensions of intercultural learning. These findings contribute to sociocultural and Third Space theories by empirically detailing the micro-processes of multilingual mediation and offer practical implications for designing translanguaging-informed pedagogies in CLIL and broader EFL education.

Keywords: translanguaging; Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC); multiple-case study; CLIL classroom

Introduction

In an era of globalization, the cultivation of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) has become a paramount objective in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education worldwide, which is deemed essential for preparing learners to navigate the complexities of multilingual and multicultural interactions (Jingping Wang, Jing Wang & Rining Wei, 2025; Hao Xu, Yong Wang & Ji Ma, 2025). Concurrently, the pedagogical approach of translanguaging is increasingly recognized for its potential to foster deeper content understanding, enhance metalinguistic awareness, and facilitate the development of ICC by validating students' full linguistic identities and enabling richer intercultural dialogue (Bowie Tang, Chengyao Guo, Chunlan Jiang & Zhuoxuan Yang, 2025; Nikoletta Charalampoglou & Ioannis Karras, 2023). This international scholarly focus reflects a shift from a purely linguistic model of proficiency towards a more holistic, socially situated vision of language education that prioritizes effective and empathetic communication across cultural boundaries.

In response to this global trend, EFL contexts, particularly in nations with strong national linguistic identities like China, have begun to acknowledge the imperative of ICC. Educational policies and curriculum reforms increasingly advocate for moving beyond rote grammar instruction to cultivate students' global competence and cross-cultural understanding (Yi Gui & S. N. Kew, 2025; Hao Xu, Yong Wang & Ji Ma, 2025). However, the domestic implementation of translanguaging pedagogies within such contexts presents unique particularities and tensions. While the theoretical value of leveraging students' first language (L1) is acknowledged, practical application often grapples with entrenched monolingual ideologies, exam-oriented educational systems that prioritize standard English forms, and concerns about ensuring adequate target language exposure (Hao Xu, Yong Wang & Ji Ma, 2025; Feng, Xu, Li, Liu & Shen, 2025). This example illustrates that while the goal of developing ICC is widely endorsed, the pathways for effectively integrating translanguaging as a core pedagogical practice within structured EFL environments, especially those employing CLIL, remain underexplored and context-dependent.

Though significant progress has been achieved in both conceptualizing and implementing strategies to enhance ICC, a prominent gap exists in understanding themicrogenetic processes through which translanguaging actually functions as a mediational tool within interactive classroom discourse, particularly when the content involves sensitive or complex sociopolitical topics. Much existing research on translanguaging and ICC assesses outcomes or perceptions but offers limited fine-grained analysis of how code-switching and multilingual resource pooling serve as a psychological tool for sense-making, identity positioning, and stance-taking in real time (Seyyede Zahra Esmaili & Davud Kuhi, 2025). From a sociocultural theory perspective, this mediation process is crucial, as learning and identity development occur through socially mediated activity. Moreover, while content-and-language-integrated learning (CLIL) provides a content-rich context, discussions on sociopolitical issues inherently involve values, beliefs, and power dynamics, making them potent sites for observing intercultural stance-taking and identity negotiation. However, little is known about how EFL students, operating within the linguistic "third space" created by translanguaging, navigate these discussions, articulate hybrid identities, and adopt intercultural positions.

Therefore, anchored in the theoretical lens of Third Space, this study aims to address the following core research question: From a sociocultural theory perspective, how does translanguaging function as a mediating tool in a CLIL classroom, and what is its role in mediating EFL students' identity negotiation and intercultural stance-taking during discussions on sociopolitical topics? The investigation seeks to move beyond documenting the presence or frequency of translanguaging to unpack its agentive and constitutive role in the dynamic, moment-by-moment construction of intercultural understanding and self-positioning.

1. Methods

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design to investigate the nuanced role of translanguaging as a mediating tool in CLIL classrooms. A case study approach is particularly suited to answering "how" and "why" questions about a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident. This aligns closely with our aim to understand the complex, processual dynamics of how translanguaging functions within the specific socio-cultural ecosystem of a university-level EFL CLIL classroom. The research was conducted over a complete 16-week academic semester at an application-oriented undergraduate college in China, which offered English-medium CLIL courses for non-English majors. The setting was selected because it represented intentional spaces where content learning was explicitly coupled with English language development, and where instructors were open to, if not formally trained in, pedagogies that tolerated or encouraged the strategic use of students' L1 (Mandarin) for deeper engagement.

Participants for this study were selected using purposive sampling to identify information-rich cases that could provide deep insights into the research problem. The primary cases were two intact CLIL classrooms, each taught by a different instructor. Case selection was guided by the principles of typicality and information density; both classes were considered typical of advanced-level CLIL offerings in the Chinese context but presented variance in instructor style and specific course content, allowing for instructive cross-case comparison. Within each classroom, a focal group of 4-5 student participants was further selected for in-depth data collection. Selection criteria for these focal students included: (1) enrollment in the target CLIL course, (2) a willingness to participate in extended interviews and share reflective work, (3) a range of self-reported English proficiency (from intermediate to advanced) to capture varied experiences with translanguaging, and (4) a balance of gender. The final sample consisted of two instructors and nine focal students (four from Case A, five from Case B). This sample size was determined to be sufficient for achieving data saturation within the scope of a detailed, process-oriented qualitative study, where the depth of analysis on interactional data from two contrasting classrooms was prioritized over breadth. The instructors were both associate professors with over five years of CLIL teaching experience, while the students were third-year undergraduates from disciplines such as Business Administration and Public Policy.

Data were collected through a triangulated approach combining non-participant classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and the collection of relevant documents, covering the entire semester-long instructional unit. Primary data came from detailed, ethnographic-style observations of 12 consecutive 90-minute class sessions per case, totaling approximately 36 hours of observation. Observations focused specifically on teacher-student and student-student interactions during discussions on pre-identified sociopolitical topics (e.g., global governance, cultural dimensions of business ethics).

Field notes were taken in real-time, with a particular focus on recording instances of translanguaging (code-switching, translation, use of Mandarin for metalinguistic or metacognitive commentary), the sequential context of these instances, and participants' paralinguistic cues. All observed sessions were also audio-recorded with permission to allow for subsequent fine-grained discourse analysis. Complementing the observations, two rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted with the focal students and their instructors. The initial interview, held mid-semester, explored participants' general perceptions of language use in the CLIL classroom, their strategies for engaging with complex content, and their experiences of intercultural discussion. The final interview, held after the course concluded, delved deeper into specific observed incidents of translanguaging, prompting participants to reflect on their intentions, challenges, and feelings during those moments. Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes, was conducted in the participant's language of choice (often a mix of English and Mandarin), and was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Finally, document analysis provided contextual and reflective data. This included the course syllabi, lesson plans for the observed sessions, PowerPoint slides used in class, and samples of students' written assignments and reflective journals, which offered insights into their ongoing learning processes and personal sense-making.

The collected data were analyzed using an iterative, thematic analysis approach informed by the study's theoretical framework (Sociocultural Theory and Third Space Theory) and assisted by the qualitative data analysis software NVivo (version 12). The process began with repeated immersion in the raw data, including reading and re-reading transcripts, field notes, and documents. The initial coding phase was both deductive and inductive. Deductively, codes were generated based on the core concepts of the theoretical framework, such as "mediational tool use," "scaffolding," "hybridity," and "identity positioning." Inductively, open coding was applied to capture emergent patterns not fully anticipated by the theory. For instance, an interview excerpt from a student, "When we debated about soft power, I knew the Chinese term '文化认同' but struggled for the exact English equivalent. So I said 'cultural... like, agreement?'" My groupmate nodded and said 'cultural identity!' Then we used both terms to discuss the intercultural meanings of "identity". It felt like we built a bridge together," was openly coded with labels such as "L1 as conceptual anchor," "collaborative lexical gap-filling," "co-construction of meaning," and "building a shared reference point." These initial codes were then compared and clustered across all data sources through a process of axial coding, where relationships between codes were identified and organized into broader, more abstract dimensions. The code "L1 as conceptual anchor," when combined with similar instances from observations (e.g., students using Mandarin to define a key theory before debating it in English), contributed to the development of a theme we labeled "Translanguaging as a Cognitive-Semiotic Mediator for Complex Idea Articulation." Similarly, codes related to alignment, disagreement, and empathy in discussions, often linked to specific language choices, were synthesized into dimensions concerning "Identity Negotiation and Stance-Taking in the Third Space." This constant comparative method, moving between raw data, codes, and emerging dimensions, and checking interpretations against the theoretical lenses, continued until a coherent and data-saturated thematic structure was developed that comprehensively addressed the research question.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were rigorously employed. Methodological triangulation was fundamental, as findings from classroom observations were constantly checked against insights from interviews and document analysis to build a convergent and robust understanding. Furthermore, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary thematic summaries with participating instructors and a subset of focal students to solicit their feedback on the accuracy and resonance of the interpretations, thereby enhancing credibility. Peer debriefing sessions were held with fellow qualitative researchers not involved in the project to challenge analytical assumptions and explore alternative explanations. The research adhered to strict ethical principles throughout. Prior to data collection, formal ethical approval was obtained from the universities' institutional review boards. All participants provided written informed consent after receiving detailed information sheets explaining the study's purpose, procedures, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures for confidentiality. To protect anonymity, all participants were assigned pseudonyms, and any identifying information in transcripts or documents was removed. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely on password-protected devices, accessible only to the research team. These measures were taken to ensure that the research was conducted with respect, integrity, and a primary commitment to the well-being of the participants.

2. Findings

The analysis of classroom observations, interviews, and reflective documents revealed that

translanguaging functioned as a dual-faceted mediating tool within the CLIL classrooms, fundamentally shaping the discursive space where intercultural learning occurred. Two interconnected core dimensions emerged from the data, capturing its primary roles: first, as a cognitive-semiotic scaffold for navigating complex content, and second, as a constitutive resource for negotiating hybrid identities and taking nuanced intercultural stances. The following figure (Figure 1) illustrates the two dimensions.

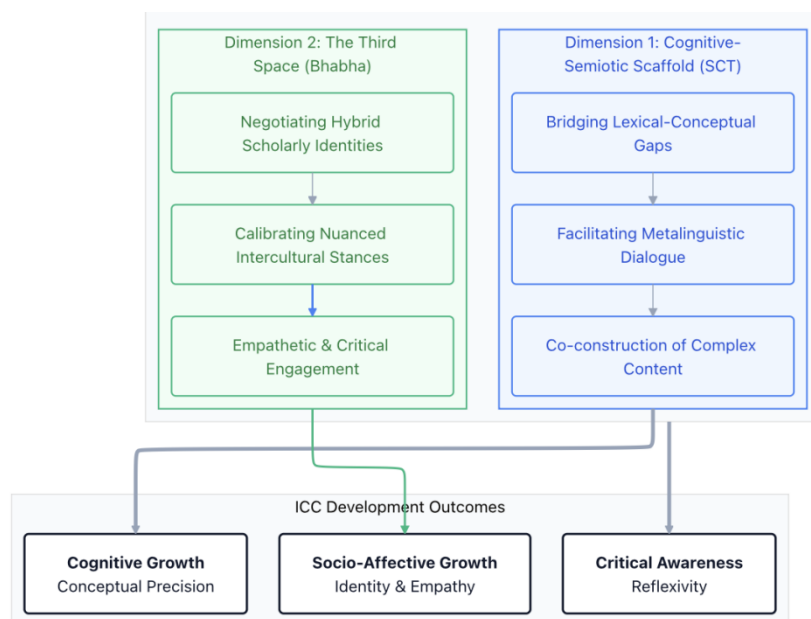


Figure 1. *Translanguaging as a mediating tool.*

As shown in Figure 1, the first core dimension is that translanguaging served as an essential cognitive and semiotic mediator, enabling students to access, articulate, and co-construct understanding of dense sociopolitical concepts. The second core dimension positions translanguaging as the discursive material from which the classroom as a "Third Space" was built, directly mediating identity negotiation and intercultural stance-taking. This process unfolded through two sub-dimensions: enacting hybrid scholarly identities and calibrating intercultural positioning. Students often used translanguaging to index a sophisticated, bilingual academic identity. For instance, one student reflected on a class debate about globalization: "When I referenced a Chinese scholar's theory, I named it in Chinese first to show it's a legitimate perspective, not just 'Western' ideas. Then I explained it in English. It felt like I was bringing my own intellectual heritage to the table" (Student, Case A). This deliberate linguistic choice was an act of identity work, asserting authority and expanding the accepted canon of knowledge in the classroom space. Simultaneously, translanguaging provided a nuanced toolkit for calibrating one's stance. Students used code-switching to soften critiques, express empathetic alignment, or mark cultural specificity.

These core dimensions, derived primarily from interview reflections and observational discourse, were strongly reinforced by documentary evidence. Students' reflective journals frequently described episodes of translanguaging in terms of "feeling more competent to engage" or "adding a necessary Chinese perspective," confirming the identity and cognitive affordances identified. While most data pointed to the agentive and facilitative role of translanguaging, a minor anomalous pattern involved a few students who expressed initial anxiety that using Mandarin might hinder their English development. However, these concerns typically diminished over the semester as they witnessed the functional value of the practice in their own learning, and their eventual engagement in translanguaging for complex tasks aligned with the dominant dimensions, thus not contradicting the core conclusions.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that translanguaging in the EFL CLIL classroom functions as a multifaceted mediating tool that is integral to both cognitive engagement and socio-cultural positioning, thereby directly fostering dimensions of Intercultural Communicative Competence. In answer to the core research question, the findings reveal that translanguaging acts as a cognitive-semiotic scaffold, enabling students to bridge conceptual gaps and co-construct understanding of complex sociopolitical content through collaborative metalinguistic talk. Furthermore, it constitutively materializes the classroom as a "Third

Space," providing the discursive means for students to negotiate hybrid scholarly identities and articulate nuanced, empathetic intercultural stances. These two roles are logically intertwined, as the cognitive confidence gained through strategic multilingual resource use empowers students to agentively engage in the identity work and critical dialogue that underpin advanced ICC.

Theoretically, these conclusions affirm and extend the integrated framework of Sociocultural and Third Space Theories. They empirically substantiate the concept of mediation by illustrating translanguaging's specific functions as a psychological tool for collaborative sense-making, while also exemplifying how hybrid linguistic practice physically instantiates a transformative Third Space for identity negotiation. Practically, this implies that EFL and CLIL educators should move beyond merely tolerating L1 use to intentionally designing tasks that leverage translanguaging as a critical resource. This can involve structuring discussions where students are prompted to compare concepts across languages or to use their full linguistic repertoire to analyze case studies from multiple cultural perspectives, thereby systematically scaffolding both content mastery and intercultural reflexivity.

Acknowledging its limitations, this study's insights are derived from a small number of cases within a specific Chinese university context, which cautions against overgeneralization. The focus on discourse and perception also means the long-term impact on ICC development warrants further investigation. Future research should, therefore, explore the application of similar translanguaging-mediated pedagogies in diverse institutional and cultural settings, and employ longitudinal designs to trace the sustained evolution of learners' intercultural identities and competencies through such practices.

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