

# Translanguaging as a Bridge: Embracing Multilingual Voices in Rural Philippine Classrooms

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## ABSTRACT

This conceptual commentary explores how translanguaging functions as a bridge for learning both Filipino and English as second languages in rural Philippine classrooms. Drawing from classroom reflections and recent scholarship in multilingual education, it highlights the role of translanguaging in enhancing comprehension, confidence, and inclusion among learners. Despite the long-standing Bilingual Education Policy (1974) and the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) policy (2012), many rural learners continue to struggle as they shift from mother tongue instruction to Filipino and English. This commentary foregrounds rural Filipino teachers' experiences navigating

linguistic environments where Bisaya, Waray, and other local languages intersect with academic discourse. It argues that translanguaging transforms linguistic diversity into a pedagogical asset rather than a barrier. Ultimately, the paper advocates for a flexible and inclusive bilingual pedagogy—one that acknowledges learners' multiple languages as tools for meaning-making and equitable participation.

**Keywords:** *bilingual education, Filipino language, multilingualism, rural education, translanguaging*

## INTRODUCTION

The Philippines is a linguistically diverse nation, home to more than 183 living languages spoken across its islands (Ethnologue, 2024). To promote national unity and global competence, Department Order No. 25, s. 1974, institutionalized the Bilingual Education Policy (BEP), mandating Filipino and English as the main media of instruction. This framework aimed to develop bilingual citizens capable of effective communication in both languages.

However, even after five decades, many learners—especially in rural schools—continue to experience difficulties in second language acquisition. Their daily communication remains rooted in their

mother tongue, and transitioning to Filipino and English often results in gaps in comprehension and expression. The introduction of the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) policy in 2012 sought to address this by grounding early learning in the child's first language. Yet, maintaining learners' comprehension and confidence beyond the early grades becomes difficult as instruction transitions to full bilingual mode.

In this context, translanguaging offers a bridge that connects home languages to academic discourse. It enables learners to utilize their full linguistic repertoire—Bisaya, Waray, Filipino, and English—to understand concepts, clarify ideas, and convey meaning effectively. When used intentionally, translanguaging fosters inclusivity, reduces anxiety, and promotes confidence in both national and international languages.

Previous studies (Martin, 2014; Tupas & Martin, 2017; Mahboob & Cruz, 2013) have focused largely on policy or urban contexts, with less attention to how rural educators experience multilingual realities in practice. This commentary argues that translanguaging serves as a transformative bridge for learning both Filipino and English by validating local linguistic identities and reimagining bilingual education as inclusive, contextual, and empowering.

### **Theoretical and Contextual Foundations**

Translanguaging, a concept introduced by Cen Williams in the 1980s and developed further by García (2009), refers to the dynamic use of multiple languages within a single communicative act. Unlike traditional bilingual approaches that separate languages by subject or skill, translanguaging views all of a learner's linguistic resources as interconnected. García and Li (2014) describe it as an act that “blurs linguistic boundaries” and promotes deeper cognitive engagement.

In the Philippines, the Bilingual Education Policy (1974) and the MTB-MLE policy (2012) sought to standardize bilingualism in education. However, as noted by Tupas and Martin (2017), these policies sometimes reinforce language hierarchies—where English is seen as the language of prestige and Filipino as the language of identity, while local languages remain marginalized. Translanguaging disrupts this hierarchy by allowing local languages to function as scaffolds for understanding Filipino and English.

As Bernardo (2020) emphasizes, comprehension deepens when learners can relate new knowledge to familiar linguistic frameworks. Translanguaging thus bridges local, culture and academic worlds, making bilingual education reflect the real-life experiences of rural learners.

### **Translanguaging as a Bridge for Inclusion and Understanding Second Language**

In multilingual classrooms, learners naturally think, translate, and express across languages. Translanguaging turns this instinctive process into a pedagogical advantage. It transforms the classroom from a space of correction into a space of connection. When students are encouraged to explain ideas first in their home language before articulating them in Filipino or English, they engage in critical thinking and construct deeper meaning.

From my experience as a Filipino subject teacher in a rural school, I have observed how translanguaging helps learners connect cultural and linguistic knowledge. For instance, when teaching Filipino idioms, students often recall Bisaya proverbs (“panultihon”) with similar meanings. Discussing these first allows them to see relationships between expressions, making abstract language more concrete. Similarly, in English lessons, allowing short clarifications in Filipino or the mother tongue helps students grasp difficult terms and concepts without losing confidence.

Classrooms in rural areas mirror the linguistic diversity of daily life. During group activities, students naturally mix Bisaya, Filipino, and English:

“Ang lesson na nais ipasabot ng author sa mga readers ay ang importance ng pagiging matatag sa harap ng mga challenges sa buhay.” *“The lesson that the author wants to convey to the readers is the importance of being strong in the face of life’s challenges.”*

When asked why she code-switched, she answered, “Mas madaling pong i-express ang aking ideya ma’am.” *“It’s easier to express my idea, ma’am.”* Her response reflected not resistance but a linguistic reality—English and Bisaya are the languages through which she can best articulate complex thoughts here in Southern Leyte.

Such code-mixed utterances show genuine comprehension, even if expressed outside formal Filipino. Yet, when I enforce a “Filipino-only” rule, participation slows, and many students withdraw.

Encouraging students to express themselves first in Bisaya or Taglish before translating to Filipino significantly deepened comprehension and participation. For instance, during a discussion on *Tekstong Ekspositori*, one student began with, “Ma’am, ang layunin po nito ay magbigay po ng a lot of information and explanation on a certain topic.” *“Ma’am, its purpose is to provide a lot of information and explanation on a certain topic.”*

The class collaboratively rephrased it in Filipino: “Layunin ng *Tekstong Ekspositori* ay magbigay ng impormasyon at magpaliwanag tungkol sa isang paksa.” *“The purpose of an expository text is to provide information and explain a certain topic.”*

The core idea was already there; translanguaging merely provided a pathway for expressing it more clearly and confidently.

This practice shows that translanguaging is not interference—it is a cognitive bridge. It uses familiar linguistic structures to support understanding, gradually strengthening proficiency in both Filipino and English.

### **Critical Perspectives and Pedagogical Implications**

Some educators express concern that translanguaging might limit exposure to the target language or slow mastery of grammar (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017). Yet, evidence from global research (García & Li, 2014; Sayer, 2013; Creese & Blackledge, 2010) and Philippine-based studies (Tupas, 2020; Bernardo,

2021) suggests otherwise. When practiced intentionally, translanguaging enhances metalinguistic awareness—learners gain insight into how languages function and interact.

The challenge lies not in whether translanguaging should be practiced, but in how it is recognized within Philippine education. In many rural schools, teachers already translanguaged intuitively to ensure comprehension. However, without formal acknowledgment, these strategies remain invisible in policy and training. Recognizing translanguaging as a legitimate pedagogical practice can lead to teacher development programs and assessments that mirror authentic multilingual learning contexts.

For rural educators, translanguaging represents a pedagogy of inclusion. It allows students to see their home languages as assets, not limitations. When their voices are validated, learners become more engaged, confident, and reflective. Translanguaging thus becomes both a bridge—linking local and academic language use—and a mirror—reflecting learners’ cultural and linguistic identities.

However, embracing translanguaging does not mean abandoning accuracy or discipline in language learning. As teachers, we still need to monitor our students’ progress. There must be consistent feedback and guided practice to help them recognize and correct linguistic errors and gradually improve their mastery of Filipino. Translanguaging serves as a starting point—a bridge toward deeper learning and more authentic expression—but it should be supported by intentional instruction that helps students refine their skills.

## CONCLUSION

Translanguaging offers a path toward an inclusive and context-responsive bilingual education in the Philippines. Embracing multilingual voices in the Filipino classroom is not merely an act of linguistic accommodation—it is an act of inclusion. By connecting local languages with Filipino and English, it nurtures comprehension, confidence, and belonging. For teachers, it transforms instruction from a process of correction to one of connection—bridging not only languages but also experiences and identities.

As a Filipino teacher, I have witnessed how translanguaging transforms hesitation into participation and silence into understanding. It humanizes the learning process and celebrates the country’s rich linguistic diversity. However, translanguaging is most effective when paired with consistent teacher feedback and careful monitoring. As language teachers, we must remember that students’ ability to speak fluently is not the sole measure of their knowledge.

Our role goes beyond observing how well they can speak; it includes guiding them toward accuracy, depth, and confidence through meaningful feedback and practice. Future studies may further explore how translanguaging can be systematically integrated into secondary education, ensuring that bilingual learning remains equitable, culturally grounded, and empowering for all learners.

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