Translanguaging in Collaborative Reading Activity: A Multilingual Perspective of Meaning Making

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from theoretical ideas of Vygotsky's sociocultural framework, this study aims to investigate the effectiveness of translanguaging as a resource in helping multilingual students to make meaning on comprehension text through collaborative reading. It facilitates language awareness and the use of scaffolding for meaningful negotiation and construction of desired voice in reading comprehension text. Data were collected through metacognitive reflective interview of ten first-year students registered for a Bachelor of Environmental Science degree programme. The study found that translanguaging enables exchange of diverse opinions due to the low-anxiety situation which allows for the negotiation of meanings from different perspectives through discussing, questioning and organizing processes which facilitate students' comprehension and internalizing of critical concepts. Thus, translanguaging serves as epistemic democratization which advocates thinking between two languages and taking linguistic fluidity as the norm and building pedagogy from students' language practices.

Keywords

Collaborative reading, translanguaging, summary writing, sociocultural framework, scaffolding

Introduction

Global research on the value of reading literacy converges on the view that the ability to read is a lifeline of students to consolidate knowledge from content materials that are central for academic success (Kirsh, 2018; Mitra 2019; Makalela, 2015). In particular, reading becomes significant for tasks to identify the purpose of written material (Bharuthram, 2012). Despite the primacy of reading in higher education, scholars demonstrated that there are challenges of reading comprehension and information recall and the effect of the cultural familiarity of texts (Pretorius & Klapwijk, 2016; Zimmerman, 2017; Mukhuba & Marutla, 2019, van Dyk & van de Poel, 2013). It has also been found that there are constraining factors such as lack of opportunities to engage in extensive and intensive reading and limited literacy engagement. These factors include limited time on task, enthusiasm and enjoyment of reading, strategies used to achieve deep comprehension, and diversity of literacy practices developed in and out of class (Kirsh, 2018; Sefotho and Makalela, 2017).

Although research highlights the importance of reading for academic success as well as the particular challenges on reading comprehension, research explaining reading literacy challenges is based on cognitive perspective that reflect epistemological and one-language bias. Current studies that takes a culturally relevant pedagogy stance reveal that the reading literacy practices of multilingual learners are hardly understood in the field. In particular, the field of translanguaging considers opportunities created by strategic use of a range of languages and practices brought about by students in our contemporary classrooms that are fluid, complex and versatile (Motlhaka & Makalela, 2016; Makalela, 2015; Garcia, 2011; Wei, 2014; Vaish & Subhan, 2015; Carstens, 2016; Sefotho & Makalela, 2017, Spinelli, 2017; Kirsch, 2018; Maruma & Motlhaka, 2020). It has been shown that multilingual students have multi-competence which enables them to acquire literacy in different languages for different functions when students multitask using or learning in more than one language without disconnecting them (Canagarajah, 2016; Garcia, 2005; Gutierrez, 2008). For this reason, it is important to accept the linguistically diverse nature of students and use multilingualism as a solution to address reading problem among university students as well as to enhance their cognitive skills and to help them to make meaning from learned material. More recent studies explicitly show that the use of students' home language encourages active engagement in learning to make meaning and understand concepts from academic texts (Mbirimi-Hungwe,

2016; Alamillo, Yun & Bennett, 2017; Mendoza & Parba, 2018). While these developments offer a model of using more than one language to develop multilingual students' literacy, very little research using translanguaging during collaborative reading as a useful pedagogic resource to understand academic texts. This paper presents an alternative view to understanding reading literacy development for university students. In the end, the paper offers useful recommendations for practice and further research to develop this line of thought further.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded within the theoretical ideas of Vygotsky's sociocultural framework which shapes the agenda of classroom discourse to promote collaborative learning among students in the zone of proximal development (Motlhaka & Makalela, 2016; Bikowski & Vithanage, 2016; Portoles & Mart, 2017; Helm & Dabre, 2018). Thus, this study is underpinned by critical post-structural paradigm shift in applied linguistics in which all languages within multilinguals' repertoires are allowed to manifest for deeper understanding and for meaning-making processes to take place (Garcia & Wei 2014; Makalela 2016). It facilitates language awareness and the use of scaffolding for meaningful negotiation and construction of desired voice in reading comprehension text. In other words, dialogue creates opportunities for individuals to have cultural voice of speaking in one's own terms when constructing meaning from the text through shared and equitable relations among students. Therefore, this study emphasizes the notion of collaboration via dialogue which is fundamental to bring social change and freedom as way of enhancing mutual understanding and intellectual growth among students.

Aim of the study

The aim of the study is to investigate the effectiveness of translanguaging as a resource in helping multilingual students to make meaning in the comprehension text.

Research methodology

Researchers used qualitative approach to investigate the effectiveness of translanguaging as resource in helping multilingual students to make

meaning on the comprehension texts. The research setting of this study is comprised of one South African rural university located in Thohoyandou, Limpopo province.

Sampling

This study was based on a population of 200 first year students at a historically black university situated in one of South Africa's remote rural areas. The university has more than 50 years of tuition. Most of students from high poverty backgrounds receive a national loan for tuition and basic amenities for their studies. The students are enrolled for a year-long academic literacy course that is obligatory for all first year students. With a mean age of 21 years and 6 months, all the student participants were conveniently sampled from an intact class of majors in Environmental Studies where the researcher was a lecturer for English academic reading literacy tailor-made for this group of students. A further purposive sampling technique was carried out to select out only students who self-assessed their dominant language as Sepedi among a range of other official languages they had proficiency in: Xitsonga, Sepedi, Setswana, isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiNdebele, Siswati and Tshivenda. The choice of Sepedi formed part of the exclusion criteria that sought to tighten analysis and limit the number of participants from large sampling frame of 200 students.

Data collection

The primary data for the study came from participant-generated summary writing and focus group interview.

Summary writing

Respondents were divided into two small groups of five members each to read through a comprehension text on global warming given by the instructor and write a summary. Through discussion, respondents are required to extract the main ideas in a text by drawing from their entire language repertoire to demonstrate what they know and can do with any language rather than within the confines of English medium of instruction. In this case, respondents were given the opportunity to display their ability to 'shuttle between languages' wherein they read in English and infer and explain unfamiliar concepts or

phrases in Sepedi language which could help them identify the main ideas from the text and write a comprehensive summary. The rationale behind summary writing through translanguaging approach is to establish that the use of Sepedi language could play a supportive role in the transfer of already learned skills in English through which L2 writers draw from conventions and resources provided by both cultures, which is central to a sociocultural perspective. This means that the use of students' Sepedi language should not only be viewed as a way to develop academic literacy skills in English but also the same skills in Sepedi language through word choices that express values and beliefs in both languages.

Focus group interview

The second data collection technique used in this study was focus group interview to explore the experiences of respondents in completing the biliteracy task to enhance their comprehension of text on reading and summary writing skills development. During the focus group interview, respondents and the researcher reflected on reading and summary writing skills development specific focus on the socio-cognitive benefits which include brainstorming, clarifying the language, summarizing and paraphrasing, and affective benefits. Drawing from Vygotsky's sociocultural framework, this study draws from multiple voices and a socially oriented research procedure which put control of the interaction and construction of knowledge in the hands of respondents rather than the researcher. Thus, respondents reflected on their reading and summary writing experience while discussing and writing the content in a combination of both Sepedi and English languages to gain a full understanding of the texts which allows them to work at a higher cognitive level than they would be if they were restricted to the sole use of English.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis approach was used to analyse data after the transcription of the focus group interview wherein students reflected on their reading and summary writing experience through translanguaging which allows them to understand difficult and unfamiliar terms in a text using their linguistic resources from both Sepedi and English

language. The following research questions guided the analysis of the article in this study:

- How does collaborative reading through translanguaging lead to greater comprehension of a text than individual reading?
- What strategies are used by the students during collaborative reading?

Then, after discussing themes as they connect to the research questions, the researchers provided pedagogical recommendations and suggestions that emerge from the results of this study.

Discussion Of Results

The study found evidence for a number of benefits of collaborative reading through translanguaging, some of which are objectively measurable and some are subjectively describable. The findings are grouped into the following two broad headings:

1. The Socio-Cognitive Benefits

Socio-cognitive benefits through collaborative reading are rooted in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (SCT) which views learning as inherently a social process activated through the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in which working with more capable peers increases the potential level of development. In other words, one's ability to perform cognitive tasks independently is premised on the prior social process which creates opportunities to develop students' cognition by actively communicating with more proficient peers and thereby expanding conceptual potential. The socio-cognitive benefits of using translanguaging approach in collaborative learning to enhance reading comprehension are divided into the follow themes:

1.1. Brainstorming

Brainstorming in collaborative learning facilitates active student participation, assists with generating ideas and sharing information or knowledge among students through the use of more than one language. Respondents highlighted the following responses on brainstorming of ideas on the text which allowed them to use Sepedi and English language interchangeably to express their understanding of the article on global warming:

Excerpt 1

The use of both Sepedi and English language in the initial discussion of what the article was about by mere looking on the title helped me to

confidently share my ideas without having to worry about my English language proficiency because whenever I struggled to express myself in English I spoke in Sepedi language which enhanced my confidence and participation unlike if I was expected to express myself in English only which is somehow problematic for me.

Excerpt 3

Speaking in both English and Sepedi language helped me to consider the topic of the article from different angles as well as taking my group members' perspectives into consideration which entails broader range of ideas facilitating deeper understanding of the article before the actual reading. For instance, one group member gave comprehensive explanation of global warming in Sepedi language which helped me, and probably other group members to understand global warming.

Above excerpts show that respondents confidently explain what the article is all about prior reading it through the use of both Sepedi and English language which enhanced their participation and deepening their understanding of global warming by considering diverse perspectives. Brainstorming of the title of the article on global warming through translanguaging contributed to the increase in students' motivation, confidence, and participation as reflected by respondent 1 and 3 which is consistent with the studies by Makalela (2016), Carroll and Morales (2016) and Motlhaka and Makalela (2016) who found that students are more confident and motivated to express their ideas when brainstorming using their various linguistic resources to understand texts drawing from more one language. In other words, the use of students' L1 helps them to understand the meaning of new and difficult words and complex syntactic rules as well as cognitive support that allows them to work at a higher cognitive level than they would be if they were restricted to English language only. From this line of argument, the use of more than one language through translanguaging helps to develop the other language(s) because translanguaging involves reading the text in a target language (English) while discussing and writing the content in both target and Sepedi language. In this case, students explore the fluid and fuzzy boundaries of languages to negotiate and grasp the meaning of the text as they move shuffle between languages

at their disposal. Brainstorming through translanguaging allows students to learn by sharing their thoughts and by asking questions that evoke their interest and natural curiosity which embodies non-threatening learning environment and provides the opportunity for students to bring real and authentic speaking experiences. For instance, students make text interpreting utterance which asked for explanation, utterances explaining something, and utterances in the form of questions and answers and meta-linguistic utterances (MUs), such as explicit requests for assistance with regard to the meaning of a particular word, phrase or sentence in the text. The findings support the belief that brainstorming activities through translanguaging encourage students to become better students, especially when low proficiency students can learn from the better ones and address students' reluctance to speak English. The results suggest that translanguaging is inherently activated within the Zone of Proximal Development for multilingual students' linguistic repertoire scaffolded in their collaborative interactions which shape their unique sociocultural contexts.

1.2. Clarifying the Language

During collaborative learning, exchange of ideas makes the negotiation of meaning possible because students clarify their output, reprocess and modify their interlanguage utterance which lead to the development of both the target language and home language. Respondents highlighted the following responses on the development of language through exchange of ideas on the text which allowed them to use Sepedi and English language interchangeably to express their understanding through explaining unfamiliar concepts and phrases:

Excerpt 7

After reading the comprehension text, I discussed my understanding of the comprehension text in both English and Sepedi language which encouraged other group members to explain words such as fossil fuels, carbon dioxide, renewable energy and industrial revolution among others in Sepedi because we struggled to comprehensively explain them in English which deepened our understanding before googling their meaning.

Excerpt 8

I think the use of both Sepedi and English language not only helped us understand the comprehension text but to learn one language through the use of another when we explained unfamiliar concepts such as greenhouse gases, global temperatures, melting ice, renewable energy and climate catastrophe in Sepedi language because some of the concepts used to explain them in Sepedi language are not often used.

Translanguaging during collaborative reading enriches the language classroom with comprehensive input as well as promoting frequent and communicative classroom in a supportive environment through the use of more than one language as reflected by respondent 7 and 8. This type of interaction gives students the opportunity to clarify and confirm their understanding of the language used in the text for better repertoire of performance drawing from their home language to maximize their learning. It is related to social constructivist epistemology where equal opportunities are provided to opine opinions with the goal of acculturating students into the immediate community of learning. Through interaction, students become actively and constructively involved in the learning content and take the ownership of their own learning as well as that of others, wherein English proficiency, learning objectives and degree of learning difficulty are considered. This implies that students engage themselves in requesting, clarifying and negotiating conversation drawing from their cultural and language background to ensure that their peers listen and are able to comprehend ideas from more than one language (Hungwe, 2019; Mgijimi and Makalela, 2016; Makalela, 2015). The results suggest that translanguaging through collaborative learning enhances students' comprehension of texts when using their first language and target language to understand the meaning of unfamiliar words, rather than entirely relying on dictionary use for meaning-making.

1.3. Summarizing

Summary writing has been recognized as a highly important and essential skill not only in language learning, but also in most areas of a student's academic career (Lina & Maarof, 2013; Poza, 2017). It is a highly useful and sophisticated skill,

associated with both reading and writing which ultimately, contributes to academic success and promotes dialectic thinking among students to articulate ideas not their own. However, as pointed out by Messer (1997), summary writing is a skill which is difficult to teach, learn and evaluate because of L2 proficiency, content schemata, affect, formal schemata, cognitive skills, and meta-cognitive skills. In light of the difficulties in the learning and teaching of summary writing in ESL classrooms, it is thus important to examine translanguaging through collaborative learning in the teaching of summary skills, wherein the main ideas of the text are identified and shared using Sepedi language instead of using English only as indicated by respondents below:

Excerpt 4
I read the comprehension text several times and process what I was reading in Sepedi language until I fully understood it, which helped me to identify the main ideas and supporting ideas of the comprehension text which helped me write the summary.

Excerpt 6
The discussion I had with my group members using both Sepedi and English language helped me to understand the comprehension text because some of the words were explained in both languages, which helped me to write a summary.

Above excerpts show that respondents were able to write summary of the text because the use of both Sepedi and English language enhanced their understanding by explaining some of the unfamiliar words using Sepedi language. Collaborative reading is therefore underpinned by Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) where group members use mediational means collaboratively to create, obtain, and communicate meaning with a multitude of resources in both L1 and L2 systems where scaffolding is central to learning as a socially constructed process (Motlhaka & Makalela, 2016). In other words, students collectively guide each other through the complex process of linguistic problem solving in creating and communicating meaning with more clarity and understanding in the comprehension text. In general, students share resources and opportunities to compare ideas, perceived academic and social benefits, and a sense of

accomplishment from discussing each other's summary using both languages to assist them understand the terms and concepts from the text.

1.4. Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is an excellent tool by which students can demonstrate their understanding of texts by identifying main ideas, finding supporting details and capturing the original ideas of the author using their own words to enhance reading comprehension using both Sepedi and English language as indicated by respondents below:

Excerpt 7
The discussion of the text using both Sepedi and English language to understand the text helped me to capture the meaning of what was stated in the passage when paraphrasing it.

Excerpt 9
The use of both Sepedi and English language helped me to generate meaningful and accurate reconstructions of what was stated in the passage.

Paraphrasing can be used in multilingual classroom during collaborative activities to allow students to interact with one another and challenge each other's ideas using both their first language and English for deeper understanding of the text as reflected by respondent 7 and 9. In this case, students may write ideas from a text in their first language to make meaning and gain understanding and knowledge of the text as a cognitive support that allows them to work at a higher cognitive level than they would be if they were restricted use English only (Hungwe, 2019). This empowers students with an understanding of difficult and unfamiliar words and phrases by using their linguistic resources from both languages to enhance their understanding of the target language to develop ideas and produce text content (Motlhaka & Makalela, 2016). It could be concluded that the use of L1 in paraphrasing as a resource and scaffolding device helps them to comprehensively navigate their L2 writing processes. Translanguaging in collaborative reading affords students the opportunity to display their ability to shuttle between languages to foster language and literacy development when paraphrasing as a way of giving them the right to learn in a language of their choice which they are most familiar.

2. Affective Benefits

Supportive and communicative learning was assumed in the collaborative reading context. This enabled the students to reduce their affective and psychological barriers, enhance their motivation, and enjoy their learning as highlighted by respondents below:

Excerpt 5
Translanguaging approach enables me to use my home language to decode a text presented in English which enhanced my confidence to actively engage in a discussion using both Sepedi and English language as a way of harnessing both languages.

Excerpt 10
I think translanguaging approach gave us the opportunity to confidently interact with one another and to challenge each other's ideas using both Sepedi and English language to achieve higher level of thinking to demonstrate an understanding of the text by capturing the original ideas of the author using our own words when summarising the text.

Above excerpts show that respondents were confident to engage in a discussion using both Sepedi and English language to harness both languages and demonstrate an understanding of the text by capturing the original ideas of the author using their own words when summarising the text. The results of this study suggests that during collaborative learning, students are exposed to other perspectives and alternatives as they share and exchange ideas, criticize and provide feedback, which increase their awareness of their learning aims, and of the strategies to employ to achieve those aims (Fraiberg, 2018). In addition, students learn how to see things from other people's point of view, and evaluate what was said as well as developing empathy for others. They look at how decisions affect people in their group and determine whether or not it was good. Furthermore, the results suggest that students developed self-confidence and self-esteem as well as a sense of accomplishment when they realized that they are successful in completing the task using both languages. Along with building self-confidence, cooperative learning builds social skills. Students learn how to get along, how to take turns, how to listen politely, and how to speak politely. The results of this study suggest that translanguaging is an essential part of working within the Zone of Proximal

Development for multilingual students whose linguistic repertoire can scaffold their collaborative interaction shaped by their unique sociocultural contexts. It enables exchange of diverse opinions due to the low-anxiety situation which allows for the negotiation of meanings from different perspectives through discussing, questioning and organizing processes which facilitate students' comprehension and internalizing of critical concepts. This implies that students speak in different ways to ensure that peers listen and able to comprehend ideas using both languages. In other words, translanguaging provides more language practice opportunities, improves the quality of talk, creates a positive learning climate, promotes social interaction and allows for critical thinking.

Conclusion

The study explored the effectiveness of translanguaging approach as resource in collaborative reading in helping multilingual students to make meaning and shape their experiences to gain understanding and knowledge on the comprehension texts. It found that translanguaging enables exchange of diverse opinions due to the low-anxiety situation which allows for the negotiation of meanings from different perspectives through discussing, questioning and organizing processes which facilitate students' comprehension and internalizing of critical concepts. This empowers students with an understanding of difficult and unfamiliar words and phrases by using their linguistic resources from both languages to enhance their understanding of the target language to develop ideas and produce text content (Motlhaka & Makalela, 2016; Pacheco & Miller, 2015). In this case, students may write ideas from a text in their first language to make meaning and gain understanding and knowledge of the text as a cognitive support that allows them to work at a higher cognitive level than they would be if they were restricted to use English only (Hungwe, 2019, MacSwan, 2017; Fraiberg, 2018). This implies that students share resources and opportunities to compare ideas, perceived academic and social benefits, and a sense of accomplishment from editing each other's work using their languages to assist them to understand the terms and concepts from the text. From this

line of argument, the use of both languages through translanguaging helps to develop the other language(s) because translanguaging involves reading the text in a target language (English) while discussing and writing the content in both target and home languages. In other words, the use of students' L1 helps them to understand the meaning of new and difficult words and complex syntactic rules as well as cognitive support that allows them to work at a higher cognitive level than they would be if they were restricted to English only. Thus, translanguaging serves as epistemic democratization which advocates thinking between two languages taking linguistic fluidity as the norm and building pedagogy from students' language practices.

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