'I learnt Japanese, but more than Japanese': Out-of-class Translanguaging Practice and Identity Transformation of an EMI Student

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1. Background

English-medium Instruction (EMI), referring to using the English language to teach academic subjects other than English itself in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) is not English (Macaro et al., 2017), has been adopted as a significant approach to the internalization of higher education in non-Anglophone countries.

In these bi/multilingual circumstances, translanguaging is a frequently observed phenomenon in teaching and learning processes. Tsou and Baker (2021) examined EMI and translanguaging practices in Asia with a focus on the dynamic and complex meaning-making processes of multilingual students' and lecturers' practices and perspectives in classroom settings. It is argued that translanguaging as a theoretical framework provides an alternative perspective in viewing relationships among English and other named languages, as well as criticizes English-only ideology in the meaning-making process.

However, previous research has focused much attention on academic activities, not limited to lectures, seminars, or lab activities, yet few have investigated the language uses of EMI students outside the classroom. To fill this gap, this research examined one international student's translanguaging practice who possesses the ability of Chinese as his native language, English as his instructed language, and Japanese as his daily language. Two research questions will be answered:

RQ1 How do EMI international students utilize linguistic and semiotic repertoires to communicate with interlocutors outside the classroom?

RQ2 How do EMI international students construct their identity in translanguaging space?

2. Literature review

The concept of translanguaging is described as the act performed by bilinguals of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximize communicative potential. Besides its meaning in language education, translanguaging is also regarded as an important means to negotiate students' activities, knowledge, and identities (García and Li Wei, 2015). Monolingual norm privileges the ideological construct of named languages and their powerful speakers from one nation-state, while translanguaging validates the speech of multilingual speakers, by dissolving the concept of named language entities, such as English, Chinese, Japanese, etc. Multilingual speakers who can speak two or more named languages could deploy agency to make effective communication, as they have a more extended semiotic repertoire combing both linguistic features and multimodal features.

3. Research method

This research examines the out-of-class translanguaging practice of an international student, Tony (pseudonym), who is currently enrolled in a top-ranking university in Japan, majoring in STEM. Tony

has been in Japan for three years since September 2019, one year in a Japanese language school, and two years in graduate school. Though studying in a Japanese language school for one year, he did not make any progress and was mainly dependent on his family to live in Japan. Besides, STEM research relies more on English ability rather than Japanese; therefore, ever since entering graduate school, he has been going through EMI, with only a few compulsory courses in Japanese.

To examine his complex and fluid language practices, a qualitative study was conducted by the means of interviews and observation. The first one-hour interview was in April 2022, after which the author observed his language uses for half a year, mainly in three situations categorized by his familiarity based on fully consenting.

1. Communicating with professors and classmates - Familiar
2. Talking to Japanese friends- Half Familiar
3. Shopping in the convenience store- Unfamiliar

Finally, the second one-hour interview was carried out in September 2022 to uncover the reason for his choice of adopting a certain kind of repertoire, and to track the identity change in the half year. Two interviews are both conducted in Chinese.

All the recording transcriptions and field notes were freely coded sentence by sentence in the first phase. Secondly, the author applied a translanguaging theoretical framework to the codes to analyze them in depth.

4. Analysis and Discussion

As a multilingual speaker, Tony lives in a contact zone that does not strictly identify with any named languages and worlds the languages exist in. At school, English is the dominant language in his laboratory and the language he uses to communicate with supervisors, but privately, as most of the students are Chinese L1 speakers, they share a Chinese-speaking community together, and with Japanese students, he employs both English and Japanese where code-switching and translanguaging appear. When it comes to daily life in Japan, he has no choice but to speak Japanese with the local people due to the acquiescent monolingual norm in Japan. In the process, he is struggling with his identity construction.

Different from code-switching, in which power hierarchies are reflected along with named languages, translanguaging allows speakers to select features from their entire language repertoires in social interactions. As stated in the excerpt below, Tony used Japanese as a 'lubricant' and a way he showed amity to his interlocutors if they were Japanese.

Excerpt 1 (first interview, translated by the author)

When I don't know how to express what I want to say in English, then I will use some Japanese words; it's like a lubricant. I think Japanese words can facilitate our communication.

Excerpt 2 (second interview, translated by the author)

[In a conversation with one supervisor] I said 耳［ear］, then pointed to my ear, 'My left ear can't hear'. I said I was '中耳炎' [otitis media] , and he told me he had '外耳炎' [otitis externa].

He mentioned an episode of his conversation with a Japanese supervisor in the second interview above. They adopted Japanese and English, gestures, as well as shared experiences and information on the ear disease to make themselves understood. The main characteristic that translanguaging is acted as a meaning-making process without over-emphasis on multilingual competencies illustrates that multilingual speakers do not have to care much about what they say and how rightful they use the named language proclaimed by native speakers. Their shared perspective in the use of terms, such as otitis media or otitis externa, considers that meaning-making is not constrained to the use of sets of linguistic resources (Creese and Blackledge, 2015), but in communicative repertoires, semiotics available for meaning-making extended beyond linguistic varieties from nation-states.

Excerpt 3 (field note)

Tony: 「月が綺麗です」、この意味はあの愛してるの意味、でも中国語でも「この馬鹿」、「You are my 馬鹿」、みたいのことは愛してる伝えたい…Culture and communication are not based on language ability. 例えば、私、日本語、とても下手です、伝いことは伝えるのは文化の…

Translation: *Tsuki ga kirei* [the moon is beautiful] means 'I love you.' In Chinese, there are words like *kono baka* [this idiot], you are my *baka* [you are my idiot], these kind*s* of words to express love. Culture and communication are not based on language ability. For example, I am not good at Japanese, but I can express what I want to express in culture…(translated by the author).

This episode was extracted from the field note of his conversation with a Japanese friend and two Chinese friends, where he mixed Japanese and English. Beyond language forms, different culture was embedded into the conversation. When he used the Japanese word '馬鹿' (baka), he actually meant '冤家' (Yuanjia) in Chinese, which initially means enemy, but in traditional Chinese literature, it is always used to refer to wife/husband in an intimate manner.

In his reflection on the conversation with this Japanese friend, he said:

Excerpt 4 (second interview, translated by the author)

I like to talk to him. I spoke with effort, but he listened with even more effort. With him, I am willing to use his language to cater to him.

For a smooth conversation, he gave up his equal status of languages and submitted himself to the monolingual norm. Sometimes, multilingual speakers are criticized or confused by the fact that their language use is not responding to the idealized monolingual norms, but in Tony's case, whether his language use is legitimate or not does not hinder his willingness to communicate, as language is no longer separate entities with fixed boundaries, but rather linguistic resources are deployed to draw on communicative repertoires.

In the translanguaging space where speakers use all their meaning-making potential to mean and communicate, multilingual speakers are enabled to represent meaning by using their own semiotic repertoire, for instance, the linguistic ability they have acquired, or multimodal features such as images. For example, Tony is exempt from the hierarchy of monolingualism in language practices; rather the ways in which he combines different modes and media across social contexts and negotiates social identities are recognized by his communicative achievements.

Excerpt 5 (first interview, translated by the author)

> I don't want to integrate into this society. Language ability is one reason, but I don't want to find a job here.

As shown in the excerpt, Tony had no intention of integrating to Japanese society in the first interview. He explained why he used 'I don't want to' instead of 'I can't'. That shows he has faith in his aptitude and agency to learn Japanese or to integrate into society, but as he had been rejected in the first place, an identity of 'transient sojourner' has grown up inside, contributing to his refusal. However, his narratives changed the second time.

Excerpt 6 (second interview, translated by the author)

> I felt a sense of inclusiveness, maybe for the first time.

This feeling came from his communication with the owner of a convenience store nearby where he lives. Multimodal repertoires were observed in their complex and dynamic communication, with seldom any words. For example, Tony always bought the same cigarette there. The first time, he showed a picture and pointed at the number. After several times, he did not need to say anything; every time he went to checkout, the owner would bring him that cigarette and choose the payment way for him. Through the communication of consensus, Tony constructed a new identity and developed a sense of belonging due to being understood.

As an empirical study of the relationship between translanguaging and identity, Tony's identity resonates with the conclusion of Creese and Blackledge (2015) that identity is incorporated and performed as sets of 'emblematic, multisemiotic features, including linguistic resources'.

5. Conclusion

This research is a small-scale study, but it has an essential meaning in making up for the deficiency of current translanguaging research. Through coding and analyzing the qualitative data, a conclusion can be drawn that EMI international students who have low proficiency in Japanese, experience translanguaging by using all kinds of features, including native language, gestures, images, eye contact, and translation tools, and construct their identity in the meaning-making process despite the linguistic barriers.

Reference

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