



## Exploring English language teachers' use of translanguaging in Indonesian secondary school English classrooms: reasons and purposes

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### ABSTRACT

Despite a growing body of research on translanguaging internationally, more studies are needed to examine secondary school teachers' reasons and purposes of translanguaging during English lessons, especially in Outer Circle countries such as Chile, Germany, China, Vietnam, and Indonesia. This paper aims to contribute to this emerging area of interest by investigating junior secondary school teachers' reasons for and purposes of utilizing students' linguistic repertoires during English language instruction in the Indonesian ELT context. Data were primarily collected through interviews with three teachers working at two schools in the Special Region of Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The findings reveal several reasons for translanguaging, including limited exposure to English outside the classroom, lack of foundational English knowledge, restricted vocabulary, and diverse student learning needs and proficiency levels. Teachers reported using languages other than English to build rapport, foster a relaxed classroom atmosphere, reinforce or clarify instructions, facilitate comprehension, check understanding, and manage instructional time efficiently. These findings suggest that translanguaging can be an effective pedagogical strategy in English language classrooms, particularly in contexts with limited English exposure. The study points out the importance of incorporating translanguaging approaches into teacher education programs and recommends further research into its long-term effects on student learning outcomes.

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## Introduction

In contexts where English is considered as a foreign language such as in Chile, China, Germany, Indonesia, Iran, Thailand, and Vietnam, English teachers often integrate students' entire linguistic repertoire into English language instruction (Donoso, 2020; Shin, 2019). This practice, referred to as transanguaging (García, 2014), is gaining prominence in the shift toward multilingualism in English Language Teaching (ELT) (Galante, 2020). Unlike the traditional English-only approach, where English is taught exclusively through English, transanguaging allows both teachers and students to draw on their home languages as well as the target language to achieve various pedagogical goals. Given its growing relevance in multilingual education, transanguaging has attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years. A substantial body of research has emerged that explores how transanguaging is enacted in classroom contexts and how it is perceived by both students and teachers. These studies provide valuable insights into the practical, attitudinal, and pedagogical dimensions of transanguaging across diverse educational settings.

Existing research on transanguaging has explored its various dimensions from both student and teacher perspectives. Studies on students have examined their self-reported use of their first language (L1) (Wasch, 2016) as well as their perceptions of L1 integration in foreign language classrooms (Brooks-Lewis, 2009). On the teacher side, investigations have focused on transanguaging implementation (Galante, 2020), educators' practices and student reactions (Brevik & Rindall, 2020), and the pedagogical functions of L1 in teacher-led transanguaging (Sali, 2014). Additional studies have analyzed teachers' reported L1 use (Molway et al., 2022; Wilden & Porsch, 2020), their attitudes toward transanguaging (Anderson & Lightfoot, 2021), their perspectives on L1 integration (Gallagher & Geraghty, 2021), and their beliefs about L1's role in language instruction (Wach & Monroy, 2019). Research has also explored pre-service teachers' perceptions of L1 use, such as Spanish, in English lessons (Donoso, 2020).

In addition to the studies mentioned above, a body of research has explored the reasons behind teachers' use of L1 and the purposes it serves during English language instruction (e.g., Barahona et al., 2021; Donoso, 2020; Tekin & Garton, 2020; Wilden & Porsch, 2020). In South America, particularly in the Chilean context, Barahona et al. (2021) investigated the purposes and key reasons for pre-service teachers to use L1 (Spanish) during English language teaching practicum. The purposes included "explaining concepts, supporting and checking comprehension, giving instructions, activating previous knowledge, and focusing students' attention on the objective of the lesson" (p. 10). Their findings also highlighted reasons for using L1, such as "students' context, preservice teachers' self-efficacy beliefs, teaching strategy, and contradictory expectations" (p. 11).

Within the Chilean context, Donoso (2020) explored the perceptions of preservice EFL teachers regarding the use of Spanish during English language instruction and found that Spanish was primarily used for two purposes: namely, fostering student-teacher relationships and serving pedagogical and instructional purposes. Meanwhile, in the European, particularly German, context, Wilden and Porsch (2020) examined the reasons behind primary school English teachers' use of German in EFL lessons. They identified what they called learner-related and teacher-related reasons. While the former included the development of L1 and L2, enhancing language awareness, assisting individual learners, maintaining learners' focus, and reducing affective barriers, the latter involved maintaining

lesson flow, saving time, reinforcing teacher authority, and compensating for limited vocabulary knowledge.

Conducting a similar study in the Turkish context, Tekin and Garton (2020) investigated primary school teachers' reasons and purposes for using L1 in the English classroom. The results showed that while the purposes of using L1 included "giving instruction, providing feedback, and asking questions" (p. 77), reasons for their decision involved "students' proficiency level, achieving target curriculum, saving time, and teaching specific language points" (p. 77). Despite these studies, there has been limited studies investigating *why* and *what for* do teachers translanguange during English lessons. Accordingly, this paper aims to add to this emerging area of research by presenting results of an empirical study investigating teachers' reasons for and purposes of translanguaging in the Asian, particularly Indonesian, ELT context.

In Indonesia, particularly in the years following 2020, research on translanguaging has gained increasing attention. Although the body of research remains limited, several key topics have been explored. In the context of tertiary education, studies have investigated the relationship between translanguaging and students' enjoyment of learning (Hidayati et al., 2024), students' views on the functions and benefits of using Indonesian during English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction (Emilia & Hamied, 2022), students' perceptions of translanguaging practices in ELT writing classrooms (Styati & Irawati, 2023), and both teachers' and students' perceptions of translanguaging and trans-semiotizing during English lessons (Silalahi & Santoso, 2023). In secondary education, research has focused on students' perceptions of translanguaging practices during English lessons (Sakkir et al., 2024). Additionally, within the context of Islamic education, a study explored teachers' attitudes toward the use of translanguaging in English Language Teaching (ELT) practices at *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) (Madkur et al., 2022).

In addition to the above-mentioned studies, there have been studies (e.g., Marsakawati, 2017; Murtiningsih et al., 2022) examining reasons for and/or purposes of using L1 in the English classroom. As for the results, Marsakawati (2017) found that L1 was used to facilitate students to better comprehend concepts taught, accommodate to the students' limited levels of English ability, and show their ethnic identity. In Murtiningsih et al. (2022), L1 was employed for "discussing specific topics, making teaching and learning more practical, managing the classroom, building social relationship, and encouraging students' active participation" (p. 318). While providing useful insight, both studies were conducted in university settings. The situation in secondary education has remained relatively underexplored, despite its critical role in students' foundational language development.

Unlike in tertiary contexts, where students often possess higher English proficiency and greater autonomy in learning, secondary school students are typically in the early stages of formal English education. They often face a range of challenges, including limited prior exposure to English, uneven language proficiency, and a heightened dependence on teacher guidance. Moreover, secondary education in Indonesia serves as a transitional phase where students' academic, cognitive, and socio-emotional development intersect, making the classroom dynamics and language needs more complex. These contextual factors make translanguaging practices at the secondary level both necessary and pedagogically distinct, yet they have received comparatively little attention in existing research. Accordingly, this paper aims to contribute to the field of translanguaging in the Indonesian ELT context by

examining teachers' reasons for and purposes of utilizing students' linguistic repertoires during English lessons in secondary education.

The present study was guided by the following two research questions:

1. What reasons do secondary school teachers provide for using translanguaging in the English language classroom?
2. What purposes do secondary school teachers aim to achieve through translanguaging in the English language classroom?

## Method

### *Research approach*

To answer the research questions, a basic qualitative approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was employed. Qualitative research is based on the idea that knowledge is constructed by individuals over time as they participate in and interpret a situation, event, or occurrence (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach aligns well with the aims of the present study, as it is specifically designed to explore how individuals make sense of their experiences.

### *Research setting and participants*

The research was conducted in two state secondary schools in the Special Region of Yogyakarta (S.R.Y.), Indonesia: Secondary Schools (SS) 1 and Secondary School (SS) 2 (See Table 1). One teacher from SS1, Nessa (pseudonym) and two teachers from SS2, Nia and Dea (pseudonyms), agreed to participate. At the time of the fieldwork, Nessa was teaching 7<sup>th</sup> graders and Nia and Dea were teaching 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders respectively. During fieldwork, both schools were implementing the Merdeka curriculum, the latest national curriculum, which emphasizes flexibility and student-centered learning practices.

The three teacher participants were selected based on specific criteria to ensure they could provide meaningful insights into reasons and purposes of translanguaging in English classrooms. To be eligible, potential teacher participants should (1) be government employees, (2) possess more than 20 years of teaching experience, and (3) have relevant qualifications such as Bachelor/Master of Education in TESOL/ELT/Applied Linguistics. As for the reasons, government employees were selected to ensure the study reflects national curriculum standards. With over 10 years of teaching experience, teachers can offer deep insights and practical knowledge of classroom practices. Relevant qualifications in TESOL/ELT provide a foundation in language teaching, offering informed perspectives on how to teach English including when to use or not to use L1.

In addition, the three teachers (1) were government employees; (2) had been working as English teachers for at least 20 years; and (3) had completed formal undergraduate and graduate training in English Language Education from reputable universities in S.R.Y. In terms of English proficiency, all teachers appeared to have operational command of English, enabling them to use English effectively in teaching and learning in secondary school settings.

**Table 1***Demographic of the Participants*

Pseudonym	School type	Teaching grade(s)	Years of teaching experience	Academic qualification	Employment status
Nessa	SS21 (Public)	Grade 7	24 years	Bachelor in English Language Education (TESOL/ELT)	Government Employee
Nia	SS2 (Public)	Grade 7	23 years	Bachelor in English Language Education (TESOL/ELT)	Government Employee
Dea	SS2 (Public)	Grade 8	21 years	Bachelor in English Language Education (TESOL/ELT)	Government Employee

***Data collection***

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, with formal consent received from both the participating schools and the teachers. Each teacher was given explanatory statements outlining the study's purpose and procedures, including their right to withdraw at any time. After reviewing the information, all participants signed consent forms to confirm their participation. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with each of the three participants, with three interviews conducted for each participant, resulting in a total of nine interviews. Each interview session lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. With each participant, interviews were spaced approximately one week apart to allow time for reflection and follow-up questions. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim by one of the researchers (i.e., Yusti). Transcripts of all interviews were then translated into English.

***Data analysis and trustworthiness***

The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to explore the reasons and purposes behind translanguaging in the English language classroom. The data analysis process involved reading and re-reading each transcript to become familiar with the content, followed by generating initial codes based on recurring ideas. These codes were then organized into broader themes that reflected the reasons and purposes for translanguaging as expressed by each teacher. The analysis aimed to identify both unique and common patterns in the teachers' perspectives on translanguaging. The final themes are summarized in Table 2 below.

To guarantee the trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and confirmation of the interview data while reducing potential misinterpretation in the article, the researchers involved the participants by sharing with them both the transcriptions of the interview data and the analysis for their feedback and comments. This approach reflects relational responsibility, addressing boundaries, anonymity, and ethical concerns collaboratively with the participants.

**Table 2***Codes and Themes Related to Reasons and Purposes for Translanguaging*

Codes	Themes
Lack of exposure to English-speaking environment	Reasons for translanguaging
Absence of basic English knowledge	
Limited vocabulary	
Specific learning needs and proficiency levels	
Building rapport with students	Purposes of translanguaging
Creating a relaxed learning atmosphere	
Reinforcing or clarifying instructions	
Helping students understand materials	
Checking students' understanding	
Saving time	

## Findings and discussion

As shown in Table 2, analysis revealed a variety of reasons and purposes for the use of translanguaging in the classroom. The reasons primarily centred on issues related to lack of exposure to English-speaking environments, absence of basic English knowledge, limited vocabulary, and specific learning needs and proficiency levels. Teachers also used translanguaging for various purposes, such as building rapport, and creating a relaxed learning atmosphere. Additionally, it helped reinforce instructions, clarify materials, check understanding, and save time.

### ***Reason #1: Lack of exposure to English-speaking environments***

The first reason reported by the teachers was the absence of an English-speaking environment outside of school. Living in a context where English is considered as a foreign language, many students have limited or no direct exposure to English outside their lessons. Nessa described this challenge, stating, "Because they don't have an environment related to English... outside the classroom, they don't have an English-speaking environment at all. Also, sometimes at home, they watch movies that are already dubbed [into Indonesian]. So, they are lacking exposure to English" (Interview 1, p. 2). To address this issue, the teachers gradually introduced English in a structured manner while initially relying on L1 for explanations and instructions. As Nessa shared, "In the first semester, I still used around 70% of L1. In the second semester, they [the students] started to understand better and became familiar with the instructions I typically used" (Interview 2, p. 2). None of the studies reviewed above mentions a broader social context, in this case, students' lack of exposure to English-speaking environment as one reason that teachers claim for justifying their L1 use.

***Reason #2: Absence of basic English knowledge from elementary school***

Another reason for translanguaging was the lack of basic English knowledge that many students had upon entering secondary school. As Nessa mentioned, some of her students had no prior exposure to English [education] at all: "They didn't have any basic knowledge of English at all, so when I directly used English, many of them still struggled" (Interview 1, p. 1). Nia further emphasized this point. She stated that "the main reason is that the students haven't been introduced to English, and they also did not receive it in elementary school" (Interview 1, p. 1). This lack of a foundational English education created gaps in students' language skills, making it necessary for teachers to rely on L1 at the beginning of their secondary education. This condition necessitated use of students' linguistic repertoire for mediating learning. As Nessa explained, "I still had to use their native languages [i.e., Javanese and/or Indonesian] first before gradually introducing English" (Interview 1, p. 1). Similar to the first reason above, this finding has not been mentioned in the previous studies reviewed earlier in this paper.

***Reason #3: Limited vocabulary***

Absence of basic English knowledge also meant limited vocabulary. Dea specifically mentioned students' limited vocabulary as a factor that drove her to translanguage. She reported, "So, the first thing ... was the lack of vocabulary" (Interview 1, p. 1). Nessa echoed this concern, pointing out that in her classroom L1 was used "because their [the students'] vocabulary is limited" (Interview 2, p. 5). Among all previous studies reviewed above, Wilden & Porsch (2020) examined primary school teachers' translanguaging practices and found that one of reasons for incorporating German during English lessons was students' limited knowledge of vocabulary. Finding of the present study appears to suggest that limited knowledge of English vocabulary can also be a factor for L1 inclusion at least until a junior secondary school level. Where students' English vocabulary is limited, teachers may need to translanguage, maximizing the potential of shared linguistic repertoire to mediate classroom interactions and English language learning (Agustin & Yana, 2023).

***Reason #4: Specific learning needs and proficiency levels***

Finally, translanguaging was utilized as a direct response to the individual learning needs and conditions of students in the classroom. Nessa explained, "The reason I used more L1 is because of that [i.e., students' difficulty in understanding English explanations], it [use of L1, i.e., Javanese and/or Indonesian] was really to adjust to the condition of the students" (Interview 1, p. 2). By translanguaging, the teachers such as Nessa tailored their teaching approaches to the students' proficiency levels, helping to create a more supportive and effective learning environment. In addition to Wilden and Porsch (2020), Tekin and Gorton's (2020) study also concerned with primary school teachers. Similar to the finding of the present study, they identified students' limited levels of English proficiency as one of the reasons. While the present study and Tekin and Gorton's (2020) study identified students' low levels of English ability as one factor/reason for teachers' translanguaging practices, results of Marsakawati's (2017) study show that this factor or reason can still hold true in tertiary education setting. The present study suggests that translanguaging, to varying extents, can

be employed to accommodate students' specific needs and proficiency levels across different levels of education.

### ***Purpose #1: Building rapport with students***

Building a connection with students and establish a comfortable learning environment were mentioned as purposes of translanguaging in the classroom. As Nia explained, "So, by doing that [using L1], I can build chemistry with the students so they don't feel scared" (Interview 2, p. 9). Dea also shared her experience with lower-level classes, where many students faced personal challenges, which could hinder their motivation to learn: "Since I happened to have a lower-level class... many of the children here lacked attention from their parents... So, their motivation to learn was really lacking" (Interview 1, p. 5). Using L1 allowed both teachers to approach students in a way that felt more approachable and less overwhelming. This finding indicates that the use of L1 to build social relationships with students was not limited to tertiary education settings, as reported by Donoso (2020) and Murtiningsih (2022). It also occurred in junior secondary school settings, where teachers utilized a more familiar language to help maintain students' motivation for learning.

### ***Purpose #2: Creating a relaxed learning atmosphere***

Translanguaging reportedly helped to create a more relaxed atmosphere in the classroom. Nia pointed out that jokes were often made using Javanese, most, if not all, students' local language, as it was more relatable to the students: "When it comes to jokes, the kids even use Javanese because it's more relatable and it hits home better" (Interview 3, p. 6). This practice not only made the learning environment more relaxed but also helps to maintain students' engagement by connecting with them in a familiar way. Previously, Wilden and Porsch (2020) also mention reducing affective/emotional barriers as one of purposes why primary school teachers utilized L1 when teaching English, resulting in a more comfortable learning atmosphere.

### ***Purpose #3: Reinforcing or clarifying instructions***

A practical use of translanguaging was to reinforce or clarify instructions, especially when students experienced difficulty understanding English-only directions. Dea noted, "Not all children knew everything that was said [in English]. Sometimes, I spoke in English, but I always followed it with Indonesian to clarify the instructions I gave. Because if I kept using English, the children got confused and didn't know what to do" (Interview 1, p. 1). Similarly, Nia explained that she used both English and Indonesian to help students follow instructions: "when I speak English, I also explain it in Indonesian. For example, if I give an instruction like, 'Okay, be quiet please,' I'll explain it in Indonesian, 'Ayo tenang,' which means 'quiet' in English. Thus, there's both English and Indonesian." (Interview 2, p. 10). This dual-language approach ensured that all students can follow classroom instructions. Uses of L1 for giving instructions were also mentioned in previous studies such as Barahona et al. (2021) and Tekin and Garton (2020).

***Purpose #4: Helping students understand materials***

Translanguaging was also employed to ensure that students fully understand the lesson content, especially when complex concepts are being introduced. Dea emphasized the importance of using Indonesian to clarify topics such as descriptive texts or tenses: "For example, the theory about descriptive texts, or perhaps about tenses, it still might be that Indonesian is really needed by the children to clarify their understanding" (Interview 1, p. 1). Given that many students struggle with understanding technical terms or concepts in English, using L1 serves as an important tool for comprehension. Nia similarly highlighted the role of L1 in facilitating understanding: "We use L1 as a connector so that the students can understand the meaning of the material" (Interview 1, p. 1). The use of L1 as a bridge between the student's existing knowledge and the new language content helps students make connections that might otherwise be difficult to achieve. Uses of L1 for enhancing comprehension did not only occur in junior secondary school settings as demonstrated in the present study but also in higher education settings as demonstrated by Barahona et al. (2021) and Marsakawati (2017).

***Purpose #5: Checking students' understanding***

Teachers utilized L1 to check whether students have understood the material. Nia described how she would follow up her question "Do you understand?" in English with a follow-up question in Indonesian if no one answered. "To check the students' understanding, I usually ask, for example, 'Do you understand?' and if no one answers, I'll usually ask them [in Indonesian]" (Nia, Interview 3, p. 10). This practice allowed her to gauge students' comprehension and ensured that no one is left behind due to language barriers. Similar to the finding above, use of L1 for checking students' understanding did not only happen in secondary school settings but also in tertiary education setting as identified by Barahona et al. (2021). The last two findings suggest that translanguaging can be useful for not only supporting but also checking students' comprehension of the lessons taught.

***Purpose #6: Saving time***

Finally, translanguaging was considered to be a time-saving strategy, particularly when students had limited proficiency in English. Nia pointed out the inefficiency of explaining complex topics like tenses entirely in English. "Yes, to help them understand faster. If I explain tenses in English, how can they understand? They don't even know English yet, so it's impossible to explain tenses using English" (Nia, Interview 1, p. 3). Additionally, Nia noted that using L1 helped keep students engaged during long lessons, stating, "...I teach [English] for three hours straight... so, what I do is [use L1] to make sure they stay engaged for three hours without getting too distracted or falling asleep" (Interview 2, p. 9). Similarly, Wilden and Porsch (2020) also found that in primary school settings, teachers made use of L1 for efficiency of time.

**Conclusion**

This study explored Indonesian secondary school teachers' reasons for and purposes of using translanguaging in English lessons, revealing that teachers employed this strategy to address

challenges such as limited English exposure, vocabulary gaps, and foundational knowledge deficits (Donoso, 2020; Molway et al., 2022), while also tailoring instruction to diverse proficiency levels. Translanguaging served key pedagogical functions, including fostering rapport (Brevik & Rindall, 2020), creating a supportive learning environment (Galante, 2020), reinforcing instructions, clarifying content (Sali, 2014), and optimizing instructional time – ultimately enhancing learning outcomes. These findings underscore translanguaging's potential as a dynamic pedagogical tool that bridges communicative barriers and advances inclusive, student-centered language teaching (García, 2014), challenging traditional monolingual ELT paradigms (Anderson & Lightfoot, 2021).

However, the study's limitations – such as its small participant pool, regional restriction to Yogyakarta, and reliance solely on teacher interviews (cf. Brook-Lewis, 2009; Carles, 2007) – warrant cautious interpretation. Future research should expand participant diversity, incorporate multiple data sources (e.g., observations, student perspectives, and documents) (Humphreys, 2022; Ma, 2012), and investigate translanguaging's long-term impacts on language acquisition and academic achievement (Nghia, 2017) to deepen understanding of its role in multilingual classrooms.

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