

# Demystifying Translanguaging in Greek Primary Education

**Isaak Papadopoulos**

Center of Greek Education, Greece

**Evelyn Biliadis-Lolis**

Fairfield University, United States of America

## Abstract

Given that translanguaging pedagogy has been receiving much of attention both from research and teaching perspective, this chapter presents a study which aimed at investigating the translanguaging use in Greek language classrooms. More specifically, the study investigated the impact of language and culture contact on students' communication, collaboration, and learning/teaching in the Greek educational context by delving into the attitudes and views of Greek and immigrant students regarding translanguaging and its role in their communication as well as in strengthening their intercultural awareness and sensitivity. This work made use of two research instruments, a) Semi-structured interviews with each student individually and b) Observation protocols that were developed by the researcher and used in translanguaging practice. The findings suggest that translanguaging played an important role in provoking collaboration among Greek and immigrant students, while it also encouraged students' behaviours towards mutual understanding and exchange of views.

## 1.1 Theoretical review: Defining Translanguaging

The term “*translanguaging*” was constructed in the 1980s by Cen Williams, a Welsh educationalist. According to Baker (2003), translanguaging was employed to describe the systematic and planned use of two languages, in order to learn or to teach in the same context or the same lesson. It is crucial to emphasize what Williams (2002) pointed out about translanguaging, which was seen as a “process” in which one language can be used in order to enhance the other language as well as the understanding and the abilities of the students in the two languages (Duarte, 2020).

Specifically, according to current research, a translanguaging-open environment facilitates students’ adoption of new ideas coming from and expressed by their classmates, their continuous attempts to understand the message, as well as the students’ attempts to employ strategies of comprehending a message (Papadopoulos, 2020). According to Papadopoulos (2020), translanguaging is a practice in which students make use of their entire linguistic and para-linguistic resources in their attempt to learn, communicate and interact.

According to what Williams (2003) supports, translanguaging emphasizes more on the use of two languages and their relevant abilities and achievements and less on the role the teacher has in the classroom, despite the fact that the teacher has to engineer it (Lewis et al., 2012). Within the greater framework of translanguaging, the use of the stronger language is important in helping the weaker language develop; leading to a balanced development of both languages in learners.

It cannot be neglected that Garcia (2017) supports that the term *translanguaging* has to be further extended. Specifically, Garcia (2017) emphasized an extending of the term translanguaging to encompass meanings that are beyond the pedagogical variation of the input and the output of languages. Translanguaging is presented as a strategy used by bilinguals, so that they can shape the desired meaning, to figurate the relevant experiences, to enhance and support the knowledge and the understanding, as well as to make sense and to understand the worlds in which the bilingual child lives in his or her everyday language life. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that Garcia (2017) referred to translanguaging as a powerful mechanism in developing understanding and promoting the inclusion of others, as well as helping and supporting the mutual understanding among people/students from different cultural and language background. Also, observing the use of translanguaging practices in communities where bilingual individuals live encourages the adoption of techniques and everyday strategies which can be complex, but at the same beneficial for the students and the members of the community in achieving effective interaction and communication (Tsokolidou, 2017).

## 1.2 Benefits of Translanguaging

In the specific unit of the chapter, it is important to emphasize the benefits or advantages of translanguaging that are suggested by linguists, researchers and research teams through their work. According to Baker (2001), various benefits can be observed when translanguaging is performed by speakers, as translanguaging leads to a fuller and deeper understanding of many subject areas (Garcia, 2009) which can be either topics of general interest or school-subjects within a more contextualized environment. Research has shown that translanguaging helps individuals develop their language skills, while it also encourages students' interaction and collaboration (Papadopoulou, 2018).

Moreover, Lewis et al. (2012) support that translanguaging can serve as an inclusive practice for students from other countries with diverse language and cultural biographies (Papadopoulos, 2021). Furthermore, many teams of neurologists have paid great attention to studying translanguaging by using factors that are related to events that demonstrate, in a way, the integration efforts made in the brain. It appears that semantic-relatedness is much more important for objects that are included in translanguaging sequences (Thierry, date). In such cases, the speaker can encode the definitions given in one language and then retrieve the relevant names of the objects included in the other language. Such a process is very difficult for monolingual sequences (Heston, 2018; Irokaba, 2017).

Allowing students to use their languages promotes equity and literacy engagement of students (Govaris, 2001). Indeed, the centre of a democratic society is and should be related to the attempts toward promoting equal access to learning procedures for children whose families are of low socio-economic status and have a different first language than the rest of the children in the dominant country has to be the centre of a democratic society. The literature has emphasized the significance of literacy engagement, while it is highly connected to academic achievements (Mary & Young, 2017). It is found that having access to literacy engagement and print resources may have positive results for students with lower reading comprehension levels, including students from a low social and economic background, as well as students with another home language than that used at school. Trying to take into account the PISA studies results (OECD, 2010) and the notions (Lin & He, 2017) as well, it seems that schools can push back almost 30% of the results of social and economic disadvantages, facilitating access to many print resources and have great literacy engagement.

## 1.3 Translanguaging and Teaching Practice

Many aspects have to be taken into account in order to use translanguaging in the teaching practice. Translanguaging can be easily characterized as a process in which

both teachers and students engage, using discursive practices for all the students and having as a great goal to communicate knowledge and to help students support their political and social realities.

Through translanguaging, students have the ability both to construct and enrich their values and identities (Tsokalidou, 2015). This way, students can contest ideologies that are present in monolingual and bilingual classrooms. When implementing translanguaging practices in education, attention is paid to the multiple ways that students can use their linguistic resources as well as make negotiations concerning social identities. One representative example is the one shown by the research findings of Kenner (2004) which involved young children who are bilingual or biliterate and the research offers a descriptive account of the ways that students acquire and develop different writing systems when being at home, at a learning centre or a mainstream school. Thus, students were allowed to express their way of life and learn by using drawings, constructions and multilingual texts, which have been proved to be important educational tools that promote a translanguaging-behaviour of students (Papadopoulos, 2021).

Using translanguaging in the school environment helps students who are bilingual to make full use of semiotic and linguistic repertoire, in order to make the necessary meaning (Hua et al., 2015), employing translanguaging as a pedagogical practice. Translanguaging in the education context, is not only a scaffolding practice, but is transformative for teacher, student, and language education, in general. Needless to mention that translanguaging helps and facilitates the exchange of experiences of children in several languages. By using translanguaging, there is the opportunity to alter practices that have to be used in the field of bilingual education (Garcia, 2017), while translanguaging can be a tool for promoting students' L1s in this globalized world (Papadopoulos, 2021).

## **1.4 Research**

### **1.4.1 Introduction and Description of the Research Activity**

Given that the landscape of education in Greece has changed in recent years with a significant number of students with immigrant biographies in the classroom, the present study attempted to investigate the impact of language and culture contact on students' communication, collaboration, and learning/teaching in the Greek educational context.

In particular, this research investigated the attitudes and views of Greek and immigrant students regarding translanguaging and its role in their communication as well as in strengthening their intercultural awareness and sensitivity.

Taking the current literature into account and given the limited research activity regarding the connection between translanguaging and intercultural communication, this research examined whether the use of translanguaging contributes to the enhancement of intercultural communication of students who attend classes in which there is linguistic and cultural diversity.

Research on a national and international level (Tsokolidou, 2017; Garcia, 2009; Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010), emphasizes translanguaging as a tool which can have a positive impact on the interaction and communication skills of indigenous and students with immigrant/refugee biographies. However, similar research activity in this field is considered limited.

## **1.5 Research Methodology**

Students' profiles and behaviour were assessed using the following tools:

### *Semi-structured Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the first research tool for this study as they provide flexibility in the investigation procedures. This method provides the researcher with the opportunity to better understand the views and attitudes of the interviewees. Regarding the role of semi-structured interviews, both Greeks and students with immigrant biographies had the opportunity to express their views on their behaviour in an environment where the use of their family and other languages is permitted. Through the interviews, they were able to describe in detail their actions, views and challenges within such a context. In addition, they had the opportunity to clarify more points that require explanation due to the multidimensional nature of translanguaging and intercultural communication such as their feelings, their difficulties, their reactions etc.

### *Observation Protocols*

Special observation protocols that focused on recording the context of both intercultural communication and openness to learning about the other were utilized in the second phase of the study. More specifically, the researcher observed teaching sessions delivered in class to students with immigrant biographies in order to focus on communication, cooperation and their actions for mutual respect. Through the interaction of students and teachers, the researcher had the opportunity to collect important findings, identify and record aspects of student behaviour which allowed for a deep investigation not only of their views regarding their interaction with classmates from different cultural backgrounds but also of the learning/teaching aspects of their daily school life as well.

## 1.6 Sample

Regarding the research sample, this consisted of 47 students, between 8-12 years old (both Greek students and students with migration biography) attending primary school classes in Greece. The selection of schools was based on the following criteria:

- *Geographical criterion*: an effort was made to include schools and students from different regions/cities of Greece, in order to achieve a more representative sample of the Greek education context.
- *Type of School and School Context*: it was considered important that in order to collect as much reliable data as possible and to draw substantial conclusions, the study should involve primary education school classes that are not only characterized by linguistic and cultural diversity but also promote the use of languages and cultural elements in the classroom environment.
- *Age Group*: in this study students of ages 8 to 12 were involved as it was the view of the researcher that in this age group, students could understand questions from questionnaires and interviews and could be positioned more systematically and purposefully.

The geographical distribution included schools from Larissa, Athens, and Katerini, following an acceptance of an invitation for the participation of students respecting anonymity and freedom of expression in accordance with Articles 13 and 14 of the United Nations children's rights, underlining that those children have the right to freedom of conscience and expression orally or in writing. The distribution of the student gender (Figure 1.1) included 21 boys (45%) and 26 girls (55%) from different primary schools in Greece participated in the study.

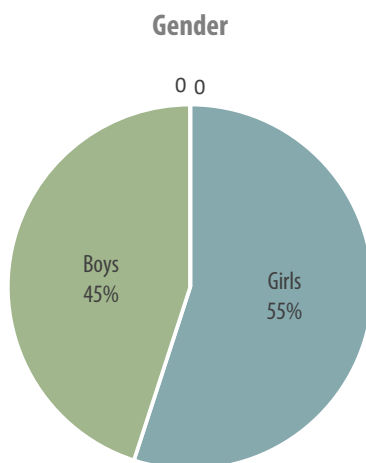


Figure 1.1: Distribution of students by gender

Age distribution is highlighted below in Figure 1.2. The students who were included in the research are between 8 and 12 years old.

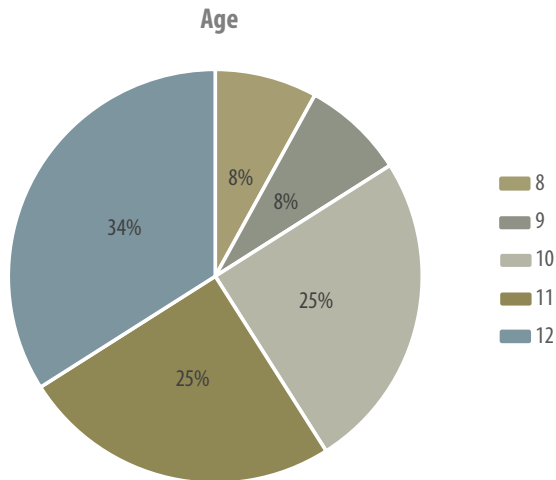


Figure 1.2: Distribution of students based on their age

Student demographics by region included 47% of the students from Larissa, 38% from Katerini, a city near Larissa and Thessaloniki and 15% from Northern Athens (Figure 1.3).

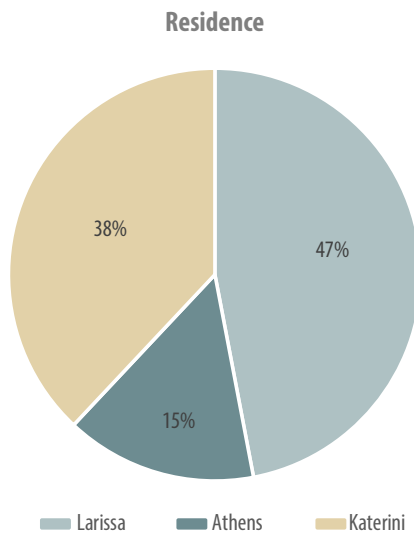
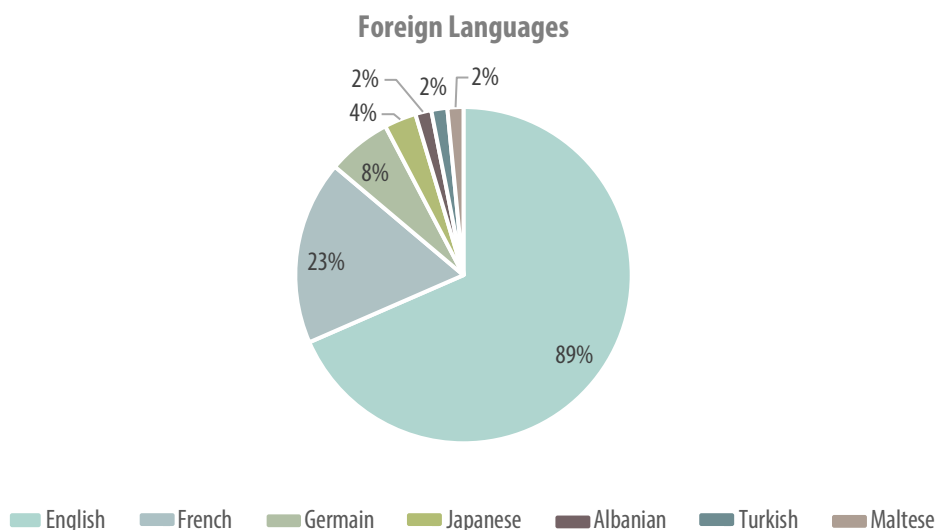


Figure 1.3: Distribution of students by area of residence

The final demographic variable concerns the family/heritage language of the students. In particular, 24 of the students had Greek as their family language, while 12 students spoke Albanian, 5 students spoke Bulgarian and 5 students Romanian. In addition to the language used by the family, we also focus on what other foreign languages children learn. Regarding their language learning experiences (Figure 1.4), most students (89, 3%) answered that they learn English, 23, 4% of students learn French while only 8% of students learn German. Also, 4, 2% learn Japanese and 2, 1% learn Turkish, the same percentage refers to learning Albanian and Maltese.

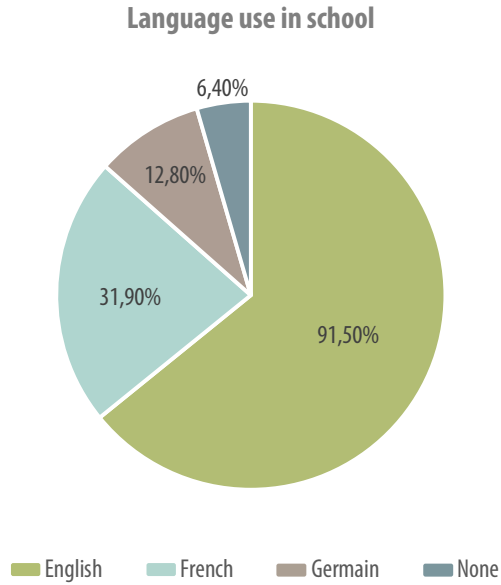


**Figure 1.4:** Knowledge of foreign languages

In addition to the basic elements of the students, an attempt was made to outline their profile in terms of language uses in the context of home and society, while their basic extracurricular activities were also investigated. Concerning the language(s) spoken by students with a migration biography at home, we noticed that 100% speak Greek at home, except two students who also speak Romanian and English.

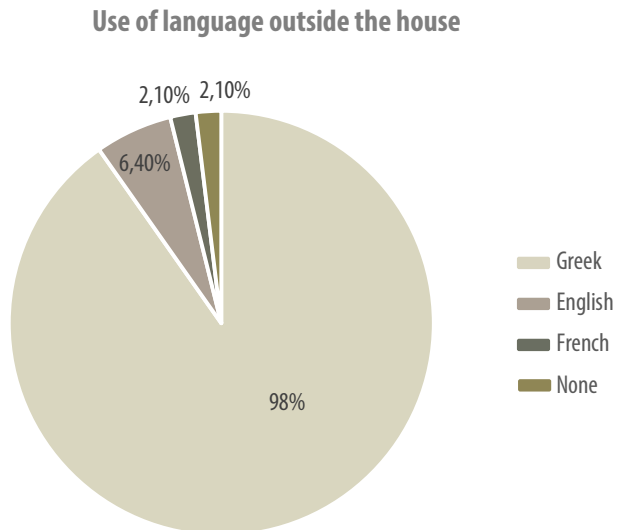
The languages the students spoken at school were also examined (Figure 1.5). Most students (91.5%) answered that they speak English, 31.9% of students reported speaking simultaneously French with only one student reported speaking only French. Further, 12.8% of students reported that they learned German simultaneously, and 6.4% said they speak the language used by their family and no other.





**Figure 1.5:** Use of language in school

Regarding the language used by all students outside the home or school context (Figure 1.6), 98% reported speaking Greek, 6.4% also reported speaking English, 2.1% used French and 2.1% reported speaking no other language.



**Figure 1.6:** Use of language outside the house

## 1.7 Participation in Interlingual / Intercultural Activities

First of all, the intercultural and translanguaging experiences and activities of the students were investigated in order to examine the frequency of contact between the languages and cultures of the students.

Regarding the participation of students in daily bi/multilingual/intercultural activities (Figure 1.7), a large proportion of students sometimes (57%) visit a museum and watch theatrical performances in the Greek language (55%), while they reported not watching theatrical performances in foreign language (rarely 62%). We observed similar results regarding students attending concerts in the Greek language (sometimes 51%), in contrast to concerts of foreign artists (rarely 43%). Also, a large proportion of young students tend to engage in information receiving activities about famous people from Greece (sometimes: 51%) and abroad (sometimes: 43%). In addition, 49% of students reported sometimes trying food from other countries, attending dance festivals (51%) and traveling to other countries (49%). In addition, students reported watching news online (sometimes: 55%) and rarely on Greek television (rarely: 62%).

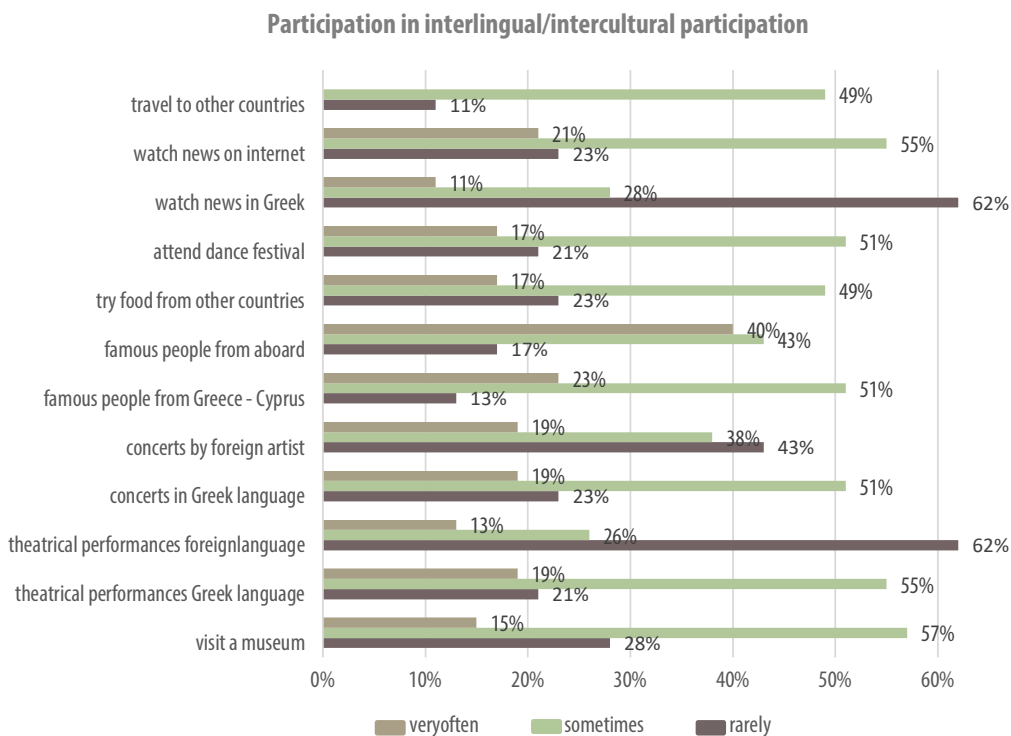


Figure 1.7: Participation in interlingual/ intercultural activities