Bridging Language Gaps: Pedagogical Translanguaging Practices in Vietnamese EFL Education

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Abstract

This paper explores the transformative potential of pedagogical translanguaging (PTL) in Vietnamese EFL classrooms, particularly in rural and under-resourced areas, where traditional English-only instruction often limits student engagement and comprehension. Drawing on global best practices, PTL is positioned as a structured, inclusive pedagogy that enables students to utilize their full linguistic repertoires, fostering critical thinking, participation, and improved academic performance. By synthesizing theoretical perspectives and practical applications, this study highlights PTL's effectiveness in reducing language anxiety, supporting bilingual identity development, and enhancing content understanding. Comparative insights from multilingual contexts, such as the United States, Europe, Africa, and Asia, demonstrate PTL's scalability and adaptability in K-12 and higher education settings. However, Vietnamese classrooms continue to face institutional and societal barriers that hinder PTL's implementation, including monolingual ideologies, lack of policy support, insufficient teacher training, and negative perceptions surrounding L1 use in English instruction. To address these challenges, this paper proposes practical strategies for integrating PTL into Vietnamese EFL classrooms, including intentional lesson planning, culturally responsive content, and flexible assessment methods. Additionally, it underscores the urgent need for teacher training programs and policy reforms to ensure a systematic and equitable adoption of PTL across educational contexts. By embracing PTL, Vietnamese schools can create more inclusive, learner-centered environments, ultimately fostering bilingualism and enhancing educational equity.

Keywords: EFL education, pedagogical translanguaging, Vietnamese context

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Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, proficiency in additional languages, especially English, is crucial for academic and professional advancement. In Vietnam, English is widely perceived as a gateway to socioeconomic mobility (Nguyen & Hamid, 2018). Yet, English language teaching (ELT) remains dominated by monolingual ideologies that mandate English-only instruction and discourage the use of students' first languages (L1s) (Nguyen et al., 2022). This approach is particularly detrimental in rural areas, where limited resources and low proficiency levels hinder effective learning (Do & Nguyen, 2023). Research shows that rigid language separation reduces comprehension, restricts participation, and exacerbates educational inequalities (Creese & Blackledge, 2015).

Pedagogical Translanguaging (PTL) offers a powerful alternative. It is a structured instructional approach that intentionally integrates students' linguistic repertoires to support learning (García & Kano, 2014). Unlike informal code-switching, PTL enables students to draw on all their languages for meaning-making, fostering critical thinking and metalinguistic awareness (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021). Originating in Welsh bilingual classrooms, PTL has since been recognized for enhancing engagement, reducing anxiety, and affirming learners' identities (Wei, 2024). International research affirms PTL's effectiveness. In the U.S., students process academic content in L1 before articulating it in English, improving retention (García & Kleyn, 2016). In the Basque Country, PTL strengthens biliteracy and cross-linguistic transfer (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021). South African classrooms using indigenous languages report higher participation and identity development (Makalela, 2018). In Portugal, alternating between Portuguese and English enhances academic performance (Kim & Weng, 2022).

In multilingual regions such as China's Xinjiang, PTL has proven effective in reducing language anxiety and enhancing academic achievement by incorporating students' home languages, such as Uyghur and Kazakh, into English instruction (Wei, 2024; Wu et al., 2025). This inclusive approach boosts learners' confidence, facilitates oral language development, and aligns with national policies that support both Mandarin and minority languages. Additionally, PTL promotes emotional well-being by reducing acculturation stress and fostering a stronger sense of belonging among minority students (Xia et al., 2021). In Southeast Asia, diverse translanguaging strategies reflect the region's multilingual realities and educational goals. In Thailand, the use of students' L1 enhances confidence and comprehension, particularly in EFL settings where English exposure is limited (Thongwichit, 2024). However, some learners still prefer English-only models, creating tensions in adopting translanguaging approaches (Boonsuk & Ambele, 2024). Despite this, PTL is recognized for improving content learning and classroom interaction (Ambele & Nuemaihom, 2024). In Malaysia, multilingual strategies such as mobile-assisted and game-based learning support vocabulary acquisition and academic success (Supian & Asraf, 2019). Malaysian learners generally prefer an "optimal" translanguaging approach that balances L1 and English use, aligning with the country's multilingual ecology (Boonsuk & Ambele, 2024). While these strategies offer clear benefits, their implementation must navigate challenges such as overreliance on L1 or resistance to non-monolingual norms, emphasizing the need for context-sensitive pedagogy across the region.

Despite global evidence, PTL remains absent from Vietnam's ELT landscape. English-only policies persist, with L1 use viewed as a hindrance (Nguyen & Hamid, 2018; Ngo & Tran, 2023). Curriculum guidelines lack support for bilingual strategies, and teachers are not trained in PTL methods (Nguyen et al., 2022; Do & Nguyen, 2023). These issues are intensified in rural schools, where rigid instruction and low English exposure limit outcomes (Ly, 2022). The misconception that immersion guarantees proficiency continues to inhibit change (Kien & Van, 2023).

This paper argues for PTL as a means to improve equity and effectiveness in Vietnamese EFL classrooms. Drawing on global and regional models, it explores practical strategies for PTL integration while addressing challenges in policy, training, and public attitudes (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022; Rajendram, 2023). PTL fosters inclusive learning by affirming linguistic diversity and improving comprehension, especially for marginalized learners. With multilingual education gaining international recognition, Vietnam must shift from monolingualism to more inclusive pedagogies. L1s should be seen as resources, not barriers (Cong-Lem, 2025). PTL offers a context-responsive framework aligned with student needs and educational equity. To implement PTL effectively, systemic reform is essential. Policy must endorse translanguaging, teacher education must include practical training, and public perceptions must evolve (Vu, 2021). Without change, Vietnam risks deepening educational divides and limiting learners' futures. This study advocates for collaborative, context-specific PTL strategies suited to Vietnam's linguistic realities. By embracing PTL, EFL classrooms can become more inclusive, equitable, and effective for all students (Pham & Vu, 2023).

Theoretical Foundations

1. Current Situations in Vietnam: Institutional and Societal Challenges

English language education in Vietnam faces systemic challenges shaped by institutional constraints and enduring monolingual ideologies. The prevailing belief that English should be taught exclusively, without support from students' L1, Vietnamese, ignores mounting evidence on the cognitive and pedagogical advantages of bilingualism (Le, 2024; Ho & Nguyen, 2019). This approach undermines learners' ability to scaffold meaning through L1, particularly disadvantaging students from rural and ethnolinguistic minority backgrounds. National initiatives like the National Foreign Language Project 2020 promote communicative competence and innovation, yet inconsistent local implementation often leads to fragmented outcomes (Ngo & Trần, 2023). A rigid focus on high-stakes exams continues to marginalize essential skills like speaking, listening, and critical thinking (Ngo, 2022). Meanwhile, many teachers, especially in rural areas, lack exposure to modern, student-centered pedagogies and receive insufficient pre- and in-service training (Nguyen & Javorsky, 2024). Societal stigma surrounding L1 use in English classrooms persists, reinforcing deficit views that equate English-only instruction with quality and global competitiveness (Ly, 2022). This perception not only weakens learner identity but also restricts classroom innovation. Digital inequality further deepens rural-urban divides, limiting students' access to online English resources and interactive learning tools (Nguyen, 2022). Collectively, these barriers call for a systemic reimagining of language education, one that embraces multilingualism as a strength, aligns

national policies with classroom realities, enhances teacher preparation, and shifts public discourse toward inclusive and equitable language learning.

2. Translanguaging as Transformative Pedagogy in EFL Classrooms

PTL serves as a transformative strategy in EFL classrooms by purposefully integrating students' full linguistic repertoires into structured instructional practices. Unlike spontaneous language switching, PTL is a deliberate pedagogical design that activates students' cognitive, linguistic, and cultural resources to support deeper learning, especially for minoritized or multilingual learners. One foundational PTL practice is code-meshing, where students blend elements from their L1 and English within writing or speaking tasks. This not only fosters metalinguistic awareness but also encourages authentic expression and engagement with complex ideas (Wen, 2023). Another effective strategy is the use of bilingual glossaries, where learners collaborate to build vocabulary lists with terms in both English and their L1, accompanied by contextual definitions and example sentences. This task supports vocabulary retention and validates home languages as academic tools (Ali et al., 2023; Wawire & Barnes-Story, 2023). PTL also thrives through group work, where students with diverse language skills co-construct meaning by discussing content in their preferred languages before reporting in English. Such collaborative learning enhances comprehension, reduces anxiety, and builds a strong sense of classroom community (Tian & Li, 2024). Furthermore, integrating PTL into content learning allows students to explore complex topics using their L1 for research or discussion, then articulate their understanding in English, promoting both conceptual clarity and linguistic development (McNamara, 2024; Pereira, 2024). While PTL requires shifts in teacher mindset, curriculum design, and assessment approaches, it offers significant benefits in fostering inclusive, equitable, and cognitively enriching classrooms that align with the multilingual realities of learners.

3. Southeast Asian Translanguaging Practices

In Southeast Asia, PTL has emerged as a context-responsive strategy shaped by each country's linguistic landscape and educational goals. In Thailand, PTL is increasingly used in EFL and EMI classrooms to bridge L1 and English, with strong support from both lecturers and students for its role in improving comprehension and inclusivity (Nuemaihom et al., 2024). Thai families also promote bilingual development through home practices like co-reading (Yuzlu & Dikilitas, 2022). Though English-only preferences persist in some EMI contexts (Boonsuk & Ambele, 2024). In Malaysia, PTL is embedded in national policy, supporting a balanced use of Malay, English, and local languages, a model termed "optimal translanguaging" (Boonsuk & Ambele, 2024). Indonesia's linguistic diversity necessitates PTL, with teachers using translation and multimodal scaffolds to support over 700 language groups (Rahayu et al., 2023). Singapore institutionalizes bilingualism through policy, requiring fluency in English and a mother tongue, while informal blending practices like Singlish reflect cultural hybridity (Lim, n.d.). Collectively, these cases show PTL not only enhances academic access and participation but also affirms linguistic identity and fosters inclusive, culturally relevant education.

4. Global Evidence of PTL's Learning Benefits

A growing body of global research confirms that PTL enhances cognitive, affective, and academic outcomes in linguistically diverse classrooms. Cognitively, PTL deepens comprehension and critical thinking by engaging students' full linguistic repertoires. For example, Hopp et al. (2021) found German students using translanguaging gained stronger grammatical awareness, while García and Kleyn (2016) showed Spanish-English bilinguals in New York improved content mastery by first processing material in their L1. Caruso (2018) and Cenoz and Gorter (2021) further emphasize PTL's role in fostering cross-linguistic transfer and analytical thinking. Effectively, PTL reduces anxiety, boosts engagement, and affirms learners' identities. Chinese EFL students reported higher participation and lower anxiety when allowed L1 use (Wen, 2023), while in Xinjiang, scaffolded use of minority languages improved emotional well-being (Treffers-Daller, 2024; Wei, 2024). In South Africa, integrating Indigenous languages into instruction increased confidence and cultural belonging (Makalela, 2018). Academically, PTL improves vocabulary, content understanding, and writing. Atta and Naqvi (2022) found that PTL led to significant literacy gains across Africa, Japan, and Indonesia. Kacsur (2024) highlighted its value in complex subjects, and studies in Thailand and Malaysia linked L1-based activities to stronger engagement and confidence (Ambele, 2022; Thongwichit & Ulla, 2024). In Australia, using indigenous languages in storytelling improved motivation and identity (Tai & Wei, 2023). Collectively, these findings underscore PTL's transformative potential. When applied thoughtfully, especially in under-resourced settings like rural Vietnam, PTL fosters equitable, inclusive, and effective language education (Duarte, 2020; Sutrisno, 2023).

5. Applying PTL to Vietnamese EFL Contexts

Implementing PTL in Vietnamese EFL classrooms presents a transformative opportunity to reform an education system historically rooted in grammar-translation and exam-driven instruction. In a context where Vietnamese is dominant and English remains largely classroom-bound, PTL offers a scaffold for learners to access complex content, build communicative competence, and gain confidence (Cong-Lem, 2025). Strategic L1 use supports vocabulary learning, clarifies key concepts, and lowers affective filters, particularly for students in rural or under-resourced areas with limited English exposure (Kien & Van, 2023). This aligns with global findings that L1 integration reduces cognitive load and enhances deeper learning, especially for emergent bilinguals (García & Kleyn, 2016; Ho & Nguyen, 2019). PTL also enables more effective differentiation in mixed-ability classrooms and fosters teacher agency in linguistically diverse contexts (Thongwichit & Ulla, 2024; Sutrisno, 2023).

However, significant institutional and societal barriers remain. Despite research supporting L1 use, monolingual ideologies persist in policy and practice, framing Vietnamese as an obstacle rather than a resource (Nguyen et al., 2022; Pham & Nguyen, 2024). This disconnect marginalizes rural and low-proficiency learners (Do & Nguyen, 2023). The lack of clear guidance from the Ministry of Education and Training leaves teachers unsure how to apply translanguaging without violating policy (Nguyen & Hamid, 2018). In contrast, countries like Malaysia and South Africa provide robust bilingual education frameworks and teacher training

(Makalela, 2018; Prilutskaya, 2021). In Vietnam, many teachers remain undertrained, under-supported, and constrained by job insecurity, limiting pedagogical innovation (Kim & Weng, 2022; Cong-Lem, 2025).

Societal attitudes further hinder PTL adoption. English is widely associated with social mobility and prestige, while the use of Vietnamese in EFL classrooms is often stigmatized as a sign of weak proficiency (Liu & Fang, 2022). This perception discourages bilingual practices and may create identity tensions, especially among high-achieving students in gifted or urban schools (Atta & Naqvi, 2022). Yet evidence from bilingual settings like Canada and the Philippines shows that valuing students' home languages affirms identity and enhances academic success (Prilutskaya, 2021).

To advance PTL in Vietnam, a multi-tiered strategy is required. Policy reform must clarify and legitimize translanguaging practices, outlining when and how L1 can be used alongside English (Do & Nguyen, 2023). Teacher education should emphasize a practical PTL approach, equipping educators to scaffold learning and adapt instruction effectively (Hopp, 2021). Curriculum resources must incorporate PTL-aligned activities, such as bilingual writing tasks and L1-supported reading (Nguyen et al., 2016; Kien & Van, 2023). Public awareness campaigns are also vital to shift perceptions, framing Vietnamese as a cultural and cognitive asset rather than a hindrance (Le, 2021; Caruso, 2018; Ly, 2022). Simultaneously, assessment systems should be reformed to include translanguaging in formative and performance-based evaluations, better capturing the full scope of multilingual learners' abilities (Atta & Naqvi, 2022). Vietnam can also draw from regional examples. Thailand's flexible use of L1 in EMI and EFL supports comprehension and differentiation (Ambele, 2022; Ambele & Nuemaihom, 2024); Malaysia's policy-driven balance of L1 and L2 promotes academic success (Boonsuk & Ambele, 2024); and Indonesia's inclusive PTL practices reduce anxiety and foster engagement (Rahayu et al., 2023). By adapting these models, Vietnam can position PTL not just as a technique but as a culturally responsive, equity-driven reform that aligns language policy with real-world communication goals.

Conclusion

PTL presents Vietnam with a transformative opportunity to move beyond rigid English-only models toward a more inclusive and context-sensitive approach to English language education. By drawing on students' full linguistic repertoires, PTL fosters deeper comprehension, increased engagement, and identity affirmation, especially for learners in rural and under-resourced contexts where English exposure remains limited (Kien & Van, 2023; Nguyen, 2022). However, effective implementation requires systemic reform. National policy must formally endorse PTL and provide clear guidelines for when and how Vietnamese can be strategically integrated into English instruction (Do & Nguyen, 2023). At the same time, teacher education programs need to equip educators with both the theoretical grounding and practical strategies for PTL, including structured routines that begin with L1 exploration and transition to L2 application (Kacsur, 2024). Within classrooms, bilingual glossaries, collaborative group work, and formative assessments such as reflective journals and oral

presentations help scaffold learning while honoring linguistic diversity (Ali et al., 2023). Beyond pedagogy, public engagement is critical to shift the deeply rooted stigma surrounding L1 use in English classrooms. Parental workshops and community awareness campaigns can challenge deficit ideologies and promote bi/multilingualism as a strength rather than a hindrance (Liu & Fang, 2022; Tai & Wei, 2023). Drawing on regional successes from Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, where translanguaging supports comprehension, reduces anxiety, and affirms student agency, Vietnam can adopt a culturally responsive model that aligns language policy with classroom realities (Ambele & Nuemaihom, 2024; Boonsuk & Ambele, 2024). With coordinated efforts across policy, pedagogy, and community, PTL can reframe Vietnamese EFL classrooms as equitable, learner-centered spaces that prepare students to thrive in an increasingly multilingual world.

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