

Translanguaging Practice in the English Classroom at an Indonesian Islamic Junior High School

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Abstract. This study explores the practice of translanguaging in an English classroom at an Islamic junior high school located in a multilingual rural area of Polewali Mandar, West Sulawesi, Indonesia. The research aims to investigate how translanguaging is used by a teacher and students during English instruction and to understand its pedagogical, communicative, and psychological functions. A qualitative descriptive method was employed, involving one English teacher and twenty eighth-grade students, five of whom took part in semi-structured interviews. Data were collected through classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis, and were analyzed using thematic analysis involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings show that translanguaging was used both as a natural communication strategy and as a deliberate pedagogical tool: the teacher used Indonesian and the local Mandar language alongside English to clarify concepts and sustain engagement, while students used translanguaging to express ideas, confirm understanding, and participate more confidently. Three themes emerged: translanguaging as a tool for comprehension, as a medium for classroom participation, and as a source of emotional comfort and confidence. The study concludes that translanguaging should not be viewed as a sign of linguistic deficiency but as an effective pedagogical strategy bridging linguistic and cultural gaps in multilingual classrooms, and that in Islamic education it further promotes inclusivity and collaborative values consistent with the moral principles of Islamic schooling.

Keywords: Translanguaging; English Language Learning; Islamic Education; Multilingual Rural Area.

1. Introduction

In many multilingual and globalized societies, English language instruction, especially vocabulary acquisition, presents persistent challenges for learners who must navigate unfamiliar lexical items in the target language (L2) while drawing on diverse linguistic backgrounds. In the Indonesian context, such challenges become even more pronounced for junior high school students, who must process new

vocabulary in English while simultaneously linking it to their first language (L1) within a multilingual learning environment. Many Indonesian students struggle to grasp the meaning of vocabulary when lessons are delivered entirely in English, especially in settings where exposure to the language is limited (Rosyada-AS & Apoko, 2023), and frequently rely on Bahasa Indonesia or their local languages to make sense of unfamiliar words (Lumbanraja, 2024).

A growing body of research provides strong evidence for the effectiveness of translanguaging in supporting language learning. Studies across various Asian EFL contexts have shown that the strategic use of L1 enhances vocabulary comprehension, reduces learners' anxiety, and increases classroom participation. Research in Turkey similarly reports that translanguaging strengthens the retention and productive use of new vocabulary and grammar (Tai, 2024; Yasar Yuzlu & Dikilitas, 2022), and experimental work shows that translanguaged pre-task planning can produce more complex and fluent subsequent speaking performance (Luo & Sun, 2025). In multilingual English-medium classrooms elsewhere in Southeast Asia, translanguaging has likewise been documented as a strategic response through which students navigate proficiency gaps, build inclusive peer connections, and negotiate cultural identity, underscoring its relevance beyond the specific contexts studied to date (Boonsuk, 2025).

Migrant and minority-language contexts add an affective dimension: translanguaging has been documented as an emotional safe space that mitigates foreign language anxiety (Dryden et al., 2021), and a recent systematic review of over a hundred studies in U.S. PK-12 classrooms concludes that translanguaging supports negotiation of meaning, engagement, and a sense of belonging (Hamman-Ortiz et al., 2025). In the Indonesian EFL context specifically, translanguaging has similarly been found to serve identifiable pedagogical reasons, such as clarifying meaning and easing classroom anxiety, with corresponding positive impacts on students' comprehension and engagement (Efendi & Syafryadin, 2024).

However, despite this promising and growing evidence, limited research has examined how translanguaging is practiced in Indonesian junior high school English classrooms specifically. Previous studies have largely focused on urban schools or higher education settings, leaving rural and Islamic educational environments understudied, and existing literature tends to emphasize pedagogical outcomes while paying comparatively little attention to how translanguaging practices relate to students' cultural and religious identities (Ooi & Aziz, 2021).

Therefore, this study addresses the research question: what are the benefits of translanguaging for students' understanding, participation, and comfort in an English classroom at an Islamic junior high school? The objective of this study is to explore how translanguaging is used by a teacher and students during English instruction at an Islamic junior high school in Polewali Mandar, West Sulawesi. The novelty of this study lies in its contextual focus, a rural, Islamic junior secondary

setting that remains underrepresented in the translanguaging literature, and in presenting findings directly through interview excerpts from the teacher and students, grounding the study's themes in participants' own words. In doing so, the study also speaks to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education that accommodates learners' diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds; the study positions translanguaging as one classroom-level practice through which this goal can be advanced in under-resourced, multilingual educational settings (United Nations, 2015).

2. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Translanguaging Theory, originally theorized by García and Wei (2014) as a shift away from viewing bilinguals' languages as separate, bounded systems, which conceptualizes multilinguals' language practices not as separate linguistic systems but as a single, integrated repertoire used flexibly to support communication and learning (Turner & Tour, 2024).

Classroom-based research within this tradition has shown that flexible, bilingual instructional strategies can function as a legitimate pedagogy for learning and teaching rather than a deviation from monolingual norms (Creese & Blackledge, 2010), and that learners draw on identifiable, teachable translanguaging strategies when navigating tasks across their linguistic repertoire (Canagarajah, 2011). It is complemented by Sociocultural Theory, which positions language as a mediational tool through which knowledge is socially constructed, drawing on the concepts of mediation, scaffolding, and the Zone of Proximal Development, first articulated in Wood, Bruner, and Ross's (1976) account of tutorial support, to explain how a teacher's use of Indonesian or the local language can facilitate learners' entry into English tasks that would otherwise be beyond their independent ability.

Finally, the study incorporates Critical Language Pedagogy (Mendoza et al., 2024), which interrogates how power, identity, and language ideologies shape the legitimacy of multilingual practices in English classrooms and calls for classroom practice that explicitly names and challenges the linguistic hierarchies students bring with them (Baker-Bell, 2013), and is used here, together with Cummins's (2021) critical analysis of bilingual-education constructs such as linguistic interdependence and translanguaging, to consider how the teacher's beliefs and the school's Islamic educational context may legitimize or constrain translanguaging as a classroom practice.

3. Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method to explore how translanguaging practices occur in an English classroom at an Islamic junior high school in Indonesia, an approach chosen because it allows the researchers to capture the natural use of language and social interaction in the classroom rather than measuring translanguaging's effects quantitatively (Fadli, 2021).

The participants consisted of one English teacher and twenty eighth-grade students who took part in classroom activities during the observation period; five of these students, selected for their active engagement in class, participated in semi-structured interviews alongside the teacher. To protect participant confidentiality, pseudonymous codes are used throughout this article: the teacher is referred to as T, and the five interviewed students are referred to as S1 through S5.

Primary data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation, including lesson plans and teaching materials, which supported triangulation and strengthened the credibility of the findings (Martha, 2025). Informed consent was obtained from the teacher and from students, with parental/guardian awareness, prior to data collection.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Nurfajriani et al., 2024). All transcripts and field notes were systematically coded to identify recurring themes related to translanguaging strategies, functions, and pedagogical implications, and the findings are presented narratively below, supported by direct excerpts from the interview data.

The table 1 shows convergence between the teacher's and the students' perceptions: the teacher used translanguaging deliberately to support comprehension, while students experienced it as something that helped them follow the lesson, participate more actively, and feel more comfortable doing so.

Table 1. Summary of key interview statements, codes, and themes

Informant	Key Statement	Code	Theme
T (Teacher)	"I explain the difficult parts in Indonesian first, then switch back to English."	Helps understanding	Comprehension
S1	"I understand directly when the teacher explains in Indonesian, instead of guessing."	Better understanding	Comprehension
S3	"I'm not afraid of making mistakes, because I can still use Indonesian."	Courage to speak	Participation
S4	"Indonesian makes me feel more comfortable and less pressured."	Learning comfort	Comfort
S5	"I become more active in asking questions when two languages are used."	Active participation	Participation

4. Results

In line with the qualitative descriptive methodology adopted in this study, the findings below are presented through descriptive frequency distributions of the

coded themes, complemented by thematic interpretation and direct excerpts drawn from the interview and observation data.

This study addressed the research question of what benefits translanguaging offers for students' understanding, participation, and comfort in the English classroom. Three dominant themes emerged from the interview data, presented below through direct excerpts from the teacher (T) and five students (S1-S5), together with a fourth, supporting pattern concerning the specific learning difficulties translanguaging helped students manage.

As shown in Table 2, comprehension-related excerpts were the most frequent among the coded interview data (50%), followed by participation (25%) and emotional comfort (25%) in roughly equal proportion. This distribution indicates that, among the three benefits investigated, supporting students' understanding of lesson content was the most salient function of translanguaging observed in this classroom, directly addressing the study's objective of examining translanguaging's pedagogical, communicative, and psychological functions; the subsections below interpret each theme in turn, illustrated with excerpts from the teacher and student informants.

Table 2. Frequency Distribution of Coded Excerpts by Theme

Theme	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Comprehension	4	50%
Participation	2	25%
Emotional Comfort	2	25%
Total	8	100%

The Teacher's Understanding and Practice. The teacher understood translanguaging as the combined use of English and Indonesian, adopted because students had different levels of English ability and not all of them could follow a lesson delivered entirely in English, explaining new concepts in Indonesian first and returning to English once students had understood.

"I usually use both English and Indonesian when I teach. Not every student can understand if the lesson is fully in English, so when the material, the instructions, or the explanation is difficult, I explain it in Indonesian first." (T, personal communication, 2026).

"Sometimes the students use too much Indonesian, so the class gets noisy and less focused. I also worry that they won't improve their English if they depend on it too much. So I only explain the difficult parts in Indonesian, and once they understand, I bring them back to English." (T, personal communication, 2026).

Translanguaging as a Tool for Comprehension. Students consistently reported that Indonesian explanation clarified vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar, and task instructions that were difficult to follow in English alone.

"When the teacher explains only in English, there are terms I don't understand. But when she explains in Indonesian, I understand directly, without guessing." (S1, personal communication, 2026).

"Indonesian becomes a bridge for me to understand new English words. I don't need to guess the meaning, because the teacher connects the English word with its meaning in Indonesian." (S3, personal communication, 2026).

"Indonesian helps me understand sentence structure and grammar. I can compare it with Indonesian structure, so the differences and similarities become clearer." (S5, personal communication, 2026).

Translanguaging as a Medium for Participation. Students linked translanguaging directly to their willingness to speak up and take part in discussion, describing a reduced fear of making mistakes when Indonesian remained available as a fallback.

"Using two languages makes me braver to speak in class. I'm not afraid of making mistakes, because I can still use Indonesian when I don't know the English word." (S3, personal communication, 2026).

"I become more active in asking questions when the teacher uses two languages. I feel free to ask or answer, because using Indonesian and English together is allowed." (S5, personal communication, 2026).

Translanguaging as a Source of Comfort. A third pattern concerned the emotional dimension of translanguaging: students described feeling less pressured and less anxious when Indonesian remained available alongside English.

"Indonesian makes me feel more comfortable and confident when learning English. I can still take part in class even though I'm not fully fluent." (S2, personal communication, 2026).

"Indonesian makes me feel more comfortable and less pressured, especially when I don't fully understand the material. I can still follow the lesson without feeling afraid." (S4, personal communication, 2026).

Learning Difficulties Addressed. Students were also asked about the specific difficulties they faced in learning English, pointing to concrete gaps that translanguaging appeared to help bridge.

"I have trouble with new vocabulary, because there are many English words with different meanings depending on the context." (S1, personal communication, 2026).

"It's hard for me to understand English conversation, because native speakers talk quickly and use different accents." (S4, personal communication, 2026).

Table 1 summarizes the key statements from the teacher and student informants, together with the code and theme each statement was associated with during data reduction.

5. Discussion

5.1. An Integrated Pedagogical Repertoire.

The findings show that translanguaging functioned in this classroom as a deliberate pedagogical strategy rather than an incidental habit. The teacher's practice of explaining difficult content in Indonesian before returning to English is consistent with the view of translanguaging as an integrated linguistic repertoire rather than two separate codes (Turner & Tour, 2024), and the comprehension-related excerpts align with Sociocultural Theory's account of scaffolding: the teacher used students' stronger language to help them reach material initially beyond their independent English ability, a pattern also reported in other EFL contexts (Tai, 2024; Yasar Yuzlu & Dikilitas, 2022). This is consistent with findings from Chinese university EFL classrooms, where translanguaging in collaborative talk has been shown to enrich the quality of student discussion, through functions such as idea sharing and self-justifying, without reducing the amount of English produced (Li & Qu, 2024).

5.2. Participation and Comfort.

The participation- and comfort-related findings extend this picture into effect: several students connected the availability of Indonesian to reduced fear of making mistakes and greater willingness to speak, echoing findings that link translanguaging to lower anxiety and higher willingness to communicate (Dryden et al., 2021; Luo & Sun, 2025), and consistent with experimental evidence that learners taught through translanguaging report significantly greater foreign language enjoyment than those taught under English-only conditions (Yaşar Yüzlü, 2025). This suggests translanguaging's benefit was not only cognitive but also affective, helping students feel safe enough to engage with the content in the first place.

5.3. Managing the Risks of Translanguaging.

The teacher's account of students over-relying on Indonesian and the classroom becoming noisy is a useful corrective to an overly celebratory reading of translanguaging, indicating a real risk of displacing rather than supporting English development if left unmanaged (Mendoza et al., 2024; Wang & Ai, 2024). The teacher's response, using Indonesian deliberately and temporarily rather than as a default, suggests the pedagogical value of translanguaging here depended on it

being used strategically, consistent with Critical Language Pedagogy's caution that multilingual practices are not automatically empowering unless teachers actively shape how and when they are used (Mendoza et al., 2024). A comparable tension has been noted in translanguaging writing instruction, where heavy reliance on the first language eased comprehension but raised concern that it could limit learners' ability to communicate with a wider English-speaking audience (Sun & Feng, 2025), and in Indonesian EFL materials-adaptation research, where students' persistent reliance on their first language remained an unresolved challenge despite the teacher's translanguaging-based scaffolding (Hanifa et al., 2024).

5.4. A Limitation Relative to the Framework.

The theoretical framework anticipated that translanguaging in an Islamic school setting would visibly intersect with students' religious and cultural identity, for instance through the symbolic role of Arabic. However, the interview data collected speak most directly to comprehension, participation, and comfort; explicit evidence of a religious or cultural-identity dimension did not emerge as strongly. This is a notable absence given that, in other religiously and culturally inflected multilingual settings, translanguaging has been shown to serve as a resource through which learners negotiate heritage-language identity across transnational and digital contexts (Amro & Iversen, 2025); the gap is addressed further as a direction for future research in the Conclusion.

6. Conclusion

This study explored how translanguaging was practiced and experienced in an English classroom at an Islamic junior high school in Polewali Mandar, West Sulawesi. Interview data from the teacher and five students converged on three themes: translanguaging as a tool for comprehension, a medium for classroom participation, and a source of emotional comfort and confidence. The teacher used Indonesian, and at times the local Mandar language, alongside English as a deliberate and temporary scaffold rather than a substitute for English instruction, and students described this practice as what allowed them to understand difficult material, speak up without fear of making mistakes, and stay engaged despite limited English proficiency.

These findings support the position that translanguaging should not be viewed as a sign of linguistic deficiency, but as an effective pedagogical strategy that bridges linguistic and cultural gaps in multilingual classrooms, and that in Islamic education specifically, it is compatible with, and may reinforce, values of inclusivity, respect, and collaboration already emphasized in Islamic schooling. The findings are drawn from a single classroom, one teacher, and five student interviewees within a larger group of twenty, which limits how far they can be generalized to other Islamic schools or regions, and although the theoretical framework anticipated a visible connection between translanguaging and students' religious and cultural identity, the interview data obtained speak more directly to comprehension, participation, and comfort, leaving that dimension for dedicated

future study. Future research could pair interview and observational data with pre- and post-instruction proficiency measures, and extend this work to a larger sample of Islamic junior high schools across Indonesia.

7. References

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