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Proposing a Linguistic Repertoires Perspective in Multilingual Higher Education Contexts

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Proposing a linguistic repertoires perspective in multilingual higher education contexts

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Abstract

Anglophone Higher Education Institutions have embraced cultural diversity but continue to approach linguistic diversity through a deficit perspective, often treating multilingualism as an obstacle rather than a resource (Preece et al., 2018). This paper argues for the adoption of a linguistic repertoires perspective in learning development to leverage students' full linguistic capacities, thereby enhancing cognitive engagement, fostering inclusivity, and contributing to the decolonisation of academic spaces. Drawing on Cummins (2007), I explore how linguistic repertoires function as cognitive tools, aiding comprehension and critical thinking. Additionally, insights from Park and May (2025) and Preece (2019b) illustrate how integrating linguistic repertoires in learning development promotes inclusion and challenges linguistic discrimination. Finally, inspired by Wei and García (2022), I position linguistic repertoires as central to a decolonising agenda in higher education. I call upon learning developers to create pedagogical frameworks that recognise linguistic diversity as an asset, facilitating equitable and enriched educational experiences.

Keywords: linguistic repertoires; linguistic inclusion; multilingualism; decolonisation; translanguaging.

Introduction

Higher Education Institutions in the Anglophone world are increasingly home to multilingual students due to globalisation and internationalisation (Preece and Marshall, 2020). However, despite this linguistic diversity, universities continue to operate within a 'monolingual malaise' (Martin, 2010, p.17), normalising English as the dominant medium

while sidelining students' full linguistic repertoires (Preece et al., 2018). English language proficiency appears as an entry requirement, and students who fail to meet these standards are referred to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) services for remediation. This deficit perspective positions multilingual students as deficient rather than viewing their linguistic resources as valuable assets for learning (Preece, 2019b).

Gornall (2019) highlights that learning developers can serve as brokers of academic literacy for international students who struggle with English-dominant curricula. To shift from a deficit to a resource-oriented approach, I propose that learning development should integrate the concept of linguistic repertoire (Wei and García, 2022), a term that acknowledges the fluid and dynamic nature of language use. The linguistic repertoires perspective recognises the full range of semiotic, communicative, and linguistic resources that individuals draw upon in meaning-making, shaped by their lived experiences, social interactions, and educational backgrounds. Rather than focusing solely on students' performance in an assumed target language (English in Anglophone Higher Education Institutions), this perspective values learners' existing linguistic resources – viewing them not as interference but as cognitive tools that can scaffold both content learning and language development.

This perspective presents multiple strengths, including its role as a cognitive tool, its potential for fostering inclusivity, and its capacity to support decolonising educational practices. Additionally, linguistic repertoires can play a crucial role in internationalisation efforts by integrating diverse linguistic backgrounds into academic and social contexts.

Linguistic repertoires as a cognitive tool

Cummins (2007) argues that multilingualism enhances cognitive processes such as problem-solving, creativity, and metalinguistic awareness. Traditional monolingual instructional strategies often ignore the benefits of bilingual cognition, thereby restricting bilingual/multilingual students' ability to engage with complex academic material in meaningful ways. Instead, learning developers should adopt approaches that allow students to access their full linguistic repertoires, which can support deeper comprehension and facilitate knowledge transfer across languages (Gimenez, 2020).

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For instance, Gimenez (2020) introduces the concept of 'edulingualism', which examines how multilingual students navigate academic tasks and negotiate agency within English-dominant universities. His findings show that students effectively use their multilingual resources to construct meaning, challenge institutional norms, and enhance their academic performance. Learning developers can incorporate this perspective by creating assessments and activities that encourage students to use their linguistic strengths rather than suppressing them. Hence, linguistic repertoires could be facilitated for supporting learning, providing smoother transitions between known and unknown concepts.

Linguistic repertoires for inclusion

Park and May (2025) discuss linguistic discrimination in higher education, emphasising the marginalisation of students whose linguistic practices diverge from institutional norms. Their study on North Korean students in South Korean universities highlights how linguistic hierarchies reinforce social exclusion, negatively impacting students' academic experiences and identity formation. These findings are relevant to Anglophone higher education, where similar processes disadvantage multilingual students whose language practices are perceived as non-traditional (Preece, 2019a).

Additionally, language proficiency as an entry requirement creates a false impression that once the entry requirement is met, the linguistic abilities of all students are homogeneous. Evidence suggests that language proficiency appears predictive of academic outcomes only before a certain threshold is reached, and this threshold does not always correspond to the minimum language entry requirements. This highlights a systematic disadvantage with which many international students pursue their education in Anglophone universities (Trenkic and Warmington, 2019).

To counteract linguistic discrimination, learning developers must develop inclusive pedagogical practices that validate and integrate students' linguistic repertoires. This could involve multilingual scaffolding, code-meshing in academic writing, and fostering translanguaging spaces where students can leverage their full linguistic resources to enhance learning (Preece et al., 2018). Such strategies not only support academic success but also affirm students' identities, fostering a more equitable and participatory learning environment.

Linguistic repertoires as a decolonising project

The dominance of English in academic spaces often reflects colonial legacies, marginalising non-dominant languages and their speakers (Preece, 2011). By legitimising students' diverse linguistic practices, universities can move toward a more decolonised educational model that values linguistic diversity as a fundamental right rather than a barrier.

The notion of linguistic inclusion has the potential to decolonise the curriculum. Wei and García (2022, p.314) argue that monolingual norms can be disrupted, and the hegemony of English can be challenged in education through 'translanguaging'. They broadly define translanguaging as opening up spaces for students' linguistic repertoires in teaching to engage fully with students' full repertoire of features and meanings.

Learning developers can play a crucial role in this transformation by designing curricula that acknowledge the historical and political dimensions of linguistic hierarchies. This might include incorporating readings and assignments in multiple languages, encouraging linguistic self-reflection, and fostering pedagogical strategies that challenge linguistic inequalities (Preece, 2019b). Additionally, linguistic repertoires can enhance internationalisation efforts by fostering integration and mobilisation of multilingual resources among students (Spencer-Oatey and Dauber, 2019; Preece, 2020).

Conclusion

The linguistic repertoires perspective offers a powerful framework for rethinking learning design in multilingual higher education contexts. By moving beyond monolingual norms and recognising linguistic diversity as an asset, educators can enhance cognitive engagement, foster inclusivity, and contribute to decolonising academic spaces. By adopting a repertoire-based approach, learning developers can move beyond deficit models that frame multilingual students as lacking. Instead, they can create interventions – such as multilingual writing support or translanguaging workshops – that validate and build on students' existing linguistic resources. For example, a writing centre might offer

multilingual writing labs where students are encouraged to draft in their strongest language and then work collaboratively to translate and refine ideas in English, helping them to maintain the richness of their thinking across languages. Similarly, learning developers could design workshops where students build bilingual glossaries of course concepts, deepening disciplinary understanding while also valuing their home languages. In-class activities might include reflective journaling tasks where students translanguage freely and then discuss how different linguistic choices shaped their thought processes. These strategies could revolutionise student support for academic literacies and study skills by allowing language to serve as a bridge rather than a barrier to learning.

Hence, I call upon educators and learning developers to actively integrate students' linguistic resources into curricula and pedagogical strategies, thereby creating more equitable and enriched educational experiences. To achieve this, institutions must adopt policies that support plurilingual pedagogies and create institutional cultures that value linguistic diversity. They should invest in professional development for course tutors, EAP practitioners, and learning developers regarding linguistic inclusion. By embracing a linguistic repertoires perspective, learning developers can play a transformative role in shaping higher education into a more inclusive and equitable space for all students. This approach should not be seen as an alternative to EAP but as a parallel effort to promote equity, inclusion, and diversity.

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