

Multilingual comic making: inviting translanguaging in the Reception classroom

EHIAZARYAN-WHITE, Ester, TZIAMALI, Andriana and MACKAY, Georgia

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/37953/>

This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

Citation:

EHIAZARYAN-WHITE, Ester, TZIAMALI, Andriana and MACKAY, Georgia (2026). Multilingual comic making: inviting translanguaging in the Reception classroom. English 4-11, 88. [Article]

Copyright and re-use policy

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

Multilingual comic making: inviting translanguaging in the Reception classroom

Andriana Tziamali

Georgia Mackay

Ester Ehiyazaryan-White Sheffield Institute of Education, Sheffield Hallam University

(Published in English 4-11, 88, Autumn 2026)

<https://englishassociation.ac.uk/english-4-11-88-autumn-2026/>

Synopsis

In this article teachers share their experience of developing a culturally sustaining and translanguaging approach in the Reception classroom. Key practices which were successful included early and continuous parental involvement, use of arts informed activities and opportunities for children to engage their full communicative repertoire.

Over a fifth of children in England speak English as an Additional Language (EAL). As language and belonging are so deeply intertwined (Borrero *et al.* 2010), it is important that practitioners critically reflect on how we are ensuring that our multilingual pupils feel welcomed, valued and included in a largely monolingual schooling system.

Research indicates that learners benefit most when they are actively supported to engage their full linguistic repertoires (D'warte, 2014). Approaches that recognise and legitimise students' multilingual practices can enhance learner willingness, facilitate knowledge acquisition, and broaden access to cultural and linguistic capital (Hélot, 2012). This perspective sees learners as active participants who build knowledge together. It moves away from traditional approaches that treat language as an abstract system disconnected from real life (García and Li, 2014). Instead, language education becomes a collaborative and engaged process of meaning making situated in schools and wider communities (García & Flores, 2012).

Encouraging translanguaging in the classroom is one such approach. Translanguaging refers to the flexible and dynamic ways in which multilingual individuals draw on their full communicative repertoire (García and Li, 2014). This involves moving fluidly across languages and language features as well as across modes of communication, such as listening, speaking, drawing, mark making, writing. In practice, it encompasses the entire spectrum of multilingual communication and serves purposes far more complex than code-mixing, including the performance of social identities, values, and relationships (Driouch, 2022). On this basis translanguaging pedagogies can foster wellbeing, strengthen relationships, and create inclusive learning environments (Song et al, 2022).

Inviting translanguaging into the classroom upholds the value of multilingualism and encourages children to use their full communicative repertoire (Osorio 2020), in doing so it becomes an inherently Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP). Theorised by Paris (2012),

CSP is a practice that seeks to promote and sustain the cultural and linguistic diversity of pupils, resisting cultural assimilation. Grounded in this ethos, our research focused on decentring monolingual and monocultural practices, to make our classrooms spaces where all languages and cultures were welcomed and valued. Taking inspiration from *Multilingual Approaches through Art* (Futro et al., n.d.), we worked towards developing a culturally sustaining, translinguaging approach in the Reception classroom through a series of arts informed activities.

Project methodology

Due to the role of materialities (artefacts, objects and places) in forming multilingual identities (Ibrahim, 2019), an important part of the methodology was to invite parents to bring cultural artefacts to the setting which connect these families to a sense of belonging and act as an expression of their identity (Pahl and Rowsell, 2011). At Maple Grove school (pseudonym), one parent talked to the children about Morocco and shared some cultural artefacts, such as a tagine and Moroccan football kit (Figure 1) and answered questions from the children.



Figure 1 Objects from Morocco

At Riverside Hill school (pseudonym), a child came in their Kurdistan traditional dress and headpiece while a family from Nigeria brought traditional decorative brooms (Figure 2). A parent from Pakistan brought us children's books from her childhood written in Urdu. Parents



Figure 2 Traditional decorative brooms from Nigeria

and children talked about the significance of these artifacts and answered questions. All these opportunities to connect artifacts to the classroom context enabled a culturally sustaining pedagogy approach and set the scene for moments of translanguaging to take place.

While the implementation of the project varied by school, on the whole, it consisted of a series of activities that involved both caregivers and pupils through group work, homework tasks, and independent in-class activities. Below we describe one of the activities – multilingual comic making which was amongst the most well received. The activity was open-ended, child-led and designed to encourage translanguaging through personal storytelling.

Multilingual comics

A comic strip was collaboratively developed and introduced to the children. The main character in the comic was a superhero named Wander (from the German Wanderlust), visiting animal friends in countries around the world. In selecting which languages and countries to represent, the teachers drew on their knowledge of the children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In Riverside Hill for example, Wander visited animal friends from Pakistan, Poland, Timor-Leste and Nigeria (Figure 3). The teachers used Google Earth to enhance the experience of 'travelling' to different countries and encourage embodied communication. Both children and teachers practiced greeting Wander's animal friends in different languages. At the end of the structured input, the children were given a blank comic template to finish in the classroom independently, using words from the languages practiced in the classroom, and memories and settings from their countries.



Figure 3 Multilingual comic strip

The findings

The project revealed the benefits of inviting translanguaging into the classroom. The most notable were the impact that it had on the pupils' wellbeing, their cultural and linguistic awareness and parental engagement.

Wellbeing

By inviting translanguaging into the classroom we created a space where all languages and cultures were welcomed and valued. The importance of this for pupils' wellbeing cannot be understated. Language and belonging are deeply connected (Borrero and Yeh, 2010), therefore it is imperative that we ensure that our pupils feel represented to prevent them from '...[internalising] ambivalence and even shame in relation to their linguistic and cultural heritage' (Cummins in Bower, 2018, p.367).

By establishing a safe and supportive environment, children became increasingly confident in sharing their languages and cultural backgrounds with others. Throughout the activities, they worked collaboratively, which strengthened the sense of teamwork within the classes. Children who had previously been reluctant to participate in class activities began to practise presenting their work in front of their peers, demonstrating greater ownership and pride in their contributions. At Riverside Hill, the presence of shared dual cultural backgrounds among the children, as well as with myself (the teacher, native speaker of Greek), fostered a sense of connection and collective identity within the classroom.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy

By inviting translanguaging into the classroom, we expanded the children's cultural, linguistic and geographical awareness. The use of maps and Google Earth supported children's understanding of place as both a physical and symbolic dimension of linguistic identity (Ibrahim, 2019). Their perspectives on the world broadened, and they engaged in child-led exploration, independently consulting maps and asking questions about countries and languages.

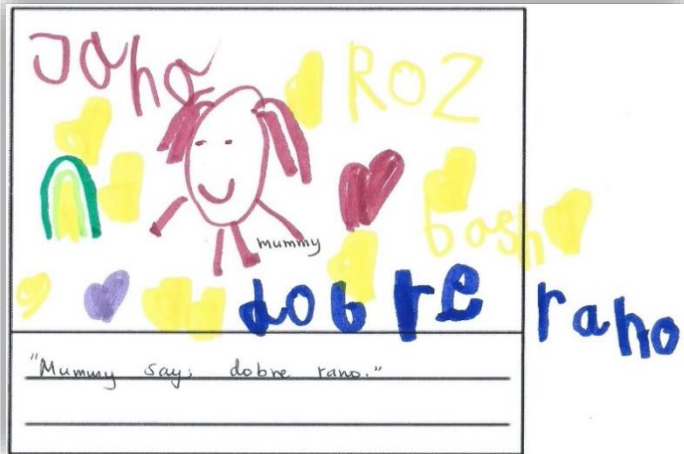


Figure 4 Comic tile showing writing in two languages

Children at Riverside Hill were curious and enthusiastic to find each others' languages and countries on the map and willing to ask and answer questions. Translanguaging was evident in children's own multilingual comics in which a number of children wrote in multiple languages (Figure 4) for example "Roj baş" and "Dobre Rano", meaning good morning in Kurdish and Slovak. A child of Kurdish background shared memories of their uncle's farm and chickens, writing "Roz Bash", good morning in Kurdish (Figure 5).

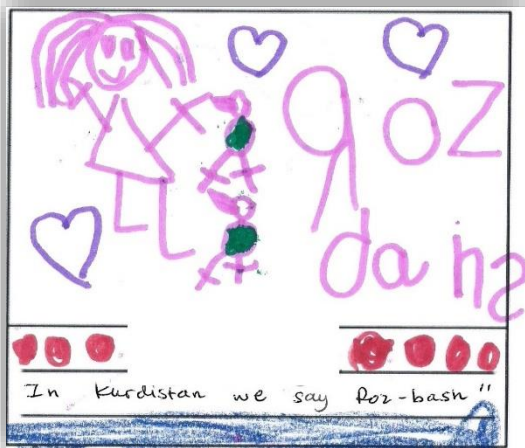


Figure 5 Comic tile by a child with writing in Kurdish

While the project consisted of a series of one-off activities, collectively they embedded a culture of linguistic inclusivity and awareness that extended beyond the parameters of the activity sessions. At Maple Grove, there were several instances where the children spoke in languages other than English outside of the activity sessions. To share a few, following the language portrait activity, one child spent almost thirty minutes trying to label his portrait in Arabic (Figure 6). During a 'Go and Learn' time session, a child came up to me and said 'Kaffee bitte' and told me that that means 'coffee please' in German. On another occasion, during our morning registration, one child responded, unprompted, to my Good Morning with

'Salem', which another child had taught us a couple of weeks prior. Finally, during a Show and Tell session in May, a child brought in a Spanish language book to show and share with the other children. What is particularly interesting with these anecdotes, is that most of the children involved are not multilingual learners, which raises an important point that all children can benefit from introducing a more multilingual and multicultural approach into the classroom.



Figure 6 Language portrait with Arabic writing

Similarly, at Riverside Hill, children with first language English engaged positively with the project and benefited from learning about their peers' languages and cultures. For example, one child drew people wearing colourful clothes as part of her multilingual comic. She verbally added, "They say As-salamu Alaykum," which was scribed onto her comic tile (Figure 7).



Figure 7 Comic tile by a child with first language English

Long-lasting effect of the project

The project broadened the children's perspectives about the world and had a lasting impact. Now that the children are in Year 1, they are still referring to the project and sharing the

experiences and knowledge they gained from it. The children at Riverside Hill still say good morning in different languages and talk about each others' countries. For example, when a new child joined the class from Czechia, the children were eager to learn how to say "good morning" in Czech, locate the country on a map, and find pictures of the capital city online. One child also noticed that Czechia looked very different from Nigeria, which sparked a child-led comparison of the two countries, exploring their similarities and differences.

Parental engagement

Throughout the project, parental engagement was notably high. At Riverside Hill, 70% of parents provided consent for their child to take part in the project, representing one of the largest levels of participation recorded by the school in recent years. Parents at Riverside Hill were grateful for the opportunity to bring their linguistic and cultural expertise into the formal learning environment of the classroom and commented that they "felt seen and included". They further noted that their children's attitude to their home language changed positively. Part of the project's legacy was also an increased parental engagement with workshops, parents evening and volunteering, showing the strengthening of the relationship between parents and school.

Similarly, at Maple Grove, in our post-activity evaluation form, parents shared comments such as, 'thank you for creating this opportunity'. Throughout the project, the feedback received was overwhelmingly positive at both schools, and parents expressed enjoyment in being creative with languages collaboratively with their children.

The challenges and suggestions for practitioners

One of the main challenges for us as practitioners was overcoming our own discomfort when attempting to use the children's home languages, in which we lacked proficiency and confidence. We relied on tools such as Google Translate, YouTube and parental support to help create a translanguaging space and found that simply *having a go* was powerful: it positioned pupils, as well as parents, as experts, encouraged them to teach us, and helped establish a classroom culture where everyone felt safe to explore language and make mistakes (Busch, 2014).

Equally important was approaching pupils' languages with sensitivity and an awareness of their cultural and linguistic histories. Rather than making assumptions, we took time to learn about families' backgrounds; for example, when working with a pupil from Ghana at Riverside Hill, I recognised that although English is the official language, many families also speak home languages such as Twi. Conducting research on the country's linguistic history helped me to frame conversations with parents from a sensitive, informed position.

Conclusion

This project demonstrates that inviting translanguaging into Reception classrooms through creative, materially situated and child-led activities can play a significant role in creating more inclusive, welcoming learning environments (Borrero and Yeh, 2010). By making space

for children to draw on their full linguistic repertoire, experiences and ways of communicating, practitioners can support not only language development, but also children's wellbeing, confidence and sense of belonging (Cummins in Bower, 2018, p.367).

Multilingual comic making proved to be a particularly powerful approach. Its open-ended nature allowed children to take ownership of their learning, positioning them as experts in their own languages and stories. Importantly, the activity benefited all pupils. First language English speakers became curious about languages, began using words they had learned from their peers, and engaged more confidently with cultural and linguistic differences. This highlights the value of embedding multilingual approaches as part of everyday classroom practice.

The project reinforced the importance of strong home–school connections. A range of activities enabled caregivers to bring their languages and identities into the classroom. This not only enriched the curriculum, but also strengthened relationships between families and school, supporting children's learning and wellbeing. As research consistently shows, meaningful parental engagement plays a crucial role in children's educational experiences, particularly in the early years (EEF, 2021).

For practitioners, one of the key learning points was that supporting translanguageing does not require fluency in pupils' home languages. Instead, it requires openness, curiosity and a willingness to learn alongside children. Although initial uncertainty was present, using technology and family support helped create a classroom culture where making mistakes was normalised and linguistic exploration was celebrated.

While this was a small-scale project, it illustrates how relatively simple shifts in practice can have lasting impacts on classroom culture (Hélot, 2012). By decentring English-only norms and valuing the students' full linguistic repertoires, practitioners can move towards more culturally sustaining early years environments where all children feel seen, valued and empowered - a place where everyone can flourish.

References

Borrero, N. E., & Yeh, C. J. (2010). Ecological English language learning among ethnic minority youth. *Educational Researcher*, 39(8), 571–581.

<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X10389810>

Bower, V. (2018). Responding to linguistic diversity. In T. Cremin (Ed.), *Learning to teach in the primary school* (pp. 363–377). Routledge.

Busch, B. (2014). Building on heteroglossia and heterogeneity: The experience of a multilingual classroom. In A. Blackledge & A. Creese (Eds.), *Heteroglossia as practice and pedagogy* (pp. 21–38). Springer.

D'warte, J. (2014). Linguistic repertoires: Teachers and students explore their everyday language worlds. *Language Arts*, 91(5), 352–362.

Driouch, A. (2022). Translanguaging as an inclusive pedagogical practice in early education classes. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 4(4), 76–96.
<https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v4i4.1088>

Education Endowment Foundation. (2021). *Parental engagement*.
<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/parental-engagement>

Futro, D., Hirsu, L., & Faulds, K. (n.d.). *Multilingual approaches through art: Materials for primary and complementary school teachers and learners*.
https://multilingualismthroughart.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/cards_digital_final.pdf

García, O., & Flores, N. (2012). Multilingual pedagogies. In M. Martin-Jones, A. Blackledge, & A. Creese (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of multilingualism* (pp. 232–246). Routledge.

García, O., & Li, W. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137385765>

Hélot, C. (2012). Linguistic diversity and education. In M. Martin-Jones, A. Blackledge, & A. Creese (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of multilingualism* (pp. 214–231). Routledge.

Ibrahim, N. (2019). Children's multimodal visual narratives: Possible sites of identity performance. In P. Kalaja & S. Melo-Pfeifer (Eds.), *Visualising multilingual lives: More than words*. Multilingual Matters.

Osorio, S. L. (2020). Building culturally and linguistically sustaining spaces for emergent bilinguals: Using read-alouds to promote translanguaging. *The Reading Teacher*, 74(2), 127–135. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1919>

Pahl, K., & Rowsell, J. (2011). Artifactual critical literacy: A new perspective for literacy education. *Berkeley Review of Education*, 2(2), 129–151. <https://doi.org/10.5070/B82110050>

Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, 41(3), 93–97.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X12441244>

Song, J., Howard, D., & Olazabal-Arias, W. (2022). Translanguaging as a strategy for supporting multilingual learners' social emotional learning. *Education Sciences*, 12(7), 475.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12070475>