



## Article

# Balancing Language Learning with Translanguaging: Insights from Yunnan Agricultural University

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## A B S T R A C T

This study investigates the strategic application of translanguaging in English classes at Yunnan Agricultural University, a context marked by significant linguistic diversity and socio-economic challenges that have been underexplored. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to provide comprehensive analysis. Grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction and cultural context in cognitive development, the study reveals that translanguaging significantly enhances comprehension and reduces stress for students across varying levels of English proficiency. However, it also identifies potential risks associated with excessive reliance on native languages, which may hinder the development of critical cognitive abilities necessary for English language acquisition. The findings underscore the importance of a balanced approach to translanguaging, where strategies are carefully adapted to the unique linguistic, cultural, and institutional contexts of learners. This research highlights the need for further exploration into how translanguaging strategies can be optimized to support both critical thinking and language comprehension in diverse educational settings.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The selection of instructional language in second or foreign language classrooms is a pivotal yet contentious decision, reflecting evolving pedagogical philosophies. Cen Williams (1994) originally coined the term 'translanguaging' to describe the process of making sense, forming perceptions, acquiring understanding, and information through two languages. The concept was later expanded upon and popularized by scholars (Baker, 1994; Lewis et al., 2012). Translanguaging and scaffolding strategies are not just educational tools but are integral in fostering a bilingual student's complete linguistic repertoire, as they allow students to make meaning through a combination of languages (García & Li Wei, 2014). This approach, which emphasizes the use of the entire linguistic and multimodal repertoire in education, enhances students' ability to articulate

understandings and create new meanings (Feller, 2022). Particularly for emergent bilinguals, previous studies underline even more how translanguaging not only helps understanding but also generates inclusive and fair learning environments (Hansen et al., 2020). These strategies help students to overcome language obstacles so that they may negotiate difficult content using their entire linguistic abilities. Translanguaging, emerging from nuanced understandings of bilingual and multilingual development, offers a paradigm shift in language education. The study of translanguaging arose from advances in our understanding of bilingual and multilingual development. Translanguaging (García, 2009) is the preferred method of operation for many bilinguals. Language teaching has evolved professionally, yet many Asian educational contexts traditionally regard the target language as a distinct entity to avoid linguistic interference (García & Li Wei, 2014).

Astika (2013) contends that only through this immersive experience can students internalize English, start thinking in it, and comprehend it. While this approach may seem beneficial in theory, Muhammet and Kenan (2022a) highlight a potential drawback: when students are required to discuss, debate, and enquire in English, yet their proficiency is not up to the task, they may choose to disengage and withhold their ideas. This situation can hinder students' learning and use of English, as they may fear making mistakes while expressing complex thoughts in a language, they are not fully comfortable with.

Recent developments in translanguaging have shown its effectiveness not just within classrooms but in shaping broader cultural and linguistic landscapes. Szabó et al. (2023), for example, address how translanguaging strategies used in educational environments can change schools' capes, so producing inclusive environments reflecting and honouring students' linguistic identities. Similarly, García and Li Wei (2021) have highlighted how translanguaging spaces can challenge and reshape traditional power dynamics, promoting a more equitable and dynamic learning environment.

Translanguaging refers to bilinguals' complex and fluid language practices and the pedagogical techniques that utilize such practices as multilingual cultures and bilingual education in foreign nations shift, according to García (2017). Furthermore, in a bilingual class, this word has been conceived as a helpful instructional activity (Lewis et al., 2012) and a way to moderate understandings, establish context, include, omit, and present information" (García & Li, 2014; Sarah et al., 2015). Students practice "translanguaging." (Kiramba, 2017) by using multiple semiotic tools to switch languages in different social contexts. Muhammet and Kenan (2022b) argue that translanguaging has a substantial impact on inducing micro- and macro-behavioural changes in instructors' identities, leading instructors to reassess their bilingual competences and redesign their teaching methods considering flexible bilingualism.

The phenomenon of translanguaging in bilingual classrooms has been studied in various schools in different regions. Several studies (Wang, 2016; Muhammet & Kenan, 2021; Sara et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2020; Robillos & Art-in, 2023) found that students used translanguaging strategies

to construct meaning and negotiate. They also felt comfortable and motivated to speak English. Other comparable studies have also shown that advanced translanguaging techniques work in three languages, highlighting their importance for English language acquisition (Dafna et al., 2020). Jack and Kevin (2021) find that translanguaging as a pedagogical strategy can coin a space for content-based thematic learning.

In addition, Liu and Fan (2022) found that diverse student groups support translanguaging. Their study found positive attitudes towards translanguaging and its potential as a personalized pedagogical tool. Current research suggests that translanguaging is an effective pedagogical tool, enhancing both educational outcomes and learning efficiency (Christina, 2019; Wang, 2021). Studies have shown that the complex interplay of teachers-students' interactions, encompassing perceptions, motivations and behavioural intents, is essential for the effectiveness of translanguaging practices. This interactional complexity has been the focus of attention for numerous scholars (Fang & Liu, 2020; Huang & Chelmers, 2023; Wang, 2022). Significant research has examined students' experiences with translanguaging across diverse educational settings, including a university in Japan, (Kavitha, 2014), an EMI finance international classroom in Shanghai (Zhou et al, 2021), an elementary school of Indonesia (Khairuunisa & Iwa, 2020) and a reading classroom at a Bangladeshi Private University (Abu & Anne, 2022). Additional research in China has examined translanguaging within specific domains such as academic writing (Zhang, 2022) and L3 classrooms, particularly in Spanish language learning (Zhou et al., 2020), as well as in knowledge construction (Jack & Kevin, 2021).

Chinese students complete 14 years of compulsory English education, with English being taught from elementary school through university. English ranks among the highest-scoring subjects alongside Chinese and math. However, the English Proficiency Index (EF EPI, 2023) ranks China 84th out of 113 countries, revealing a significant gap between the time invested and actual proficiency achieved. This discrepancy highlights English as a persistent challenge for Chinese students, even as they progress to higher education. Although it is expected that university students will have adequate competence to engage in English-only courses,

translanguaging practices frequently emerge as a common strategy in university settings, suggesting a need to examine its role and effectiveness in enhancing English learning. Xiong's (2019) findings underscore the essential function of translanguaging in bridging linguistic gaps. Nevertheless, most previous studies have focused on urban or well-resourced academic settings (Xiong, 2019; Zhou et al., 2020; Zhou, 2020; Wang, 2021; Wang 2022; Zhang, 2022); and there has been comparatively less research on English language learning at the university level. Leaving a gap in understanding how translanguaging is utilized in more linguistically diverse and socio-economically challenged regions. Research on under-represented regions, such as Yunnan, the province with the most ethnic minorities in China (there are 55 ethnic minorities in China, distributed in 23 provinces and 5 autonomous regions, of which 25 are concentrated in Yunnan Province), where various local languages as well as Mandarin impact English language acquisition, is still limited. Moreover, there is a paucity of research examining both students' and teachers' perceptions of the utilisation of the target language and the mother tongue in bilingual educational settings. Most studies have concentrated on either teachers or students as the primary focus. This study addresses a significant gap in the research on Chinese undergraduate students, instructors and learners on both sides, while also considering the impact of geographical diversity. This study aims to fill these gaps by investigating translanguaging practices. The study examines the unique language learning environment at Yunnan Agricultural University and provides new insights into the translanguaging strategies used by teachers and students in this diverse environment.

The objective of the study is to improve comprehension of how students and instructors perceive and implement translanguaging in the classroom and to better understand how both students and instructors perceive and apply translanguaging in their teaching and learning environments. This study examines the intentionality behind Chinese university English instructors' translanguaging practices and explores the attitudes of both students and instructors, offering a comprehensive perspective on the phenomenon. The research will address four key questions: (a) What are Chinese undergraduates' attitudes toward translanguaging

in English classes? (b) How do university English instructors perceive translanguaging? (c) Under what circumstances do Chinese students and instructors practice translanguaging in the classroom? (d) How does the use of a native language affect communicative abilities in English for both students and instructors?

## II. METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, guided by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in cognitive development, to explore translanguaging practices among instructors and students at Yunnan Agricultural University (YAU). Guided by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in cognitive development. This theoretical framework was used to examine how translanguaging functions as a mediating tool in multilingual educational settings. Both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods are used to provide a comprehensive analysis of the translanguaging practices within the university.

### *Theoretical Framework*

This study involves two concepts from Vygotsky's theory: the term "scaffolding help" refers to a type of learning support that includes the usage of the mother tongue. The mother tongue has the advantage of facilitating the building of scaffolding assistance" by students since it serves as an important psychological tool for learners. Learners are thus able to construct a social and cognitive space in which they can utilise their mother tongue to assist one another in the completion of a task. Another term 'zone of proximal development' is defined as the discrepancy between an individual's actual and potential developmental levels. The objective of teaching should be to focus on the zone of proximal development of students, which provides valuable insights into university English teaching. These two concepts offer a practical and pragmatic framework for rethinking the role of translanguaging in second language acquisition.

### *Participants*

Among the universities in Yunnan, Yunnan Agricultural University recruits the most local students. Taking the admission data released in 2021 as an example, the number of local students

admitted accounts for 90.6% of the total, and the number of ethnic minorities also far exceeds that of other schools. Therefore, choosing Yunnan Agricultural University for research is more representative.

The sample comprised 100 undergraduate students and 10 instructors from Yunnan Agricultural University. A stratified random sampling method was selected to ensure a representative cross-section of students across the university's diverse linguistic and academic backgrounds. Students were stratified by the ten public English courses offered each semester, and ten students per course were randomly selected to achieve a total of 100 participants. This method was chosen to reduce biases related to specific course content or instructional styles, ensuring a well-rounded perspective on translanguaging practices. Purposive sampling was used for instructors. Ten instructors were chosen based on two criteria: a minimum of ten years of teaching experience and active participation in English instruction, including courses that utilise translanguaging practices, which ensured the instructors had sufficient exposure to the relevant teaching strategies being studied (Dörnyei, 2007).

#### *Instruments*

The primary data collection tool was a Chinese online questionnaire website—Wenjuanxing (问卷星), and the questionnaire was developed following Dörnyei's (2007) framework for designing research instruments in second language acquisition studies. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: closed-ended Likert scale (Likert, 1932) questions that researchers have excluded the 'neutral' option to obtain better results to quantify the frequency and context of translanguaging practices, and open-ended questions designed to capture qualitative insights into the participants' attitudes and experiences. The questionnaire was pilot tested with 15 students and 2 instructors and found to have strong internal consistency and acceptable reliability by using SPSS with a Cronbach's alpha between 0.7 and 0.9. Pilot feedback led to minor question wording changes to improve clarity.

#### *Procedure*

Data collection was conducted in compliance with institutional regulations, following approval from the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Yunnan Agricultural University. The questionnaire was

administered online, and participants provided informed consent prior to participation. The Wenjuanxing platform was used to automatically record responses, ensuring data accuracy and facilitating real-time monitoring of response rates. For qualitative data, thematic analysis was conducted to identify key themes and patterns within the participants' responses. This systematic coding process ensured the reliability and depth of analysis, capturing the key themes that resonate with Vygotsky's emphasis on social interaction and cognitive development.

The data was collected over a two-week period. To maintain consistency in data analysis, a bilingual research assistant translated questionnaire responses from Chinese to English with descriptive statistics employed to summarise the findings, preserving participants' nuances. Quantitative data was converted from Likert scale responses into percentages for cross-group student and instructor comparisons. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to identify recurring themes. Two researchers independently coded a subset of the responses to assess inter-coder reliability, resulting in an agreement rate of 85%. This methodological approach is comprehensive and guarantees the reliability and validity of the results, giving a detailed comprehension of the functions of translanguaging in a multilingual educational setting. The analysis is enhanced by quantitative and qualitative data, laying the groundwork for similar educational settings.

### III. RESULTS

In order to find out the first research question of Chinese undergraduates' attitudes towards translanguaging in English classrooms, this study is based on a strict Likert scale (Table 1), which is used to measure the intensity of respondents' feelings about this item (Table 2) and set with four options: strongly agree (4 points), agree (3 points), disagree (2 points), and strongly disagree (1 point).

**Table 1. Likert Scales (1932)**

| Attitudes              | Mean Score |
|------------------------|------------|
| very positive attitude | 3.28-4.00  |
| positive attitude      | 2.52-3.27  |
| negative attitude      | 1.76-2.51  |
| very negative attitude | 0.75-1.75  |

**Table 2. Undergraduates' Attitudes Toward Translanguaging in English Classes**

| Statements   | Strongly agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Mean Score |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|------------|
| 1. It would be easier for me to understand if the English instructor used the native language appropriately in the English classes | 26%            | 47%   | 18%      | 9%                | 2.90       |
| 2. It is inappropriate for English instructors to use their native language in the English classes                                 | 28%            | 31%   | 29%      | 12%               | 2.75       |
| 3. Instructors only use English in English classes I would consider the instructor more professional                               | 36%            | 30%   | 24%      | 10%               | 2.92       |
| 4. Instructors using only English in English classes can leave me potentially confused about parts of the lecture                  | 42%            | 27%   | 17%      | 14%               | 2.97       |
| 5. The appropriate use of native language by English instructors in English classes will make me feel friendly and relaxed         | 38%            | 37%   | 14%      | 11%               | 3.02       |
| 6. Using my native language when appropriate will help me better understand the class content                                      | 40%            | 38%   | 9%       | 13%               | 3.05       |
| 7. The instructor's use of my native language in English classes will prevent me from improving my English skills.                 | 31%            | 28%   | 23%      | 18%               | 2.72       |
| 8. Instructors who only let undergraduates use English may cause stress.   | 32%            | 35%   | 22%      | 11%               | 2.88       |

**Table 3. Instructors' Attitudes Towards Using Translanguaging in English Classes**

| Questions  | Strongly agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| 1. It is beneficial for English instructors to use their undergraduates' native language in English classes                          | 10%            | 50%   | 40%      | 0%                |
| 2. Instructors should use only English in English classes  | 0%             | 20%   | 50%      | 30%               |
| 3. The instructor is using native language in English classes, which will prevent undergraduates from improving their English skills | 0%             | 10%   | 50%      | 40%               |

The examination of the survey data, using a Likert scale (Table1), indicated that the average scores for statements 1 to 8 ranged from 2.52 to below 3.28. These findings suggest that undergraduate students possess a favourable disposition towards utilizing their native language in English classes. Nevertheless, these findings also indicate a diverse viewpoint, as the scores demonstrate a certain level of ambivalence among the students.

Despite this overall positive attitude towards native language use in English classrooms, a sizable proportion of the cohort, approximately 66%, expressed a preference for an exclusively English-speaking classroom environment. Most undergraduates have a psychological preference towards an immersive English language learning experience, as indicated by this point of view. This trend reflects the complexities of student attitudes in language education, where a balance of native language use and English immersion is both desired and difficult to achieve in practice. In fact, 59% of the undergraduates admitted that their language skills are insufficient, and 69%

of the undergraduates felt that they might have difficulty understanding the class content if the instructor only spoke English, which indicates that they would express their native language in actual English classes.

To address the second research question, the Likert scale model was continued to explore instructors' attitudes towards using translanguaging in English classrooms (Table 3).

The results indicated although instructors may encourage the utilization of Chinese in English classes, this does not constitute official sanction. As Table 3 above demonstrates, more than half of the instructors believed that utilizing the native language in the English classes was advantageous, and 80% of the instructors disagreed with the teaching approach of using just English and favoured the use of the native language in the English classes. Also, 40% of instructors disagreed that utilizing the native language in English classes was beneficial. From this it can be deduced that most instructors emphasized the helpfulness of

translanguaging in English classes.

For answering the third research question, Tables 4 and 5 detail the specific circumstances in which students and teachers use translanguaging. Open-ended questionnaires were also designed to allow teachers and students to add other situations not mentioned in Table 4 and 5, and only the responses of teachers adding additional situations were received (Table 6).

Table 4 shows that for students, translanguaging is most frequently employed during group discussions, answering questions, and when clarifying difficult content. Table 4 shows that only 10% to 20% of undergraduates in

the 10 examples do not speak their native language. These findings show that most undergraduates use Chinese in English classes. Over half of surveyed undergraduates ask or suggest solutions in their native languages when facing English class challenges. When English instructors use Chinese, 75% of undergraduates feel at ease and learn better. The goal of university English classes is to teach language history and culture, not just language acquisition. These two goals require classroom dynamics knowledge. Undergraduates' responses adhere to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, revealing that a well-implemented translanguaging strategy in English classes can improve language proficiency and effectiveness in learning English.

**Table 4. The Circumstances for Undergraduates Use Native Language in English Classes**

| Statements   | Never | Not often | often | Very Often |
|--|-------|-----------|-------|------------|
| 1. I use native language in English classes when doing group discussions on the tasks assigned by the instructor   | 11%   | 25%       | 38%   | 26%        |
| 2. I use native language when answering the instructor's questions in English classes  | 20%   | 23%       | 24%   | 33%        |
| 3. I use native language when I ask the undergraduates next to me in English classes some relevant questions   | 20%   | 14%       | 35%   | 31%        |
| 4. I use native language when brainstorming in the English class activities  | 16%   | 20%       | 43%   | 21%        |
| 5. I use native language when I help other undergraduates in English class activities.   | 13%   | 18%       | 56%   | 13%        |
| 6. I use native language when I ask a question to the English instructor alone for an answer in English classes  | 12%   | 17%       | 46%   | 25%        |
| 7. I use native language when I ask my English instructor for help when I don't understand an assignment in English classes.                                       | 10%   | 19%       | 41%   | 30%        |
| 8. I do not understand the tasks set by the English instructor and use native language when I ask the English instructor questions.                                | 14%   | 17%       | 34%   | 35%        |
| 9. I don't understand something in English classes and use native language when asking questions to the English instructor   | 17%   | 15%       | 36%   | 32%        |
| 10. I use native language when I want to remind the English instructor of something in English classes (e.g. remind the instructor that it's time to leave class.) | 16%   | 16%       | 37%   | 31%        |

**Table 5. The Circumstances for Instructors Using Native Language in English Classes**

| Circumstances                             | Never | Sometimes | Often | Always |
|---|-------|-----------|-------|--------|
| 1. to explain the concept                 | 10%   | 40%       | 50%   | 0%     |
| 2. to describe new vocabulary             | 10%   | 60%       | 30%   | 0%     |
| 3. to provide guidance                    | 20%   | 60%       | 20%   | 0%     |
| 4. To maintain class discipline           | 30%   | 30%       | 40%   | 0%     |
| 5. to give feedback to undergraduates     | 0%    | 40%       | 50%   | 10%    |
| 6. to praise undergraduates               | 40%   | 30%       | 30%   | 0%     |
| 7. to build bonds with undergraduates     | 10%   | 30%       | 60%   | 0%     |
| 8. to help low-proficiency undergraduates | 10%   | 40%       | 40%   | 10%    |
| 9. to quickly clarify during activities   | 20%   | 60%       | 20%   | 0%     |
| 10. to ease the atmosphere of the class   | 0%    | 60%       | 40%   | 0%     |
| 11. to talk about personal experience     | 0%    | 60%       | 40%   | 0%     |
| 12. to empower undergraduates' interests  | 0%    | 70%       | 30%   | 0%     |

Thus, undergraduates psychologically request that instructors use the target language, but they use their native language. The results of Table 4 imply that using the mother tongue as a bridge to be learning a second language is helpful for English learning at the undergraduate level. The native language can also improve undergraduates' scaffolding help learning, helping them learn a foreign language.

There were 12 scenarios (Table 5) in which instructors could use their native language in English classes, covering a wide range of situations. Given the small sample size, the data was displayed as a headcount immediately after collection.

As for instructors, translanguaging is often used to explain concepts, provide guidance, and build rapport with students. Table 5 demonstrates that the number of instructors who answered "never" does not reach 50%. It showed that more than half of the English instructors used Chinese in their English classes. For example, 60% of instructors use their native language to greet undergraduates and 50% use it to provide feedback. 60% Of instructors use their native language more than necessary to understand English classes content better when explaining difficult points, giving instructions, describing class activities, or sharing personal experiences. Second, instructors combine English classes with their native language to facilitate individual learning and understanding. According to the instructors, the native language helps undergraduates assimilate English teachings. By instructing in the native language, instructors can better comprehend the requirements of their undergraduates.

In addition, to compensate for the potential exclusion of the 12 circumstances (Table 5) listed above, the questionnaire was developed to include supplementary questions (Table 6) enabling 10 instructors to add additional situations in which they would also utilize Chinese during English classes.

Table 6 highlights supplementary circumstances where instructors engage with undergraduate students in Chinese to clarify misunderstandings or address specific classroom needs. These circumstances include pointing out students' errors, comparing English and Chinese language structures, responding to requests for explanations in the native language, evaluating homework, and teaching foreign literature.

**Table 6. Supplementary Circumstances in which Instructors Use Students' Native Language in Class (Open-ended Responses)**

| <b>Supplementary Circumstances (I=Instructor)</b>                      |
|--|
| 1. Point out the problems of undergraduates (I2)                       |
| 2. When instructors need to compare English and Chinese languages (I6) |
| 3. Pointing out mistakes (I10)   |
| 4. When undergraduates ask the instructor to use native language (I3)  |
| 5. To evaluate undergraduates' homework. (I4)                          |
| 6. When teaching foreign literature (I8)                               |

The data from Table 6 indicate that instructors use Chinese as a tool to connect concepts between English and American literature, as well as to draw meaningful comparisons between the two languages and their respective cultures. In these supplementary situations, the native language plays a crucial role in facilitating communication, enhancing student engagement, and ensuring that instructions are clear and comprehensible. This practice focuses not only on language usage, but primarily on cultivating a harmonious and inclusive linguistic atmosphere within English classes.

The native language should not impede second-language learning; rather, it should act as a scaffold to support the learner. When used appropriately, the native language aids in acquiring a second language. However, effective language instruction requires a balanced integration of both theory and practice. While translanguaging offers benefits, such as improved comprehension and reduced anxiety, it must be carefully managed to avoid potential drawbacks.

In English classes, the native language is a valuable tool, but the goal is to enhance communication in English. The success of language learning often depends on the instructor's ability to adapt their language use to the students' proficiency levels and class context. Instructors should adjust the balance between native language and English based on classroom needs, ensuring that the native language serves as a temporary scaffold that can be gradually removed.

Strategic use of the native language helps students internalize challenging concepts and fosters confidence in their English abilities. Furthermore, teaching in the native language, when done scientifically and rationally, can stimulate English thinking and help students overcome feelings of inferiority. This highlights why an

all-English classroom may not be ideal in the context of China. However, this does not suggest that the native language should dominate English instruction. Instead, a balanced, strategic use of the native language can enhance learning without compromising the goal of English proficiency.

To answer the fourth research question, which further explores the reasons for and effects of translanguaging in the English classes. Table 7 and Table 9 explore how the use of the native language affects communicative abilities in English. The data reveals a dual impact: while translanguaging supports comprehension and reduces anxiety, it can also lead to dependency on the native language, potentially limiting students' opportunities to practice and develop their English-speaking skills.

**Table 7. Chinese Undergraduates to Use Native Language in English Classes (open-ended questions)**

| What are your reasons for using your native language in English classes?   |
|--|
| 1. Because we all speak our native language in our lives, it would be strange and awkward to communicate with classmates in a language other than our native language. |
| 2. When asking my instructor, a question, I am afraid that I cannot express clearly what I really want to ask in English.  |
| 3. Because English speaking is not very good, it is efficient to discuss in native language.   |
| 4. Not good enough to speak English.   |
| 5. Not confident in using English.   |

According to Table 7, students identified five main reasons for preferring to use their native language in English classes. Primarily, the abrupt transition from daily communication in Chinese to English in the classroom causes discomfort, which is rooted in China's dominant language environment. Additionally, using English outside of class is often perceived as pretentious by peers, further discouraging its use. While the reasons vary, they are generally linked to a lack of confidence in English proficiency, leading students to avoid using English to prevent embarrassment. This reliance on their native language helps them feel more comfortable and effective when asking questions or engaging in discussions, particularly in situations outlined in Table 4.

Instructors also noted the potential drawbacks of frequent native language use, such as creating an "inertia" that can hinder the development of English language skills. However, the native language can also serve as a crucial scaffold for second language

learning, aiding comprehension and engagement. Using only English in classes, without considering students' proficiency levels, can cause significant psychological stress, leading to feelings of being overwhelmed and potentially threatening their cultural identity.

To delve deeper into research question (d), we posed an open-ended question to the participants to explore their views on how using their native language in English classes might hinder their improvement in English. The responses are summarized in Table 8.

**Table 8. Impact of Native Language Use on English Communicative Abilities Among Undergraduates (Open-Ended Responses)**

| What are the reasons using your native language in English classes might hinder your ability to communicate in English? |
|---|
| 1. Dependence on native language and failure to improve oral English.   |
| 2. It is easy to form inertial thinking in native language.   |
| 3. We do not get any exercise in speaking and listening if we use of native language long-term.                         |

This table shows student responses to the open-ended question about how using their native language in English classes may hinder their English communication. Three main concerns emerged from the responses. First, undergraduates concerned about dependency because overusing the native language can hinder oral English improvement. Second, students indicate "inertial thinking" in their native language prevents them from developing English thinking patterns for fluency. Third, students emphasize that long-term use of the native language limits their English speaking and listening practice, which is essential to language acquisition.

Due to cultural and linguistic reasons, Chinese undergraduates get used to translating Chinese into English before they say it, which can easily result in thinking in Chinese and making it difficult to develop English thinking. For example, Chinese undergraduates often say "I very like you" in Chinese, while "I like you very much" is the standard English expression. "I really like you" is not grammatically incorrect, but it is not in keeping with English idioms. To gain insights into research question (d), which explores how the use of native language in English classes impacts the communicative abilities of both instructors and students, we asked instructors to provide their

reasons for using or avoiding the native language in their teaching. Their responses, categorized into reasons for and against the use of the native language, are summarized in Table 9.

**Table 9. Impact of Native Language Use on English Communicative Abilities Among Instructors (Open-Ended Responses)**

| <b>If you think the use of Native language in English classes is beneficial for undergraduates, please give at least one reason. (I=Instructor)</b>                                |
|--|
| When pointing out problems with undergraduates, it is more effective to communicate in the native language (I2, I6)  |
| Bridging the gap between two languages for second language learners (I3, I7)   |
| The use of native language helps undergraduates understand obscure grammar and concepts (I4, I8)   |
| Cultural Exchange (I1, I9)   |
| When teaching foreign literature, some experts suggest that it should be taught in the native language (I5, I10)   |
| <b>If you think the use of Native language in English classes will prevent undergraduates from improving their English skills, please give at least one reason. (I=Instructor)</b> |
| Dependency (I1, I8, I5)  |
| Undergraduates need a lot of language input for their language skills to improve (I2, I7, I10)   |
| Undergraduates are reluctant to paraphrase after developing a dependency (I3, I9)  |
| Thinking in Native language can hinder the ability to express oneself in English (I4, I6)  |

Table 9 shows that instructors of English priorities using their native language when explaining complex issues or grammar points. This strategic use of Chinese clarifies difficult material and bridges linguistic gaps to improve student understanding. The application of translanguaging in subjects requiring intercultural competence, such as English and American literature, is especially effective. Instructors help students understand cultural differences in literature by comparing Chinese and Western literary forms. This practice helps students understand complex literary concepts and improves their analytical skills, allowing them to distinguish Eastern and Western literary traditions. The targeted use of translanguaging in this context demonstrates its utility as a pedagogical tool that supports comprehensive learning outcomes, fostering both linguistic proficiency and intercultural awareness.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

The first research question explored

Chinese university students' attitudes towards translanguaging in English classrooms. Undergraduate students generally held positive attitudes towards the use of their mother tongue in English classrooms, but more than half of them still preferred an English-only environment. However, students also acknowledged that their language skills were insufficient, which led to difficulties in comprehension, reflecting the contradictions and challenges between the use of the mother tongue and immersive teaching. The results align with existing research on translanguaging, particularly in its ability to enhance students' sense of security and comfort, reduce psychological pressure in English-only environments (Muhammet & Kenan, 2021), and promote bilingualism and multilingualism alongside academic content learning (Zhou et al. 2020; Khairuunisa & Iwa 2020). The positive attitudes observed among students suggest that they perceive translanguaging as a valuable tool for understanding complex material and navigating language barriers. For instance, a significant proportion of students (75%) reported feeling more relaxed and capable of understanding the content when instructors used Chinese in the classroom. This finding is consistent with previous research by Xiong (2019), which highlighted the supportive role of the native language in second language acquisition.

The second research question explored university teachers' attitudes towards translanguaging in English classrooms. The results showed that, in general, teachers were positive about using their mother tongue in English classes and believed that this practice helped English learning, but also acknowledged that excessive use of the mother tongue could hinder students' English learning.

The third research question explored the classroom application of translanguaging. The research suggests that translanguaging can help students understand difficult concepts, reduce anxiety, and improve English language learning, but it can also lead to overreliance on the first language and reduce opportunities for oral English practice. Teachers must balance the use of both languages to support learning and boost students' confidence. This study extends the general findings of other studies by analysing specific contexts in which translanguaging is most effective (Tables 4, 5 and 6). Namely, that students with lower English

proficiency levels tend to use translanguaging as a mechanism to cope with language anxiety, suggesting that teachers should adapt language use to the individual needs of students to avoid overreliance. These findings are consistent with Takaki's (2019) research, which showed how translanguaging can enhance creativity and engagement through multimodal and intercultural elements. Similarly, Uddling and Warren's (2023) research suggested that spontaneous translanguaging in linguistically diverse classrooms can enhance learning outcomes, as observed at Yunnan Agricultural University where students used their mother tongue to engage with challenging academic content, further evidencing the importance of flexible, context-sensitive approaches to language teaching and learning. Furthermore, Kelvin's (2024) research supported the use of technology to enable strategic translanguaging, thereby creating a richer, interactive learning environment. Overall, the findings highlight the potential of translanguaging to promote active participation, critical thinking and dynamic learning, as supported by Kelvin's (2024a) concept of 'translanguaging', which aligns with the questionnaire results that teachers at Yunnan Agricultural University switch roles between teaching and co-learning and utilise students' linguistic resources to improve classroom interactions.

The fourth research question explored the impact of translanguaging strategies on students and teachers. Findings suggest that students use their first language for reasons including lack of confidence in English, avoidance of embarrassment and cultural influences. While first language use can help reduce classroom stress and understand complex content, overreliance can hinder the development of spoken English and thinking in English. Teachers' use of first language to explain difficult concepts can help with understanding, but a balance needs to be struck to avoid overreliance and promote intercultural awareness. Seals (2021) emphasised the transformative potential of translanguaging to empower students and challenge monolingual bias. The results confirm this view, showing that strategic translanguaging not only promotes understanding, but also empowerment by validating students' linguistic backgrounds. Jenny and Anne (2023) pointed out that translanguaging can reduce language stress and simplify academic content. The findings further reveal a challenge

rarely reported in the literature, namely that overreliance on the mother tongue may hinder the development of critical thinking skills in advanced English.

All of the findings discussed above can be better understood through the lens of Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory (1978), which posits that interpersonal interactions and cultural resources significantly impact cognitive development. Translanguaging plays a key role in promoting understanding and the development of higher cognitive abilities. At Yunnan Agricultural University, translanguaging not only enhanced students' comprehension but also promoted cognitive development. The study emphasises the need for teachers to balance the use of translanguaging to avoid hindering English learning. This strategic approach, which combines methodological and critical pedagogies, requires further research on how to adapt to different learning environments. The effectiveness of bilingual education depends on the language, cultural and institutional backgrounds of the learners, so translanguaging strategies need to be studied in greater depth to enhance students' critical thinking and language comprehension skills. While most prior research (Zhou & Gao, 2021) has concentrated on translanguaging in urban, well-resourced universities, our study examines its dynamics in a less-studied, diverse linguistic environment. This study adds a significant socioeconomic and geographical aspect to the literature on translanguaging, indicating that the advantages and challenges of translanguaging might differ according to institutional and regional contexts.

## V. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the role of translanguaging as both a supportive scaffold and a strategic instructional tool in English classrooms at Yunnan Agricultural University. The findings demonstrate that the mother tongue, rather than acting as a barrier, serves as a valuable resource for enhancing comprehension and reducing students' anxiety. Pedagogically, this suggests that a balanced use of translanguaging can aid in developing students' English proficiency by easing their transition into complex language tasks, while also promoting autonomous, higher-order thinking. Teachers should adjust the ratio of native language and English based on lesson objectives, student

proficiency, and classroom dynamics, allowing the mother tongue to support—not replace—target language development. Yunnan Agricultural University was chosen as the focus of this study due to its unique linguistic diversity and socio-economic setting, which is representative of under-researched, non-metropolitan educational contexts in China. This study provides insights that may be applicable to similar educational settings, where linguistic diversity and varying proficiency levels pose challenges to English language instruction. Future research should extend these findings across diverse educational contexts to assess the long-term impact of translanguaging on language acquisition and cognitive development, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of its role in global language education.

### ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Informed consent was obtained from all participants (students and instructors) prior to data collection. The research adhered to the ethical

guidelines of Yunnan Agricultural University for studies involving human subjects.

### CREDIT AUTHOR STATEMENT

**Ke Xin** conducted the field research, performed data collection, and carried out the statistical analysis. **Yap Teng Teng** provided the main direction and overall guidance for the article, contributing to the research focus and conceptual design of the study. Both authors collaborated closely to ensure the rigor and quality of the final manuscript.

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### DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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