



Translanguaging in Pedagogy: A Case Study of Chinese Students' Meaning-Making in an English- Medium Indonesian University

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Abstract

This study explores how translanguaging shapes academic learning and everyday interactions among Chinese students in an English-medium instruction (EMI) context at President University in Indonesia. While English functions as the primary language of instruction, students frequently navigate Mandarin as their first language and Bahasa Indonesia for daily communication, creating a dynamic multilingual environment. Grounded in García's translanguaging framework, this qualitative descriptive case study investigates how students mobilize their linguistic repertoires to support academic comprehension, emotional expression, social participation, and identity negotiation. Data were collected through multilingual reflective journals written by 30 Chinese undergraduate students over a six-week period, with three representative reflections presented in Mandarin, English, and Bahasa Indonesia. Content analysis indicates that translanguaging operates as a crucial pedagogical and social resource, enhancing comprehension, emotional expression, social interaction, and identity negotiation. By foregrounding students' reflective accounts, this study contributes to the limited body of research on translanguaging in Indonesian EMI higher education and provides empirical insight into multilingual meaning-making from learners' perspectives. The findings highlight the importance of linguistically flexible pedagogies and suggest that EMI institutions should recognize translanguaging as a valuable resource for supporting multilingual students' academic engagement.

Keywords: *Chinese students; Identity; Multilingual; Negotiation; Translanguaging*

Introduction

Reflective thinking plays an important role in helping students interpret learning experiences and respond to new academic challenges. It involves analyzing experiences by drawing on existing knowledge and evaluating possible responses, enabling learners to make informed decisions about their learning processes (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983). Research in educational contexts has shown that reflective thinking supports learners in evaluating problems and identifying appropriate strategies, as demonstrated in recent studies on nutrition education (Mustafid et al., 2024).

In multilingual learning environments, reflective engagement becomes even more significant because students must navigate not only new academic expectations but also unfamiliar linguistic and cultural contexts. Reflective writing therefore provides an important window into how learners interpret their experiences and mobilize different linguistic resources to construct meaning across languages.

These dynamics have become increasingly visible with the internationalization of higher education. The growing mobility of students across Asia has transformed university environments, with an increasing number of Chinese students pursuing higher education in neighboring countries, including Indonesia. Recent studies on international students in Indonesian universities highlight expanding linguistic and cultural diversity on campuses as well as the challenges students face in adapting to unfamiliar academic and social environments (Lukman et al., 2024; Pradana & Nugroho, 2023).

President University represents one such context. As an English-medium institution, the university adopts English as the official language of instruction. However, students often operate within a multilingual environment where Mandarin remains the primary language for many Chinese students, while Bahasa Indonesia is frequently used in everyday communication outside the classroom. This linguistic diversity creates complex conditions that shape how students learn, communicate, and position themselves within Indonesian higher education.

Within such multilingual settings, translanguaging offers a valuable perspective for understanding how students draw upon their full linguistic repertoires to support learning. García (2009) conceptualizes translanguaging as the flexible and integrated use of multiple linguistic resources to construct meaning, a framework further developed by García and Li Wei (2014) as both a theoretical lens and a pedagogical approach that recognizes multilingual practices in education. Studies in higher education suggest that translanguaging can enhance comprehension, reduce linguistic anxiety, and promote more interactive engagement in linguistically demanding courses (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; Tian & Macaro, 2020; Wu, 2020).

Research on Chinese international students also indicates that translanguaging extends beyond a compensatory mechanism; it supports the processing of complex academic content, the organization of ideas in academic writing, and the negotiation of expectations in English-dominated learning environments (Ni, 2021; Yuan, 2025; Zhang, 2021). Reflective journals written in multiple languages provide particularly rich data for observing these practices because they allow students to express learning experiences, emotions, and strategies using their entire linguistic repertoire.

Language use in multilingual contexts is also closely related to identity negotiation. Hall (1990, 1996) conceptualizes cultural identity as dynamic and continuously constructed within social interactions. From this perspective, language functions not only as a communicative tool but also as a symbolic resource through which individuals express belonging, difference, aspiration, and adaptation (Block, 2007; Darvin & Norton, 2015). In English-Medium Instruction (EMI) environments across Asia, identity negotiation is further shaped by institutional language policies.

Although EMI is often promoted as a pathway to global competitiveness, previous research has highlighted ongoing discrepancies between policy expectations and classroom realities, including varying levels of English proficiency and the continued reliance on multiple languages to facilitate comprehension (Macaro, 2018; Dearden, 2015). Kirkpatrick (2011, 2017) argues that many EMI policies in Asia implicitly assume levels of English proficiency that students may not possess, resulting in translanguaging practices that naturally emerge as students navigate academic demands.

In the Indonesian context, studies on international and multilingual students have identified language barriers, unfamiliar academic conventions, and challenges related to learning Bahasa Indonesia as key issues in students' adaptation processes (Rahmawati & Sunarto, 2023). Research focusing on Chinese learners of Indonesian also highlights the role of language in supporting intercultural communication and cultural adjustment (Heryanto, 2018).

However, despite the increasing presence of international students in Indonesian universities, research examining translanguaging practices within English-medium higher education institutions remains limited. Existing studies on Chinese international students globally frequently emphasize challenges related to English proficiency, social integration, and reliance on first-language networks (Li & Zhai, 2023), suggesting the need to explore how multilingual practices function as resources for meaning-making in specific institutional contexts.

Addressing this research gap, the present study investigates the multilingual reflective journals of Chinese undergraduate students at President University, an English-medium university in Indonesia. The study analyzes reflective journals written in Mandarin, English, and Bahasa Indonesia by 30 Chinese students in order to examine how translanguaging shapes their academic learning experiences and

everyday interactions. Guided by García's translanguaging theory (2009, 2011, 2017), Hall's (1990, 1996) framework of cultural identity, and Kirkpatrick's (2011, 2017) critique of English-Medium Instruction in Asia, this research explores how students mobilize their linguistic repertoires to construct meaning, express emotions, and negotiate identities within a multilingual academic environment.

Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do Chinese students at President University employ translanguaging in their multilingual reflective journals?
2. How does translanguaging influence their academic learning experiences and identity negotiation in an English-medium university context?

By foregrounding students' reflective narratives, this study contributes to the growing body of research on translanguaging in higher education while offering empirical insight into multilingual meaning-making within Indonesian EMI contexts. The findings highlight the role of translanguaging not only as a learning strategy but also as a resource for navigating linguistic, academic, and cultural challenges faced by international students.

Method

This study applied a qualitative descriptive case study design (Sandelowski, 2000; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014) to examine how translanguaging shapes academic learning and everyday interactions among Chinese students at President University, an English-medium institution in Indonesia. A qualitative case study approach was appropriate because the study aimed to explore students' meaning-making processes and language practices within a specific multilingual educational context.

The participants consisted of 30 Chinese undergraduate students at President University who participated in the reflective writing activity as part of a course. All participants were native Mandarin speakers who used English for academic purposes and Bahasa Indonesia in everyday communication.

Data were collected through multilingual reflective diaries written over a six-week period. Students were encouraged to describe their academic and social learning experiences and were allowed to write their reflections in Mandarin, English, or Bahasa Indonesia, or to combine these languages. This flexible format enabled students to express their experiences naturally while revealing translanguaging practices in their reflections. Reflective diaries were selected as the primary data source because reflective writing allows students to articulate their experiences, emotions, and learning strategies in their own words, thereby providing insight into how multilingual resources are used in meaning-making processes.

Data collection was integrated into regular coursework, and all participants provided informed consent for their reflections to be used for research purposes. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used when presenting excerpts from the reflections.

The dataset was analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The analysis involved several stages, including repeated reading of the reflective diaries, open coding to identify meaningful segments related to language use, learning experiences, emotional responses, and identity expressions, and grouping related codes into broader categories that were subsequently organized into themes representing patterns of translanguaging practices across the dataset. The interpretation of the findings was guided by García's translanguaging theory (2009, 2011, 2017), Hall's concept of fluid cultural identity (1990, 1996), and Kirkpatrick's insights on English-medium instruction in multilingual Asian contexts (2011, 2017). This analytic approach provides a structured yet flexible framework for understanding students' multilingual experiences within their sociocultural and institutional contexts.

Discussion

The analysis of the multilingual reflection writing indicates that Chinese students at an English-medium Indonesian institution utilize translanguaging as an inherent and essential approach for learning, articulating experiences, and social engagement. Their thoughts in Mandarin, English, and Bahasa Indonesia demonstrate how students utilize their complete linguistic resources to manage academic activities and everyday interactions. This part analyzes the data by synthesizing students' written thoughts with pertinent theoretical frameworks.

The writing reflections demonstrate that translanguaging offers essential cognitive support as students attempt to understand new lesson content and express their learning processes. In the first reflection, 郑子炫 writes in Mandarin. His email is zz8191825@gmail.com. He stated, 我今天学习了新的句型, 知道了如何去表达你体验一种新事物后的感官, 比如去吃新的东西, 体验新的交通工具后如何表达情感等, 还知道朋友的一些特点。我还知道了, 朋友想要尝试的食物, 想去参观的地方和想尝试的交通工具。 Today, I learned new sentence patterns and how to express my senses after experiencing a new thing, such as how to express emotions after eating new food or trying a new means of transportation. I also learned about some characteristics of friends. Additionally, I got to know the food my friends want to try, the places they want to visit, and the means of transportation they want to experience. Hari ini, saya belajar pola kalimat baru dan bagaimana mengungkapkan indera saya setelah mengalami hal baru, seperti bagaimana mengungkapkan perasaan setelah makan makanan baru atau mencoba alat transportasi baru. Saya juga belajar tentang beberapa karakteristik teman. Selain itu, saya mengetahui makanan yang teman-teman saya ingin coba, tempat yang mereka ingin kunjungi, dan alat transportasi yang mereka ingin coba.

In closer examination, beginning in Mandarin allows him to access familiar linguistic structures, making it easier to process new academic input before shifting into English and Bahasa Indonesia. This flexible movement between languages

reflects García's (2009, 2011, 2017) description of translanguaging as drawing from a single, integrated linguistic repertoire rather than separated language systems. Like findings in earlier research, translanguaging in this context reduces cognitive load and strengthens comprehension for learners operating within EMI environments (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; Tian & Macaro, 2020).

The second student, Jie Wen Zheng, also uses Mandarin to make sense of new cultural content, writing: “今天我学到印尼特色美食—tumpeng. 今天我学到印尼特色美食—tumpeng.我非常想尝试一下, 而且还了解到了同学们去过那些地方用什么交通工具去的, 还有告诉别人我尝试过什么东西, 感觉怎么样, 也学到了其他事物的例子 Today I learned about Indonesian specialties - tumpeng. I really want to try it. I also learned about the places my classmates went to and what means of transportation they used to get there. I also told others what I tried and how it felt. I also learned other examples of things. Hari ini saya belajar tentang makanan khas Indonesia - tumpeng. Saya sangat ingin mencobanya. Saya juga belajar tentang tempat-tempat yang dikunjungi teman-teman sekelas saya dan moda transportasi apa yang mereka gunakan untuk sampai ke sana. Saya juga menceritakan apa yang saya coba dan bagaimana rasanya kepada orang lain. Saya juga belajar contoh-contoh lain.

In closer analysis, by anchoring the reflection in L1 while shifting into English and Indonesian to elaborate, he demonstrates how students use translanguaging to consolidate vocabulary, connect classroom learning to real experiences, and expand meaning across languages. These multilingual transitions reveal a deliberate and sophisticated process of cognitive scaffolding as students learn in an EMI setting.

The writing reflections also show that translanguaging enables students to express emotions and personal experiences more richly. Learners tended to use Mandarin when describing feelings, sensory impressions, and subjective experiences—areas where L2 or L3 may not yet provide enough nuance. For instance, 郑子炫's description guoxinrong1234567890@gmail.com of how to express emotions after trying new food shows how L1 allows deeper emotional articulation. He stated, 中文我今天学习了 我尝试过的东西做完东西都感受以及他是什么样的还了解到朋友们做过哪些事情. Hari ini saya belajar tentang hal-hal yang telah saya coba, bagaimana rasanya menyelesaikan sesuatu, dan bagaimana rasanya. Saya juga belajar tentang apa yang telah dilakukan teman-teman saya. Today I learned about the things I have tried, how it felt after I finished doing them, and what they were like. I also learned about what my friends have done.

For further analysis, these expressions illustrate García's argument that translanguaging expands emotional meaning-making opportunities and helps learners communicate affective dimensions that may otherwise be muted in English. Beyond academic and emotional functions, translanguaging emerges as a vital social resource that supports students' interactions with peers and their integration into Indonesian society. By describing peers' interests, shared activities, and cultural explorations across languages, students display multilingual engagement with both

Chinese and non-Chinese classmates.

For example, 郑子炫 writes: “我还知道了朋友想要尝试的食物...想参观的地方...” (I also learned the food my friends want to try and the places they want to visit.). Using Bahasa Indonesia in their reflections, such as “Hari ini saya belajar...”, indicates a growing sense of belonging and identity expansion within the Indonesian context. According to Hall (1990, 1996), identity is fluid and negotiated through discourse; these language choices show students performing their identities as Mandarin speakers, English learners, and temporary members of Indonesian society.

Translanguaging reveals structural deficiencies within the EMI context. Although English is designated as the medium of instruction, students' dependence on Mandarin and Bahasa Indonesia illustrates the actual linguistic dynamics present in multilingual Asian classrooms. Kirkpatrick (2011, 2017) contends that English Medium Instruction (EMI) in Asia frequently neglects the genuine linguistic repertoires of students, resulting in their reliance on additional languages to fulfill academic requirements. The reflections demonstrate this dynamic clearly: instead of resisting EMI, students actively integrate languages to facilitate learning.

The writing reflections collectively indicate that translanguaging serves as a crucial mechanism enabling Chinese students to comprehend academic content, articulate emotions, foster relationships, and navigate their identities within the Indonesian EMI context. Translanguaging serves as a vital linguistic and cultural resource that corresponds with students lived experiences, rather than acting as a barrier. The findings support the pedagogical significance of translanguaging and underscore the necessity for more adaptable language practices in English-medium Indonesian universities

Result

The analysis of multilingual reflective journals indicates that Chinese students at an English-medium university in Indonesia frequently engaged in translanguaging while describing their academic experiences and classroom interactions. Across the reflections, students moved flexibly between Mandarin, English, and Bahasa Indonesia. These multilingual practices suggest that students utilized their full linguistic repertoires when reflecting on classroom activities and social experiences. Rather than treating languages as separate systems, students appeared to combine multiple linguistic resources when constructing meaning in their reflections.

4.1 Translanguaging for Cognitive Scaffolding

Many reflection entries show that students used translanguaging to support their understanding of new academic content. Students often began their reflections in Mandarin before shifting to English or Bahasa Indonesia when elaborating their ideas. This pattern suggests that students relied on familiar linguistic resources to process new lesson content before expressing their understanding in additional

languages.

For example, one student wrote:

我今天学习了新的句型，知道了如何去表达你体验一种新事物后的感官，比如去吃新的东西，体验新的交通工具后如何表达情感等，还知道朋友的一些特点。

(Today I learned new sentence patterns and how to express my feelings after experiencing something new, such as trying new food or using new transportation. I also learned about some characteristics of my friends.)

In the same reflection, the student continued the explanation in English and Bahasa Indonesia when describing the activities discussed in class. Beginning the reflection in Mandarin allowed the student to organize ideas using a familiar language before expanding the explanation in other languages. This pattern reflects translanguaging practices described by García (2009), where multilingual learners draw upon their integrated linguistic repertoires to support meaning-making.

Similar patterns were observed in other reflections. Students frequently used Mandarin to summarize lesson content and then shifted to English or Bahasa Indonesia when describing classroom discussions or providing examples. These multilingual transitions indicate that translanguaging functioned as a form of cognitive scaffolding that helped students interpret and explain new learning materials.

Another student described learning about Indonesian culture:

今天我学到印尼特色美食—tumpeng。我非常想尝试一下，而且还了解到了同学们去过那些地方用什么交通工具去的。

(Today I learned about an Indonesian traditional food—tumpeng. I really want to try it. I also learned about the places my classmates have visited and the transportation they used to get there.)

The reflection continued in English and Bahasa Indonesia when the student explained classmates' experiences and classroom discussions. The movement between languages suggests that students connected classroom content with real-life cultural knowledge through multilingual reflection.

4.2 Emotional Expression through First Language

The reflections also indicate that students frequently relied on Mandarin when expressing emotions or personal reactions to their learning experiences. Emotional descriptions and subjective impressions were often articulated first in the students' first language.

One student wrote:

中文我今天学习了 I 尝试过的东西做完东西都感受以及他是什么样的还了解到朋友们做过哪些事情。

(Today I learned about the things I have tried, how I felt after doing them, and what they were like. I also learned about what my friends have done.)

The reflection was later expressed in English and Bahasa Indonesia when describing classroom activities and discussions with classmates. Beginning the reflection in Mandarin appeared to allow the student to express feelings and impressions more naturally before translating these ideas into additional languages.

These patterns suggest that translanguaging provided students with greater flexibility in expressing emotional experiences. As García and Wei (2014) argue, translanguaging allows multilingual speakers to draw upon the language that best conveys their intended meaning. In this context, Mandarin enabled students to articulate personal experiences more comfortably while still participating in an English-medium learning environment.

4.3 Social Interaction and Identity Negotiation

Beyond supporting cognitive understanding and emotional expression, translanguaging also appeared to facilitate students' social interactions within the multilingual campus environment. Many reflections described classmates, shared activities, and cultural exploration using multiple languages.

For instance, one student wrote:

我还知道了朋友想要尝试的食物...想参观的地方...
(*I also learned about the food my friends want to try and the places they want to visit.*)

The student then continued the reflection in Bahasa Indonesia using phrases such as "*Hari ini saya belajar...*" when describing classroom discussions and interactions with peers. The inclusion of Bahasa Indonesia alongside Mandarin and English suggests that students were gradually engaging with the local linguistic environment.

These multilingual practices also reflect students' identity negotiation within the Indonesian context. According to Hall (1996), identity is constructed through discourse and social interaction. By combining Mandarin, English, and Bahasa Indonesia in their reflections, students demonstrated how they navigated their roles as Mandarin speakers, English learners, and temporary members of Indonesian society.

More broadly, the reflections highlight the multilingual realities of English-medium instruction in Asia. Although English is designated as the official medium of instruction, students continue to rely on multiple languages to support learning and communication. As noted by Kirkpatrick (2011), EMI contexts in Asia often involve flexible language practices that reflect the linguistic diversity of students.

Overall, the findings suggest that translanguaging served as an important strategy that enabled Chinese students to understand academic content, express personal experiences, and interact with peers in a multilingual learning environment.

Discussion

The findings highlight the important role of translanguaging in supporting Chinese students' learning experiences within an English-medium Indonesian university. The multilingual reflective journals demonstrate that students used Mandarin, English, and Bahasa Indonesia as interconnected resources rather than as separate linguistic systems. Through these reflections, translanguaging emerges as a practical strategy that enables students to process academic knowledge, express personal experiences, and engage with peers in a multilingual environment.

The results indicate that translanguaging functions as an important cognitive strategy for understanding academic content. Many students began their reflections in Mandarin before shifting into English or Bahasa Indonesia when elaborating their ideas. This movement across languages suggests that students relied on familiar linguistic resources to organize and process new academic knowledge before expressing these ideas in other languages. Such patterns align with García's (2009, 2011, 2017) conceptualization of translanguaging as the flexible use of an integrated linguistic repertoire. Rather than separating languages into rigid systems, multilingual learners dynamically draw from their entire linguistic resources to construct meaning. Previous studies have similarly shown that translanguaging can support comprehension and reduce cognitive load in English-medium instruction environments (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; Tian & Macaro, 2020).

The reflections also demonstrate that translanguaging enables richer emotional expression. Students frequently relied on Mandarin when describing feelings, personal reactions, and sensory impressions related to classroom activities and new experiences. This tendency suggests that the first language continues to function as an important emotional and expressive resource for learners operating in multilingual environments. García (2009) argues that translanguaging allows learners to access the full expressive potential of their linguistic repertoires, particularly when communicating experiences that may be difficult to articulate in a second or third language. The reflective journals in this study illustrate how students used Mandarin to articulate nuanced feelings before expressing similar ideas in English or Bahasa Indonesia.

In addition to cognitive and emotional functions, translanguaging also appears to support social interaction and identity negotiation. The presence of Bahasa Indonesia in several reflections suggests that students were beginning to incorporate elements of the local linguistic environment into their experiences. By combining Mandarin, English, and Bahasa Indonesia within the same reflection, students positioned themselves simultaneously as members of multiple linguistic communities. From a sociocultural perspective, these multilingual practices can be interpreted as forms of identity negotiation. Hall (1990, 1996) describes identity as dynamic and continuously constructed through discourse, and the multilingual reflections illustrate how students navigate their identities as Mandarin speakers, English learners, and participants in Indonesian academic life.

These findings also reveal broader implications for English-medium instruction in multilingual contexts. Although English is formally designated as the language of instruction, the reflections clearly demonstrate that students rely on multiple languages to successfully navigate academic tasks and social interactions. This observation reflects a tension commonly identified in EMI research across Asia. Kirkpatrick (2011, 2017) argues that EMI policies often assume levels of English proficiency that may not fully reflect the linguistic realities of multilingual classrooms. The reflections in this study suggest that translanguaging functions as a practical mechanism through which students manage these linguistic demands.

Overall, the findings suggest that translanguaging should not be viewed as a deviation from English-medium instruction but rather as a valuable linguistic resource that supports multilingual students' learning and social participation. Recognizing and legitimizing these multilingual practices may help universities create more inclusive learning environments that better support international students' academic engagement and well-being.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that translanguaging is essential in influencing the academic learning and daily interactions of Chinese students in an English-medium university in Indonesia. Through multilingual reflective journals, students showed how they strategically mobilised Mandarin, English, and Bahasa Indonesia to support academic comprehension, express emotions, and participate socially, confirming translanguaging as a core meaning-making practice rather than a compensatory strategy. These practices also reflected ongoing identity negotiation within multilingual and EMI contexts.

While this study is limited by its focus on a single institution and reliance on reflective self-reported data, it highlights important implications for EMI practice and policy. Specifically, EMI institutions are encouraged to move from rigid English-only orientations toward an English-dominant but multilingual-supportive approach, in which lecturers do not penalize the use of students' first or additional languages when such use facilitates comprehension and participation. Future research may build on this study by incorporating classroom interaction data, examining lecturers' perspectives, or comparing translanguaging practices across different EMI contexts.

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