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Translanguaging with Multisensory Storytelling: A Conceptual Framework for Enhancing First-Grade Language Acquisition in Multilingual Contexts

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Abstract
Language acquisition during early childhood lays the foundation for literacy, cognitive development, and social integration. In multilingual educational contexts, such as Indonesia, children often encounter challenges when learning Bahasa Indonesia while English dominates instructional practices in international schools. Traditional monolingual and grammar-based approaches may lead to disengagement and limited vocabulary retention among early learners. This literature review synthesizes research on two complementary pedagogical strategies: translanguaging and multisensory storytelling. Translanguaging, a pedagogical practice that draws upon learners' full linguistic repertoires, fosters cognitive flexibility, identity affirmation, and metalinguistic awareness. Multisensory storytelling, rooted in multimodal learning theory, integrates visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic stimuli to enhance comprehension, memory, and emotional engagement. A systematic review of 42 peer-reviewed studies published between 2000 and 2024 was conducted using databases such as Scopus, ERIC, and Web of Science. Thematic analysis revealed four critical domains: (1) translanguaging as a scaffold for linguistic and cultural inclusion; (2) multisensory storytelling for vocabulary retention and emotional engagement; (3) conceptual intersections between the two methods; and (4) implementation barriers, including policy constraints and teacher preparedness. Findings indicate that the integration of translanguaging with multisensory storytelling can transform language learning into an interactive, inclusive, and culturally responsive experience. However, gaps remain regarding empirical validation, scalability, and long-term outcomes. This review concludes with recommendations for teacher education, curriculum design, and future research to operationalize this integrated approach in multilingual classrooms.

Keywords
translanguaging, multisensory storytelling, multilingual education, early language acquisition, vocabulary development

INTRODUCTION

Language acquisition during early childhood is universally recognized as a critical component of educational success. Children's linguistic competencies influence not only literacy and academic achievement but also cognitive development, identity formation, and socio-emotional well-being (Cummins, 2001; García & Wei, 2014). In multilingual societies such as Indonesia, where Bahasa Indonesia serves as the national language while English is increasingly dominant in international and private schools, the dynamics of early language learning are particularly complex.

Recent statistics underscore the linguistic diversity in Southeast Asia: Indonesia alone is home to over 700 local languages (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021). This creates an educational paradox: while national curricula mandate Bahasa Indonesia, many urban schools prioritize English as a medium of instruction for global competitiveness. Consequently, young learners from expatriate or bilingual families often exhibit limited exposure to Bahasa Indonesia beyond the classroom, leading to vocabulary deficits and affective barriers such as anxiety and low motivation (Hadi-Tabassum, 2021).

Traditional pedagogical approaches—rooted in monolingual immersion or rote memorization—are insufficient to address these challenges. Such methods often neglect the linguistic resources children bring to the classroom and fail to engage multiple learning modalities (Tomlinson, 2001). There is, therefore, an urgent need to adopt innovative frameworks that embrace linguistic plurality and leverage multimodal resources to foster deeper learning and engagement.

Translanguaging has emerged as a transformative concept in language education. Coined by Williams in the 1980s and expanded by García and Wei (2014), translanguaging refers to the strategic use of a learner's entire linguistic repertoire to make meaning and communicate effectively. Rather than enforcing rigid language boundaries, translanguaging legitimizes hybrid language practices, enabling learners to navigate complex cognitive and social landscapes (Creese & Blackledge, 2015).

Research indicates that translanguaging offers multiple benefits in early education:

- Cognitive flexibility: By allowing cross-linguistic connections, translanguaging enhances problem-solving and metalinguistic awareness (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021).
- Identity affirmation: Multilingual learners often experience cultural validation when permitted to

use their home languages, reducing language anxiety (Samuelsson, 2022).
- Comprehension and participation: Translanguaging scaffolds complex content by enabling learners to access knowledge in familiar linguistic forms (Ollerhead & Pennington, 2024).

However, translanguaging faces implementation barriers. Language policies in many educational systems still enforce monolingual norms, and teachers often lack training to integrate translanguaging strategies into formal instruction (Hadi-Tabassum, 2021). These challenges necessitate innovative instructional models that operationalize translanguaging within curriculum frameworks.

Parallel to linguistic inclusivity, pedagogical innovations have focused on multisensory learning as a means to improve cognitive processing. Grounded in the theories of multimodal learning (Shams & Seitz, 2008) and multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1999), multisensory storytelling involves integrating visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic inputs into narrative instruction. Such approaches stimulate multiple neural pathways, reinforcing memory through redundancy (Bahrick & Lickliter, 2014).

Empirical studies underscore the efficacy of multisensory storytelling in early language learning:

- Hettiarachchi and Ranaweera (2013) demonstrated significant vocabulary gains among preschoolers exposed to tactile-rich story sessions.
- Vaahtoranta et al. (2019) reported that multisensory stories improved attention and recall compared to text-only approaches.
- Stephens (2018) highlighted the role of rhythm and movement in sustaining engagement, particularly for learners with short attention spans.

Multisensory storytelling also addresses affective dimensions by embedding language learning in emotionally resonant experiences (Stephens, 2018). Through dramatization, props, and embodied enactments, stories become memorable and meaningful, aligning with Krashen's (1985) affective filter hypothesis and Rahiem et al. (2020).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology, grounded in the principles established by Kitchenham (2004) and aligned with the PRISMA protocols (Moher et al., 2009), to ensure methodological rigor, transparency, and replicability throughout the process of identifying, screening, and synthesizing relevant scholarly works. The primary objective is to critically analyze peer-reviewed research and theoretical contributions concerning translanguaging, multisensory storytelling, and their intersection within early childhood and primary language education contexts. By adopting this structured approach—distinct from more informal narrative reviews—the study aims to minimize bias and enhance the reliability of its findings.

The review was guided by four central research questions. First, it sought to understand the theoretical and empirical foundations of translanguaging as applied in early language education. Second, it explored how multisensory storytelling supports vocabulary acquisition, engagement, and comprehension among young learners. Third, the review investigated the existing evidence regarding the integration of translanguaging and multisensory storytelling in multilingual classrooms. Finally, it aimed to identify critical gaps in the current literature and propose directions for future research on this combined pedagogical approach.

To capture a comprehensive and representative body of knowledge, the literature search was conducted across five major academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), SpringerLink, and Google Scholar (used primarily for supplementary sources). The search strategy employed Boolean operators and carefully selected keyword combinations, including "translanguaging" AND "early childhood education," "multisensory storytelling" OR "multimodal literacy," "language acquisition" AND "multilingual classrooms," and "bilingual pedagogy" AND "inclusive education." This initial search yielded 1,278 records published between 2000 and 2024, reflecting contemporary developments and scholarly interest in the field.

Strict inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to ensure the relevance and quality of the selected literature. Included sources comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, or conference proceedings that focused on early childhood or primary education (ages 3–10) and addressed translanguaging, multisensory storytelling, or multimodal language learning through empirical studies, systematic reviews, or theoretical frameworks. Only English-language publications were considered. Conversely, grey literature (such as unpublished theses or reports), non-educational studies, research focused exclusively on adolescents or adults, and publications without full-text availability were excluded. After applying these filters, 213 studies remained for abstract screening.

The screening and selection process followed PRISMA guidelines and occurred in three sequential stages. In the first stage, titles and abstracts of the 213 records were reviewed, resulting in the exclusion of 87 studies deemed irrelevant. The remaining 126 articles underwent full-text screening, during which 65 were removed due to insufficient relevance, methodological weaknesses, or incomplete data. Ultimately, 61 high-quality studies were retained for in-depth analysis—comprising 42 empirical studies and 19 conceptual or theoretical contributions. A PRISMA flow diagram was developed to document this selection process and will be included in the final manuscript.

For each of the 61 included studies, key data were systematically extracted, including author(s) and publication year, study design and educational context, sample characteristics (for empirical works), descriptions of pedagogical interventions (translanguaging, multisensory storytelling, or both), and key findings with their implications for practice and theory. To ensure methodological quality, studies underwent critical appraisal using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist for qualitative research and the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) criteria for mixed-method and quantitative studies. Only those meeting at least 70% of the relevant quality indicators were included in the synthesis.

Data synthesis was conducted using thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Through iterative coding and pattern recognition, findings across the studies were grouped into four overarching themes: (1) Translanguaging as a Pedagogical and Cognitive Resource, (2) Multisensory Storytelling for Vocabulary and Engagement, (3) Intersection of Translanguaging and Multisensory Pedagogies, and (4) Barriers and Future Research Directions. Given the heterogeneity in research designs, participant demographics, and outcome measures, a narrative synthesis was deemed more appropriate than a meta-analysis. However, frequency counts of thematic occurrences were recorded to highlight dominant trends and recurring insights in the literature.

Despite the rigorous methodology, the review acknowledges several limitations. The restriction to English-language publications may have excluded valuable research from non-English-speaking regions—particularly in Asia and Africa—where translanguaging practices are widespread and deeply embedded in educational contexts. Additionally, the variability in study designs and reporting standards limited the ability to compare effect sizes directly across studies. Furthermore, some recent publications from 2023–2024 were only available as preprints, introducing uncertainty regarding their peer-review status. These constraints highlight the need for ongoing systematic reviews as the evidence base continues to evolve and expand.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Translanguaging in Early Childhood Education

Theoretical Foundations

Translanguaging, originally coined by Cen Williams in the 1980s, has developed into a cornerstone concept for bilingual and multilingual education. García and Wei (2014) defined it as the process by which multilingual speakers use their entire linguistic repertoires to make meaning, rather than keeping languages in separate, compartmentalized systems. This approach challenges traditional monolingual ideologies, which view languages as discrete and ranked hierarchically (Creese & Blackledge, 2015).

From a theoretical standpoint, translanguaging aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes learning through social interaction and the use of cultural tools. Language, in this sense, is not a fixed code but a flexible semiotic resource (Hall, 2011). Translanguaging also resonates with Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis, as it lowers the affective filter: learners feel less anxious when they can rely on their stronger language to scaffold their weaker ones. Moreover, translanguaging promotes metalinguistic awareness by encouraging children to reflect on cross-linguistic similarities and differences (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021).

Empirical Evidence in Early Childhood Settings

Research has consistently demonstrated the positive effects of translanguaging on engagement and learning outcomes in early childhood classrooms. For example, Ticheloven et al. (2019) examined Dutch primary classrooms where translanguaging was integrated into storybook reading. They found that children made richer meaning connections, increased their vocabulary in both Dutch and heritage languages, and participated more actively in classroom discourse.

Similarly, Palmer et al. (2014) studied bilingual classrooms in the U.S. and found that translanguaging fostered solidarity among students and reduced the stigma of non-dominant languages. Young learners used their full linguistic repertoires creatively, negotiating meaning in ways that traditional immersion models suppressed.

In Asian contexts, Choi and Ollerhead (2018) investigated translanguaging practices in South Korean English-medium preschools. Their study revealed that children who engaged in flexible bilingual practices displayed greater confidence and comprehension than peers restricted to monolingual English use. The findings challenge dominant ideologies in many Asian education systems, which often view English-only instruction as superior.

Cognitive and Affective Benefits

Translanguaging's primary strength lies in its ability to connect cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of learning. Cognitive benefits include enhanced problem-solving and transfer of knowledge across languages (Cummins, 2001). Affective benefits are equally critical in early childhood: by legitimizing home languages, translanguaging reduces anxiety and affirms identity (Samuelsson, 2022). For immigrant or expatriate children, translanguaging bridges cultural gaps, making new school environments less alienating (García & Kleyn, 2016).

Challenges and Tensions

Despite its promise, translanguaging faces resistance in practice. Teachers often lack training or fear that bilingual practices may hinder acquisition of the target language (Hadi-Tabassum, 2021). Institutional policies frequently mandate rigid language separation, making translanguaging seem "illegitimate" in formal instruction (Creese & Blackledge, 2015). Some critics argue that translanguaging lacks standardized pedagogical frameworks, making implementation inconsistent (Poza, 2017). These tensions underscore the need for clearer teacher preparation and curriculum guidelines.

Multisensory Storytelling in Language Learning

Theoretical Underpinnings

Multisensory storytelling builds upon theories of multimodal learning and intersensory redundancy. According to Shams and Seitz (2008), learning that engages multiple sensory channels (visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic) enhances neural encoding and long-term retention. Bahrick and Lickliter's (2014) Intersensory Redundancy Hypothesis explains how simultaneous stimulation across modalities (e.g., seeing and touching an object while hearing its name) makes information more salient for young learners.

Storytelling, as a pedagogical tool, is grounded in Bruner's (1996) notion of narrative as a mode of thought. Stories offer structure, coherence, and emotional resonance, making them ideal for language acquisition. When combined with multisensory inputs—props, textures, sounds, movements—stories engage not only cognitive but also emotional and embodied dimensions of learning (Hettiarachchi & Ranaweera, 2013).

3.2.2 Empirical Evidence of Effectiveness

A growing body of research validates the role of multisensory storytelling in vocabulary learning, comprehension, and motivation:

- Hettiarachchi and Ranaweera (2013) found that Sri Lankan preschoolers exposed to story boxes containing tactile props retained significantly more vocabulary than those who listened to text-only stories.
- Vaahtoranta et al. (2019) conducted a quasi-experimental study in Finland and demonstrated that children in multisensory storytelling groups not only learned vocabulary more effectively but also exhibited longer attention spans.
- Stephens (2018) reported that rhythm, rhyme, and bodily movement in storytelling improved engagement for children with attention deficits, making learning accessible to diverse learners.
- Ghaderi et al. (2017) highlighted that storytelling interventions improved auditory memory among children with reading disabilities, confirming its inclusive potential.

Cognitive and Affective Outcomes

The integration of multiple senses in storytelling supports both cognitive and affective development. Cognitively, multisensory storytelling strengthens encoding and retrieval processes by engaging different brain regions simultaneously (Hillock et al., 2011). This makes it especially effective for vocabulary retention and semantic mapping.

Effectively, multisensory narratives provide joy, curiosity, and emotional connection. Colors, sounds, and textures help children associate abstract vocabulary with tangible experiences, lowering anxiety and making language learning memorable (MacDonald, 2015). These affective dimensions resonate with Krashen's (1985) affective filter hypothesis, which emphasizes the role of emotional states in language acquisition.

Applications in Multilingual Classrooms

While most multisensory storytelling studies have been conducted in monolingual or bilingual contexts, its potential for multilingual classrooms is significant. For example, Choo et al. (2020) compared digital storytelling and oral storytelling in Malaysia and found that while both methods improved comprehension, multisensory oral approaches offered stronger cultural connections. This suggests that multisensory storytelling can bridge not only cognitive but also cultural gaps in multilingual settings.

However, implementation barriers remain. Teachers often perceive multisensory storytelling as time-consuming or resource-heavy (Preece & Yu, 2014). Training and institutional support are required to integrate such methods sustainably.

Synergy of Translanguaging and Multisensory Pedagogies

Conceptual Intersections

Although translanguaging and multisensory storytelling have largely developed as independent pedagogical domains, there are clear conceptual intersections that suggest potential synergy. Translanguaging emphasizes the flexible use of all available linguistic resources, while multisensory storytelling emphasizes the flexible use of sensory modalities. Together, they form a holistic framework for inclusive pedagogy, one that values both the linguistic and sensory repertoires children bring to the classroom.

This synergy aligns with Coyle et al. (2010) CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) model, where content, communication, cognition, and culture interact. Translanguaging ensures communication and culture are respected, while multisensory storytelling amplifies content delivery and cognition. The combined approach encourages children not only to learn vocabulary but to live it, feel it, and embody it.

Complementary Strengths

The integration of these two approaches provides multiple complementary strengths:

- Enhanced Comprehension through Dual Scaffolds: Translanguaging provides linguistic scaffolding, while multisensory storytelling provides sensory scaffolding. A child unsure of a new Indonesian word (rumput) can rely on English ("grass") while simultaneously feeling the texture of artificial grass. This double scaffold increases retention and reduces cognitive overload.
- Emotional Engagement and Identity Affirmation: Stories that embed multiple languages and sensory cues allow learners to see their identities reflected and validated. A narrative told partly in English, partly in Bahasa Indonesia, and accompanied by touch and sound ensures no learner feels excluded.
- Inclusion of Diverse Learners: Children with different learning preferences (visual, auditory, kinesthetic) or learning difficulties (dyslexia, ADHD, autism spectrum) benefit when both linguistic flexibility and sensory cues are available (Preece & Yu, 2014; Stephens, 2018).

Emerging Empirical Evidence

While empirical research explicitly integrating translanguaging and multisensory storytelling remains limited, related studies suggest their potential when combined:

- Hettiarachchi and Ranaweera (2013) demonstrated that tactile-rich storytelling improved vocabulary acquisition. If delivered bilingually, this approach could multiply benefits.
- Palmer et al. (2014) showed that translanguaging practices enhanced student collaboration and creativity in storytelling. Adding multisensory props to such bilingual stories could deepen both engagement and memory.
- Choo et al. (2020) found that oral storytelling in multilingual contexts strengthened cultural identity. Coupling this with translanguaging would allow learners to negotiate cultural meanings through both language and sensory experiences.

The gap is clear: while both fields recognize storytelling as powerful, very few have examined the

intersection of multilingual discourse and sensory modalities. This remains an important future direction.

Illustrative Example

Imagine a first-grade class where the story of a caterpillar (ulat) is told using tactile props (cotton for softness, leaves for texture), visual cards of colors, and rhythmic chants. The teacher invites children to describe the caterpillar in both Bahasa Indonesia and English: "ulat hijau" (green caterpillar), "ulat kecil" (small caterpillar). Learners switch fluidly between languages while connecting the words to tangible experiences. The story culminates with a butterfly made of colorful fabric, eliciting emotional responses of joy and curiosity. This scenario illustrates how translanguaging and multisensory storytelling converge to create deeply embodied, emotionally charged learning.

Implementation Barriers and Future Directions

Teacher Training and Pedagogical Readiness

One of the most significant barriers to implementation is teacher preparedness. Many educators lack formal training in either translanguaging strategies or multisensory instructional design (Hadi-Tabassum, 2021). Teachers often default to monolingual instruction because they perceive it as more efficient or academically rigorous. Others see multisensory activities as "extra" or resource-heavy rather than central to pedagogy (Preece & Yu, 2014).

Professional development programs need to equip teachers with practical strategies: how to select appropriate sensory materials, how to code-switch meaningfully, and how to design assessments that capture both linguistic and multimodal learning.

Institutional and Policy Constraints

Educational policy in many countries—including Indonesia—still emphasizes monolingual instruction, often tied to standardized testing regimes (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021). Teachers may face institutional resistance if they deviate from prescribed curricula. Similarly, multisensory approaches may be dismissed as "play" rather than legitimate academic practice. Overcoming such barriers requires advocacy at the policy level, emphasizing research evidence that demonstrates improved outcomes for learners.

Resource Limitations

Another challenge is material and financial constraints. Not all schools, particularly in low-resource contexts, can afford elaborate props or multisensory kits. However, many multisensory experiences can be created with low-cost materials (e.g., colored paper, natural objects, recycled items). Research needs to document low-cost innovations so that equity is maintained across socioeconomic contexts.

Assessment Challenges

Traditional assessments focus on discrete vocabulary recall or grammar accuracy, which may not fully capture the benefits of translanguaging and multisensory approaches. Alternative assessment models—such as portfolios, narrative retellings, or performance-based tasks—are better suited to evaluate creativity, engagement, and deeper comprehension (Echevarría et al., 2017). Future research should explore reliable assessment frameworks that align with these pedagogies.

Directions for Future Research

Based on the gaps identified, several directions emerge:

- Empirical Studies on Integrated Models: More classroom-based research is needed to test how translanguaging and multisensory storytelling can be effectively combined, particularly in early childhood settings.
- Longitudinal Research: Most existing studies measure immediate vocabulary gains; future studies should track retention, literacy, and socio-emotional development over time.
- Cross-Cultural Comparisons: Research should examine how these methods function across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts—e.g., Southeast Asia, Africa, and Europe.
- Teacher Education Studies: Investigating how training programs influence teacher attitudes and classroom practices regarding translanguaging and multisensory instruction.
- Digital and Hybrid Applications: With the rise of educational technology, integrating digital storytelling with translanguaging practices represents an important future direction.

CONCLUSION

This literature review has explored the intersection of translanguaging and multisensory storytelling as complementary pedagogical strategies for early language acquisition in multilingual contexts. The findings highlight that translanguaging challenges the hegemony of monolingual approaches by legitimizing children's full linguistic repertoires, thereby reducing affective barriers, affirming identity, and enhancing comprehension. Concurrently, multisensory storytelling leverages visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic modalities to foster memory, engagement, and emotional connection, creating embodied experiences of language.

Synthesizing these domains suggests a powerful synergy: translanguaging provides linguistic scaffolding, while multisensory storytelling provides sensory scaffolding. Together, they cultivate inclusive classrooms that address the needs of diverse learners, from bilingual expatriates to children with learning differences. Despite these strengths, challenges persist. Teacher preparedness, institutional resistance, and resource limitations remain significant barriers to large-scale adoption. Current assessment models also lag behind, often failing to capture creative and multimodal dimensions of learning.

Future research must empirically test integrated models, conduct longitudinal studies, and develop teacher training programs that normalize translanguaging and multisensory practices. Moreover, policy advocacy is required to shift curricula away from rigid monolingualism and toward inclusive pedagogies supported by research evidence. Ultimately, translanguaging with multisensory storytelling is

not merely an instructional technique but a paradigm shift in language education—one that aligns cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of learning to empower young learners in increasingly multilingual worlds.

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