Rethinking the Education of Multilingual Learners:
A Focus on Research, Theory and Policy

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Introduction and Overview

• Section 1 - Three sets of research findings
  - how long does it take for multilingual language learners (MLLs) to catch up academically to grade expectations in literacy and other school subjects?
  - Does knowledge of students' home languages (L1) facilitate or hinder the development of literacy skills in the school language (L2)?
  - Does use of L1 in the home interfere with the acquisition of L2 in school?

• Section 2 - An integrative framework
  - Identifying evidence-based instructional strategies that respond to opportunity gaps associated with (a) home-school language switch, (b) SES, and (c) marginalized status within the broader society.

• Section 3 - Contrasting the instructional implications of Unitary versus Crosslinguistic Translanguaging theory (UTT vs. CTT)
  - UTT's claim that languages do not exist in our cognitive/linguistic system fails to meet the criteria of empirical adequacy, logical coherence, and consequential validity.
Lily Wong Fillmore (2009: 4):

"The fourth grade is where writers begin to use forms and structures that are more complex than the language of spoken discourse. The language is complex by necessity.

A text from which children are expected to learn content must be specific and unambiguous. In such texts the writer’s purpose is to introduce new facts and ideas and to show connections between these facts and ideas.

To do that, authors must include as much background information as readers might need for interpretation, and this results in informationally dense texts, with a great deal of content packed into words, phrases, clauses, and sentences.

Section 1. Relevant Research Evidence:

Conversational and Academic Language
How Long Does it Take for MLLs to Catch Up Academically?

Feyisa Demie (2013, UK study)

'The main finding of this study suggests that it takes about 5–7 years on average to acquire academic English proficiency' (p. 59).

Cummins, 1981 data - Picture Vocabulary Test
2.2 The Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) hypothesis highlighted the importance of teaching for transfer across languages

Among bilingual children, transfer of academic language knowledge occurs across languages when development of literacy in both languages is promoted in the school context.

In concrete terms, what this hypothesis means is that in, for example, a Turkish-German bilingual program in the Germany, instruction that develops speaking, listening, reading and writing skills in Turkish is not just developing Turkish skills, it is also developing a deeper conceptual and linguistic proficiency that is strongly related to the development of literacy in the dominant language (Germany).

In other words, although the surface aspects (e.g., pronunciation, fluency, etc.) of different languages can clearly be distinguished, there is an underlying conceptual proficiency, or knowledge base, that is common across languages. Similar constructs have been proposed by multiple researchers (Baker, 2011; Kecskés & Papp, 2000; Riches & Genesee, 2006).

Adapted from Cummins, 1980, p. 36: The Entry and Exit Fallacy in Bilingual Education.
The Kahikatea Tree Metaphor


The Common Underlying Proficiency is totally consistent with dynamic models of multilingualism.

The Kahikatea tree, native to Aotearoa/New Zealand, grows in water-logged swampy soil and is characterized by a network of entangled roots that bind multiple trees together, thereby enhancing the strength of each individual tree.
Teaching for Crosslinguistic Transfer: Dual language book example

Scaffold instruction by engaging students’ multilingual repertoires;
Connect to students’ lives;
Affirm student identities;
Reinforce academic language;
Expand literacy engagement

• I think using your first language is so helpful because when you don’t understand something after you’ve just come here it is like beginning as a baby. You don’t know English and you need to learn it all from the beginning; but if you already have it in another language then it is easier, you can translate it, and you can do it in your language too, then it is easier to understand the second language.

• The first time I couldn’t understand what she [Lisa] was saying except the word Hebrew, but I think it’s very smart that she said for us to do it in our language because we can’t just sit on our hands doing nothing.
Is Speaking a Minority Language at Home Part of the Problem or Part of the Solution?

- Differences in PISA achievement between 15-year-old immigrant-background and ‘native-speaking’ students have been interpreted in some OECD reports as causal—the following argument has been commonly made:

  - Insufficient opportunity to learn the school language as a result of speaking a minority language at home leads to inadequate proficiency and academic underachievement in the school language.

- “The language skills of parents, particularly of mothers, may not be sufficient to allow them to assist their children in their schoolwork. The objective needs to be more exposure to the host-country language, both in and out of school. … Parents need to be sensitised to this so that the home environment contributes to improving outcomes” (OECD, 2012: 14).

Study involved PISA 2012 data from 18 countries, with about 5,000 schools and 120,000 students.

“We found that LMi students who speak a [minority language] more often with their parents do not achieve less. In most countries, language use is unrelated to academic performance. In a few countries, such as Canada, Finland, and Singapore, speaking a [minority language] with parents has a positive effect” (2016: 11)
## Section 2. An Integrative Framework Specifying Evidence-Based Instructional Responses to Opportunity Gaps Experienced by MLLs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student background</th>
<th>Linguistically Diverse</th>
<th>Low-SES</th>
<th>Marginalized Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sources of potential disadvantage</td>
<td>- Failure to understand instruction due to home-school language differences;</td>
<td>- Inadequate healthcare and/or nutrition;</td>
<td>- Societal discrimination;</td>
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<td>- Housing segregation;</td>
<td>- Low teacher expectations;</td>
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<td>- Lack of cultural and material resources in the home due to poverty;</td>
<td>- Stereotype threat;</td>
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<td>- Limited access to print in home and school;</td>
<td>- Stigmatization of L1/L2 language varieties;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence-based instructional response</td>
<td>- Scaffold comprehension and production of language across the curriculum;</td>
<td>- Maximize print access and literacy engagement;</td>
<td>- Connect instruction to students’ lives;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Engage students’ multilingual repertoires;</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Decolonize curriculum and instruction through linguistically and culturally sustaining pedagogy;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Reinforce academic language across the curriculum;</td>
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<td>- Valorize and build on L1/L2 language varieties;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Affirm student identities in association with academic engagement;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Linguistically Diverse Students</td>
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</table>
Scaffold Language

Scaffolding refers to the provision of instructional supports that enable learners to carry out tasks and perform academically at a higher level than they would be capable of without these supports.

- Graphic organizers
- Visuals in texts
- Demonstrations
- Hands-on experiences
- Collaborative group work
- Encouraging L1 use (e.g., writing) as a means of transferring knowledge and skills from L1 to L2
- Learning strategies (planning tasks, visualization, note taking/summarizing, questioning for clarification)
- Language clarification (explanation, dictionary use, etc.)

Scaffolding needs to happen across the curriculum - it's not just the job of the language specialist teacher
Reinforce Academic Language across the Curriculum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Topic</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content objectives</td>
<td>Language objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner activities</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Content and Language Objectives Instructional Template

Why should we teach language across the curriculum?

- Language is infused in all curricular content, and we are missing significant opportunities to accelerate students’ progress if we don’t reinforce students’ grasp of academic language as they learn subject-matter content.

- This principle applies to all students, but it is particularly relevant for ELLs who may have significant gaps in their knowledge of academic language.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Arabic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Starts from left to right</td>
<td>Starts from right to left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Noun comes after adjective, e.g. The green apple</td>
<td>Noun comes before adjective, e.g. The apple green</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) English we say “yes”</td>
<td>Arabic we say “السلاما” which is more respectful and serious. It means “I’m here” or “I’m ready,” but the meaning changes depending on context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To our parents and friends.</td>
<td>To our parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Uses less words to describe something, e.g. A short girl</td>
<td>More descriptive words and details when we speak about something because one word can have more than one meaning, e.g. “حَلَوَاء” - hulaa can mean candy or a cute girl.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) E is capitalized for English</td>
<td>You don’t capitalize the first letter of the word Arabic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our language group is Arabic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Group members: Faisal, Wael, Ossama, Ali, Ossama A
Engaging Students' Multilingual Repertoires:
The experiential reality of crosslinguistic transfer for multilingual students learning the
language of instruction: Two examples from Lisa Leoni's EAL class in the Toronto area

“When I am allowed to use my first language in class it helps me with my writing and reading of English because if I translation in English to Urdu then Urdu give me help for English language. I also think better and write more in English when I use Urdu because I can see in Urdu what I want to say in English”. (Aminah, original spelling retained).

“When I am allowed to use Urdu in class it helps me because when I write in Urdu and then I look at Urdu words and English comes in my mind. So, it’s help me a lot. When I write in English, Urdu comes in my mind. When I read in English I say it in Urdu in my mind. When I read in Urdu I feel very comfortable because I can understand it”. (Hira, original spelling retained) (Leoni et al., 2011: 55-56)
Students from Socially Disadvantaged Backgrounds

• The OECD PISA research has consistently demonstrated that students from low-SES backgrounds perform at significantly lower academic levels than those from higher-SES backgrounds both with respect to the SES of individual students and the collective SES of students within particular schools.

• Sources of potential disadvantage
  Multiple factors that will vary across contexts; for example, housing/school segregation; overcrowding; nutritional/medical issues; lack of access to books and other forms of print etc.

• Evidence-based instructional responses
  Immerse low-SES students in a print-rich preschool and school environment;

  Reinforce academic language across the curriculum.
Literacy Engagement Can Dramatically Push Back the Negative Effects of Social Disadvantage

- Amount and range of reading and writing;
- Use of effective strategies for deep understanding of text;
- Positive affect and identity investment in reading and writing;

Cognitive psychologist John Guthrie notes that in all spheres of life (e.g., driving a car, doing surgery, playing golf, gourmet cooking, etc.) participation is key to the development of proficiency:

"Certainly, some initial lessons are valuable for driving a car or typing on a keyboard, but expertise spirals upward mainly with engaged participation" (2004, p. 8).
Data on the reading attainment of 15-year-olds in 27 countries showed that “the level of a student’s reading engagement is a better predictor of literacy performance than his or her socioeconomic background, indicating that cultivating a student’s interest in reading can help overcome home disadvantages” (OECD, 2004, p. 8).

OECD (2010) - about one-third of the negative impact of SES is mediated through reading engagement (or lack thereof). In other words, schools can significantly reduce the negative effects of low-SES by strongly promoting literacy engagement.
• Sources of potential disadvantage
  Societal discrimination;
  Stereotype threat (students’ task performance deteriorates when negative stereotypes are communicated to them);
  Low teacher expectations;

• Key insight:
  Devaluation of identity is a cause of underachievement
  Gloria Ladson-Billings:
  “The problem that African-American students face is the constant devaluation of their culture both in school and in the larger society” (1995, p. 485).

• Evidence-based instructional responses
  Gloria Ladson-Billings:
  ‘When students are treated as competent, they are likely to demonstrate competence’ (1994: 123).
  -- Connect instruction to students’ lives;
  -- Use students’ varieties of L1 and L2 as resources for learning
  -- Decolonize curriculum and instruction;
  -- Affirm students’ identities in association with literacy development;
  -- Enable students to use language (L1/L2) in powerful (identity-affirming) ways;
This experience gave me a gift of poetry. I started to develop a passion for poetry during this project. I didn’t know I had this passion. Since this project I have written and shared many pieces of poetry. …

Participating in this project was like hearing a collective voice telling me: ‘We are proud of you. We care about you. You have a future.’

Being able to express my thoughts about who I am as an Anishinaabekwe (an Ojibwe woman) made me feel like I belonged and was connected to a larger community. (Montero et al., 2013, p. 88)
Affirming Identity = Challenging the Legacy and Current Operation of Coercive Relations of Power

Take away identity and what do you have?

If you have a student that doesn't know who they are, do you think they care about what goes on in the classroom?

Cassandra Bice-Zaugg, Mississauga of the New Credit First Nations, Ontario
What Image of the Student Are We Sketching in Our Instruction?

- Capable of becoming bilingual and biliterate?
- Capable of thinking about and finding solutions to social issues?
- Capable of generating new knowledge?
- Capable of higher-order thinking and intellectual accomplishments?
- Capable of creative and imaginative thinking?
- Capable of creating literature and art?
Section 3. Translanguaging Theory

Unitary Translanguaging Theory (García and colleagues 2009-2021)

- The bilingual's linguistic system is unitary and undifferentiated and that languages have no cognitive or linguistic reality - 'a language is not something that a person speaks' (Otheguy et al., 2015: 256).

- Purely on the basis of this claim, UTT rejects several influential theoretical concepts including academic language, additive (approaches to) bilingualism, the common underlying proficiency (CUP) and teaching for transfer across languages.

- The UTT claim is that these concepts affirm the cognitive reality of languages and thus are 'monoglossic' and static rather than 'heteroglossic' and dynamic in underlying ideology.

Crosslinguistic Translanguaging Theory (Cummins, 2021)

- CTT, by contrast, claims that bilinguals actually do speak languages, involving multiple registers, and effective teaching promotes conceptual and linguistic transfer across languages.

- CTT affirms that the CUP and teaching for crosslinguistic transfer are fully consistent with dynamic or heteroglossic orientations to bilingual cognitive processing, as are the concepts of additive bilingualism and academic language.

- Both CTT and UTT agree on the importance of pedagogical translanguaging understood as:

  instruction designed to enable students to use their entire multilingual/plurilingual repertoire in carrying out academic tasks and activities.
The distinction between UTT and CTT derives from the distinction articulated by García and Lin (2015) between what they termed ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ versions of translanguaging theory.

• “On the one hand, there is the strong version of translanguaging, a theory that poses that bilingual people do not speak languages but rather, use their repertoire of linguistic features selectively. On the other hand, there is a weak version of translanguaging, the one that supports national and state language boundaries and yet calls for softening these boundaries” (García & Lin, 2017: 126).

• Rather than adopt the semantically loaded terms strong and weak, I use the terms Unitary Translanguaging Theory (UTT) and Crosslinguistic Translanguaging Theory (CTT) to highlight distinguishing features of the alternative theoretical orientations identified by García and Lin.

• CTT proposes fluid social and cognitive boundaries between languages; UTT proposes no boundaries and no languages.

Ofelia García, Professor Emerita, CUNY Graduate Center, NYC

Angel Lin, Canada Research Chair, Simon Fraser University
Academic language

- “Academic language is a raciolinguistic ideology that frames racialized students as linguistically deficient and in need of remediation” (Flores, 2020: 22).

- “… the concept of academic language adds to the burden and the failure of Latinx bilingual students and renders their knowledge of language and bilingualism as non-academic, popular, intuitive, incomprehensible, or simply wrong” (García, 2020: 2-3).

- In other words, the whole notion of ‘academic language’ is embedded in a deficit/raciolinguistic ideology.

Additive (approaches to) bilingualism

- “[S]tandard language and additive bilingualism have been used as instruments to minoritize the language practices of some bilinguals and rendering them as deficient” (García, 2020: 16).

- “… discourses of appropriateness … lie at the core of additive approaches to language education” (Flores & Rosa, 2015: 166).

- “… from a raciolinguistic perspective, the limitation to additive bilingualism is that … it offers a purely linguistic analysis of a phenomenon that is highly racialized” (Flores, 2019:56).

Common Underlying Proficiency and teaching for transfer

- The Common Underlying Proficiency delineates “separate L1 and L2 and separate linguistic features” (García & Li Wei, 2014: 14).

- We can now “shed the concept of transfer … [in favor of] a conceptualization of integration of language practices in the person of the learner” (García & Li Wei, 2014: 80).
It is worth noting that none of the other frameworks for conceptualizing multilingual/plurilingual education have endorsed the UTT theoretical claims despite the fact that several were influenced and inspired by the ideas of García and colleagues.

These frameworks include:

- Council of Europe’s (2020) focus on *plurilingual pedagogies*,
- Creese and Blackledge’s (2010) concept of *flexible bilingualism*,
- Cenoz and Gorter’s (2014) *focus on multilingualism*,
- Slembrouck and colleagues’ (2018) *functional multilingual learning*,
- Duarte and Günther-van der Meij’s (2018) *holistic model for multilingualism in education*,
- Hornberger and Link’s (2012) *continua of biliteracy*.
UTT Perspective:

Concepts such as 'additive bilingualism', the common underlying proficiency, and teaching for crosslinguistic transfer are monoglossic and therefore minimally different from monolingual/two solitudes conceptions of bilingualism.

Diagram:

- **Heteroglossic**
  - Unitary Translanguaging Theory

- **Monoglossic**
  - Crosslinguistic Translanguaging Theory
  - Two Solitudes/Dual Correspondence/Separate L1/L2 Proficiencies
CTT Perspective:

CTT is just as 'heteroglossic' and dynamic as UTT in rejecting monoglossic orientations to bi/multilingualism; Concepts such as the common underlying proficiency, teaching for crosslinguistic transfer, and additive bilingualism were proposed 40+ years ago in order to challenge monolingual and separate underlying proficiency orientations to students' bilingualism.

Heteroglossic ___________________________ Monoglossic

Unitary
Translanguaging Theory

Crosslinguistic
Translanguaging Theory

Two Solitudes/
Dual Correspondence/
Separate L1/L2 Proficiencies

Figure 10.1. Heteroglossic to monoglossic continuum
Three criteria for evaluating the credibility and legitimacy of any theoretical construct:

- **Empirical adequacy**—to what extent is the claim consistent with all the relevant empirical evidence?
- **Logical coherence**—to what extent is the claim internally consistent and non-contradictory?
- **Consequential validity**—to what extent is the claim useful in promoting effective pedagogy and policies?
UTT Claim 1.
Is the bilingual's linguistic system unitary and undifferentiated?

Empirical adequacy?

- Bhatt and Bolonyai (2019) review compelling data from studies of aphasia demonstrating that the different languages of bilinguals have specific patterns of neural representation and organization. For example, they cite the case of JZ, a Basque-Spanish bilingual individual with aphasia, whose linguistic functioning in each language was affected in markedly different ways by his aphasia:

"JZ's aphasia impacted his languages to different degrees: his first language, Basque, was more impaired than his second language, Spanish. In particular, the Bilingual Aphasia Test revealed deficits in first language production, but intact production in his second language. Such differential language loss does not find an account in translanguaging theory: a unitary linguistic system cannot explain why one language is impacted (more) than another in differential bilingual aphasia". (2019: 18)

This type of finding refutes UTT but is consistent with CTT

Consequential validity?

- Teachers may be puzzled when they are informed that the languages they teach exist in the social realm but have no reality within the individual's cognitive apparatus or architecture.

- "OK, whatever. What are the implications of this for my teaching?"

- The short answer to this question is that the claim that languages have no linguistic or cognitive reality entails NO IMPLICATIONS for classroom instruction.

- The reality is that languages have experiential, material, and cognitive reality for individuals. The fact that there are no differences in the instructional implications of UTT (which denies the cognitive reality of languages) and CTT (which acknowledges that people do speak languages) suggests that educators can safely ignore this theoretical dispute.

- So what is the theoretical or pedagogical payoff in claiming, with minimal empirical support, that languages have no cognitive reality?
UTT Claim 2: To what extent does the empirical evidence support the notion of a common underlying proficiency and for teaching for crosslinguistic transfer?

- “A growing body of research dating back to the 1960s reveals that the two languages of bilinguals do not exist in isolation and to the contrary, are highly interactive. … The two languages of bilinguals share a cognitive/conceptual foundation that can facilitate the acquisition and use of more than one language for communication, thinking, and problem solving” (NASEM, 2017: 243).

- “Conclusion 6-3: The languages of bilinguals do not develop in isolation from one another. Evidence indicates that certain aspects of dual language learning, processing, and usage are significantly and positively correlated and that the development of strong L1 skills supports the development of English-L2 skills.

- Conclusion 6-4: Evidence reveals significant positive correlations between literacy skills in ELs’ [English learners’] L1 and the development of literacy skills in English-L2” (NASEM, 2017: 245).
UTT Claim 3. Additive Bilingualism

C TT: The construct of ‘additive bilingualism’ says nothing about how languages are processed cognitively by the individual

- UTT theorists consistently characterize ‘additive bilingualism’ as monoglossic and conflate the construct with the imposition of autonomous ‘named languages’, which leave the monolingual and ‘dual correspondance’ paradigms intact (following Makoni/Pennycook).

Examples:

- Additive bilingualism involves “the enforcement of named languages as wholes to be used separately [which] stigmatizes even further [minoritized speakers’] more dynamic and fluid multilingual practices” (García, 2019: 157).
- “merely acknowledging or even using what is seen as the students’ first language in education does not in any way uncover the ways in which standard language and additive bilingualism have been used as instruments to minoritize the language practices of some bilinguals and rendering them as deficient”. (García, 2020: 16)

- None of the many researchers who have used the term ‘additive bilingualism’ over the past 40 years have made any claims regarding the cognitive or neurolinguistic organization of languages.

- They have predominantly used the term to argue against raciolinguistic subtractive orientations to bilingualism.

- A lesson in antonyms: UTT theorists consistently contrast ‘additive’ and ‘dynamic’ as though these concepts were the opposite of each other:

  - “The bilingualism of Latinx bilingual students is not simply additive; it is dynamic” (García, 2020: 16).

  \[
  \text{additive} - \text{subtractive} \\
  \text{dynamic} - \text{static}
  \]

  additive \neq \text{static}
UTT Claim 4:

To what extent is it valid to claim that “academic language is a raciolinguistic ideology that frames racialized students as linguistically deficient and in need of remediation” (Flores, 2020: 22)

- It is important to note that Flores (2020) is not claiming that certain approaches to teaching academic language are problematic, but rather that academic language itself is a raciolinguistic (i.e., racist) concept.

- This assertion, which is made without any qualification or conditions, raises multiple questions.

- For example, UTT theorists also claim that schools must teach standard academic language to all students:
  
  "Because literacy relies on the standard, the standard language itself is taught explicitly in school, and it certainly needs to be taught. [...] We are not questioning the teaching of a standard language in school; without its acquisition, language minority children will continue to fail and will not have equal access to resources and opportunities. (García, 2009: 36)

- Is there any contradiction between the characterization of standard academic language as raciolinguistic and García’s (2009: 36) claim that the standard language needs to taught?

- If academic language is a raciolinguistic ideology, are all of us who use academic language implicated inadvertently in raciolinguistic ideologies? What are the criteria (if any) for distinguishing between academic registers and/or texts that are infused with raciolinguistic ideologies and those that are not permeated by discourses of appropriateness?

- Does this mean that teachers who attempt to teach academic language are inadvertently implicated in raciolinguistic instructional practices?

- Are teachers who provide conceptual and linguistic feedback on students’ writing complicit with ‘discourses of appropriateness’?
Conclusions and Claims

• There is a solid empirical basis with respect to (a) the reality and relevance of academic language, (b) the typical academic catch-up trajectory of MLLs, and (c) development of language and literacy skills in L1 provides a foundation for subsequent L2 literacy development.

• In addition to considering instructional strategies that respond to the language learning needs of MLLs, schools also need to consider evidence-based instructional strategies that respond to the social disadvantage and marginalized social status of many MLLs.

• The concept of pedagogical translanguaging is useful in highlighting the importance of engaging MLLs’ multilingual resources, but it is not by itself a panacea. Other instructional strategies (e.g., reinforcing academic language across the curriculum) are equally important.

• Furthermore, many of the claims of UTT are empirically unsupported, logically flawed, and unhelpful pedagogically. By contrast, CTT translanguaging claims are supported by the research evidence, logically coherent, and carry direct implications for classroom instruction and school-based language policies.
References


References


