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Language as Power: Translanguaging's Interaction with Chinese International Students' English Academic Writing Processes Outside the Classroom

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International students in the U.S. face challenges in navigating university-level academic writing, particularly if English is not their first language. To succeed in their coursework, they must demonstrate mastery of course content, academic English, and writing conventions, while also balancing their native writing habits. Facing these difficulties, international students employ different resources (i.e., repertoires) to facilitate their writing. Understanding challenges international students face as well as resources they employ allows instructors to better support this population. This study examines the academic writing experiences of Chinese university-level international students through the lens of translanguaging in order to identify these repertoires and explore how students use them. The research question is: how does translanguaging interact with Chinese international students' academic writing outside the traditional classroom setting? Through in-depth interviews with seven multilingual Chinese international students, this study reveals that Chinese international students may feel disadvantaged in the American education system because they cannot fully showcase their mastery of course content in their second language, English. Translanguaging is a tool that can help alleviate this disadvantage, and participants in this study used it automatically. However, they kept this process in their mind, separate from the policed zone of written text due to internalized English-only policies.

INTRODUCTION

International students in the U.S. face challenges in navigating university-level academic writing, particularly if English is not their first language. To succeed in their coursework, they must demonstrate mastery of course content, academic English, and writing conventions, while also balancing their native writing habits. Facing these difficulties, international students employ different resources (i.e., repertoires containing different linguistic semiotic features) to facilitate their writing (Li & García, 2022). Understanding challenges international students face as well as resources they employ allows instructors to better support this population.

This study examines the academic writing experiences of Chinese university-level international students through the lens of translanguaging in order to identify these repertoires and explore how students use them. The research question is: how does translanguaging interact with Chinese international students' academic writing when they are writing on their own, outside the classroom?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Translanguaging refers to the deployment of a multilingual's entire linguistic repertoire (Li & García, 2022). The term was coined by educator Cen Williams. Translanguaging does not consider the languages of multilingual speakers as separate systems, allowing multilingual speakers to move through and draw on linguistic and semiotic features from their entire linguistic system (Li & García, 2022). Therefore, translanguaging is taken in the sense of a fluid and dynamic practice that transcends linguistic boundaries (Li, 2018). Many scholars have worked in the theoretical development of translanguaging (e.g., Creese & Blackledge, 2010) in the context of bilingual students, conceptualizing it as a form of flexible multilingualism that allows students to "shuttle between repertoires" without the socially defined boundaries of languages (Canagarajah, 2011, p. 401). In diverse contexts, researchers have documented at the university-level that translanguaging promoted the comprehension of class materials for multilingual students (Rafi & Morgan, 2021; Zhou & Mann, 2021).

In previous studies that emphasized translanguaging's positive impacts, translanguaging was examined under the premise that its legitimacy was fully recognized in classrooms as it was introduced as an intentional strategy for students. However, learning experiences can also take place in academic contexts outside classrooms, for example, when students complete academic writing tasks that are not assigned as part of a classroom experience on their own. In these contexts, will translanguaging bring additional challenges besides its positive influence? Research on potential challenges students face when practicing translanguaging when it is no longer a pre-designed intervention is sparse. One study explored how external factors, including English-only policies and conflicting attitudes among parents, undermined the pedagogical benefits of translanguaging, which brought a meaningful complication to previous research that focused mainly on translanguaging's benefits (Rajendram, 2021).

My research question aims to continue the examination of the multidimensional role translanguaging plays in one specific context outside the traditional classroom experience: students' own academic writing processes. Translanguaging can occur in both speaking and writing. Multilingual students who speak different languages may also think and write in different languages when writing an English essay. Developing a more comprehensive understanding of translanguaging with its potential challenges and benefits can help instructors to better support international multilingual students in developing their academic writing.

METHODOLOGY

Seven participants were recruited from the undergraduate Chinese international student body at the University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley). An invitation to participate in the study was published on the Berkeley Chinese Students and Scholars Association's official social media platform. Snowball sampling was also employed for recruitment. Participant profiles can be found in the Appendix.

The study consisted of three parts: a structured pre-task interview, a writing task, and a semi-structured post-task interview. All interviews were conducted in Chinese over zoom. In the pre-task interview, participants answered general questions about their academic background and previous experiences with academic writing. Participants then completed a timed writing task (20 minutes) answering the following prompt: how has your socioeconomic background shaped your educational trajectory? The prompt was designed based on a short essay assignment of a mandatory writing class at UC Berkeley. It reflected the typical level of

difficulty and requirements of college academic writing assignments and did not require prior knowledge in a specific academic field. Therefore, it was applicable to all participants from various majors. Participants recorded their writing process and were interviewed about it afterwards, discussing their thought process and answering additional questions regarding places where they paused or made changes. Lastly, participants reflected on their experience with college academic writing and contextualized the findings.

Findings and Analysis

This section presents the repertoires (i.e. linguistic and semiotic features) study participants employed and their thoughts and feelings when using those repertoires, which together shed light on the great potential of translanguaging and Chinese international students' attitudes towards such a practice. All repertoires contributed to the writing process in significant ways and there were no significant differences in repertoire use across academic levels.

Writing Conventions Repertoire

One main type of repertoire participants employed involved writing conventions. Participants drew on two main aspects of this repertoire: an organizational template for writing a standard five-paragraph essay and knowledge of Chinese academic writing styles.

All seven participants had received one to two years of English academic essay writing training for standardized tests such as TOEFL in Chinese high schools. The training was conducted in "English-only" classrooms by U.S. teachers, and participants recalled the common use of a five-paragraph essay template with a thesis, body paragraphs, and a conclusion. Most participants found the template useful and mentioned that they relied on it in the writing task. As Mary suggested, such a template helped her with the organization of her essay: "Having learned the writing template in high school, I already knew what the essay will look like after reading the prompt."

Knowledge of Chinese writing styles also facilitated participants' writing process. Participants reported that in China, all the essays they wrote in their Chinese classes were narrative. Mary recalled, "We are expected to describe our experiences like telling a story, and we don't need to use evidence to back up claims or make sure everything is logically connected like we do in English academic writing." Participants adapted this knowledge to the academic writing task when including "factual information," and two participants reported that this was the easiest part of the task due to its similarity to Chinese academic writing.

In this particular aspect of English academic writing, the boundary between Chinese and English writing conventions was transcended by participants' dynamic drawing on appropriate writing styles to complete the writing task.

Changing Cultural Positionalities/Cultural Repertoires

Another repertoire participants constantly drew on was their cultural repertoire. In different instances, all participants identified moments of concern related to expressing cultural information in two distinct ways. The first was when participants wrote about a phenomenon unique in Chinese culture that they thought the reader might not be familiar with in a U.S. context. For example, Mary wrote in her response that she went to an international school and added an additional explanation "an international school is a private school with expensive tuition" after the term. She explained, "I did this because Chinese people know right away an international school means higher tuition and higher education quality, but I don't think this type of international school is common in western culture."

Whereas the first concern focused on translating cultural concepts, the second involved understanding the task itself. The prompt of the writing task asked participants to discuss how their socioeconomic status influenced their educational trajectories. Emily discussed how she found it challenging to write about the relationship between SES and education because "In Chinese, we seldom say explicitly which socioeconomic background we came from, but in the context of English, the phrase made sense." Emily explained that the word for "SES" in Mandarin is "*社会阶层* (social class)," which entails deep historical roots that date back to the 1920s. "*社会阶层*" became popular after Mao Zedong published an analysis on the division of social class in China. In the analysis, Mao used "*社会阶层*" to identify enemies and friends in the revolution. From then on, "*社会阶层*" took on implications of separation and opposition. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the hegemonic social and cultural norm celebrate a classless society where inequality is minimized. Even though class differences marked mainly by wealth still exist, people become less and less comfortable explicitly discussing their "*社会阶层*." Interestingly, Emily's sociology education in the U.S. provided her contexts to discuss SES more comfortably. Emily believed that this is because the term is more often associated with 'critical reflection of one's access to resources' instead of 'a distinction between friends and enemies' in the U.S. context. Unlike in Chinese culture, SES is frequently discussed in U.S. culture and Emily recalled that her sociology professor often asked her to reflect on how SES is connected with different access to education, healthcare, housing, and social networks. Therefore, she was able to connect her Chinese SES with her educational trajectory. In her response to the writing prompt, Emily wrote:

> "In terms of SES, my parents were from the upper-middle class (higher SES) with high income, well-paying jobs, and high education level, and they could afford the expensive tuition for my college education abroad as well as the fees for SAT tutors and college application counselors. Their rich knowledge in higher education also helped my school research and writing personal statements. I know not everyone in China enjoys such a privilege and many talented peers of mine also dream to study abroad but their families cannot afford the money and do not have the resources to support their applications. Class inequality in China is very serious."

In this case, translanguaging allowed Emily to understand and narrate her own "*社会阶层*" in the Mandarin context in light of the American meaning of SES and connect "社会阶层" to her educational trajectory.

Overall, participants changed their cultural positionalities to consider different perspectives with the goal of maximizing comprehensibility. They mentioned in the post-task interview that they were proud and glad that their cultural knowledge helped them fill the gap of cultural differences.

Language-Related Repertoires
Language-related repertoires also supported participants' writing process in the clarification of logical connection.

In terms of clarification of logical connection, Jack, Mary, Jacob, and Elsa revealed in the post-task interview that when writing a new sentence, they would mentally plan the content in a mixture of Chinese and English and then convert the general mixed summary to more formal and academic expressions in English. Elsa recalled her thought process in a mixture of Chinese and English: "In my mind, I said to myself: I need 例子去支持分 论点 (example to support

my argument). 例子我可以写 Study abroad (I can use my experience of studying abroad as an example)."

Potential Educational Disadvantage

Besides employing different repertoires during writing, participants of my study also reported feelings and thoughts that shed light on the educational disadvantage they suffer from.

Many participants believed that crossing stylistic, cultural, linguistic, and cognitive repertoires allowed them to convey meaning effectively. However, in the post-task interview, all participants mentioned feelings of guilt and shame when they inevitably crossed the borders of their repertoires. Elsa, Emily, and Mary all referred to the inclusion of Chinese as a "secret tool" or "shortcut" that they should keep out of the written text.

When asked about the resources that could help improve participants' academic writing experiences, they all mentioned sample essays or writing tutors. Mary believed that having a sample paper to follow would help her understand professors' expectations more clearly. Jason, Emily, Elsa, Jack, and Jacob all reported that with the help of writing tutors, who are usually native speakers of English, they can ensure they will not lose points due to grammar, unclear expressions, and confusing phrasing. Elsa said, "I always asked a writing tutor to go over my essay before submitting it to make sure I don't lose points on those small mistakes."

DISCUSSION

Translanguaging is present in all seven participants' writing processes, and they practiced it instinctively in their minds. They drew on three main repertoires (writing conventions, cultural, and language-related) that were identified in the first three themes. Their engagement with different repertoires echoed with the "shuttle between repertoires" from previous scholars' theoretical conceptualization of translanguaging (Canagarajah, 2011, p. 401).

Despite the usefulness and richness of their repertoires, all seven participants experienced complex feelings when drawing on these repertoires. Participants did not consider their move between various repertoires as a legitimate part of the writing process but rather felt ashamed about it and believed they needed to keep it a secret. Therefore, they considered translanguaging as something they could draw on privately, but that should otherwise be kept hidden. Such self-policing might be internalized during their high school academic writing training that took place in "English-only" classrooms where the legitimacy of translanguaging was denied. "English-only policy" implies that crossing the boundary between the mother language and English, whether linguistically or cognitively, disrupts the learning of English, especially in English academic writing. Even though students still instinctively translanguage using cultural and cognitive repertoires, the "English-only" policies make them feel guilty, concerned, and anxious when they think and reason in Chinese. Participants' experiences at an American university reinforced such internalization, as most learning also took place in English-only classrooms. They believed that sample essays and writing tutors could mitigate such a disadvantage. While these resources were helpful, participants were still operating in English-only contexts when using them. Since participants reported that drawing on different repertoires helped them convey meaning more effectively, translanguaging could also help them reduce the disadvantage. However, no one mentioned that it would be helpful if instructors could encourage international students to utilize their entire repertoire (linguistic, stylistic, cultural, cognitive). This suggests that participants may never consider translanguaging as a possible alternative because they have internalized English-only policies.

Understanding the different repertoires that participants brought to the writing task sheds light on ways to better support international students' academic writing. All seven participants experienced feelings of pride when moving between culture repertoires and did not consider such move as an illegitimate shortcut. This may be because cultural diversity and differences are openly discussed and valued in classrooms from high schools to universities in the U.S. Just as cultural differences are explicitly discussed and appreciated, instructors can open up a space for translanguaging through open discussions of linguistic diversity to cultivate international students' recognition and appreciation of their multilingual repertoires. Translanguaging is almost an instinctive practice for many international students and has the potential to support their academic writing and challenge the bounded nature of languages, but the current academic systems do not grant international students the freedom to fully translangauge. Indeed, even though participants of the study engaged with translanguaging during their writing, there were instances when they, with English-only policies in mind, differentiated the boundaries between Chinese and English academic writing styles, cultures, and languages instead of considering them as part of their encompassing multilingual repertoire. It is not reasonable to expect graders to know all the diverse languages in the world, so it may still not be possible for international students to submit papers that are written in multiple languages. However, instructors can still encourage international students to draw on their entire linguistic repertoire at least in the preparation stages of writing: when students write outlines and drafts. This approach may help students convey meaning more smoothly and reduce their disadvantages. By openly appreciating linguistic diversity and encouraging international students to draw on and move between various repertoires in and outside class, instructors not only make the writing process smoother for these students but also validate their identities as multilingual writers, not just English academic writers.

CONCLUSION

Chinese international students may feel disadvantaged in the American educational system because they cannot fully showcase their mastery of course content in their second language, English. Translanguaging is a tool that can help alleviate this disadvantage, and participants in this study used it automatically. The study contributes to existing literature by showing that translanguaging is not just a pedagogical intervention but also a natural process among students. Using their entire linguistic repertoire aided participants in conveying their intended meaning, but due to internalized English-only policies, they kept this process in their mind, separate from the policed zone of written text. In other words, participants were employing their linguistic and semiotic features from a unitary repertoire but not recognizing these features as coming from a unitary system. Instructors should consider encouraging multilingual students to appreciate the incorporation of their mother-language during the English academic writing process.

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APPENDIX
Study participants

Name (Pseudonyms)	Academic Level	College Major	Languages Known	Prior training in English academic writing	Date of Interview
Mary	Sophomore	Psychology	Chinese (native), English	Had training since high school.	2/19/2022
Elsa	Junior	Sociology	Chinese (native), English	Had training since high school	3/22/2022
Jack	Senior	Data Science	Chinese (native), English	Had training since high school	3/22/2022
Jacob	Junior	Sociology	Chinese (native), English	Had training since high school	4/5/2022
Jerry	Junior	Computer Science	Chinese (native), English	Had training since high school	10/19/2022
Emily	Freshman	Economy	Chinese (native), English	Had training since high school	11/14/2022
Jason	Senior	Psychology	Chinese (native), English	Had training since high school	11/17/2022