

Beyond the Policy Ban: Translanguaging Practices in Pakistani English-Medium Instruction Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Pakistan's English-medium instruction (EMI) policies typically mandate English-only classroom interaction, yet classroom realities across universities and colleges often diverge sharply from this monolingual ideal, with teachers and students routinely drawing on Urdu and regional languages to negotiate meaning, manage comprehension, and maintain rapport. This study examines translanguaging practices in Pakistani EMI classrooms, investigating how teachers and students actually navigate English-Urdu-regional language switching in everyday instruction despite formal policy prohibitions against it. Adopting a qualitative, classroom-based ethnographic approach, the research combines non-participant classroom observation across three university departments, audio-recorded lesson excerpts, and follow-up interviews with 12 instructors and 18 students to document the functions, patterns, and pedagogical rationale behind translanguaging moments. Findings reveal that translanguaging most frequently served content clarification and comprehension-checking functions, followed by classroom management, peer negotiation of meaning, rapport-building, and identity marking, with teachers and students alike expressing a persistent disjuncture between official monolingual policy discourse and the multilingual reality of everyday classroom interaction. The study explores this disjuncture between top-down monolingual policy discourse and bottom-up multilingual classroom practice, asking how translanguaging serves as a scaffold for content comprehension, identity affirmation, and classroom management, while also considering the tensions and stigma teachers and students associate with departing from English-only norms. By foregrounding lived classroom practice over stated policy, this research contributes to translanguaging theory in South Asian higher education contexts and offers implications for more linguistically realistic EMI policy design in Pakistan.

Keywords: Translanguaging; English-Medium Instruction (EMI); Language Policy; Classroom Discourse; Pakistani Higher Education

1. Introduction

As far as English is concerned, only a few exceptions, the current policy environment of Pakistan assumes that English is the medium of instruction in all the departments of higher education, which stems from the history of the language of administration being English and the perception of the policymakers about the merits of English-medium instruction (EMI) for achieving international academic competitiveness and employability. However, a significant amount of classroom-based research, as well as many daily experiences in the classroom indicate that this monolingual policy ideal is not actually applied in its entirety in the classroom. Rather, Urdu and regional languages are frequently used in classrooms ostensibly taught in the English language to help clarify complex content, regulate classroom behavior, establish rapport, and negotiate meaning with class peers by teachers and students.

Instead of seeing the lack of language as a problem for teachers, as it is often portrayed in official discourse, what if the use of multiple languages in the classroom is an integrated and pedagogically useful approach to meeting the practical demands of teaching and learning complex academic content in a language that many students have only



limited prior knowledge of? Theories of translanguaging, as a strategy of the speaker's complete language repertoire and not a complete system of alternation between two clearly defined systems of linguistic planning, offer a way of understanding these classroom practices as not a failure of the English-medium policy, but as a valid pedagogical and communicative tool.

The study asks three main questions: What communicative and pedagogical functions do translanguaging episodes serve in the everyday classroom interaction in Pakistani EMI classrooms? How do teachers and students make sense of, justify, and evaluate their use of translanguaging in their own classroom practice when compared with the communicative and pedagogical expectations of the official English-only policy? What are the tensions, stigmas, or institutional pressures involved in the willingness of teachers and students to recognize and accept translanguaging in their classrooms? The objective of the study is to bring in a contribution to the theoretical framework of translanguaging in South Asian context of higher education and to language realistically informed policy debates on the possible reform of EMI that will reflect instead of suppressing the multilingual classroom realities in Pakistan.

The stakes of this inquiry are not only descriptive in interest, but also go beyond it and reveal ones interest in the classroom language use. The potential implications of this study are obvious, and if what it predicts is true, that is, if translanguaging will be found to have legitimate pedagogical purposes and not merely a failure of discipline, what will this imply for Pakistani universities in training, evaluating and supporting their teaching staff. Much of the apparatus of teacher evaluation in universities in Pakistan tacitly, or sometimes explicitly, values highly such teachers as those who make extensive use of translanguaging, even if it is evident that this helps students comprehend what is being taught, and such teachers could be at risk of being evaluated unfavorably. This study's design had several practical motives, including documentation of the functional value of translanguaging empirically, as it could help inform more realistic and pedagogically defensible teacher evaluation criteria.

The present study is also inspired by an awareness of educational equity which pervades the broader literature on English medium instruction in the postcolonial and multilingual context. Implementing English-only norms in the classroom does not only risk the systematic disadvantage of students from Urdu-medium and vernacular-medium schools, it also places them at a disadvantage in learning unfamiliar subject matter and using an unfamiliar language of instruction without the scaffolding that translanguaging offers. It is not only a linguistic description of translanguaging but has direct implications for issues of equitable access to higher education content for Pakistan's most linguistically diverse and socioeconomically disadvantaged learners.

It is significant to mention that the context of this study falls at a time when the nation is greatly concerned with reform of the curriculum and medium of instruction in Pakistan, and there are on-going discussions related to the Single National Curriculum in Pakistan and its implications for language policy at the school and university level. Empirical evidence of the way classroom practice actually works is of practical value for policy makers designing curriculum guidance and the medium of instruction that is responsive to classroom reality and not out of it, within the overarching context of reform. The focus of this study on actual classroom practice—not just on teacher self-report—is designed to make precisely this sort of practice-based evidence to the national debate on language-in-education reform.

2. Literature Review

Over the last ten years, translanguaging theory has become a popular rethinking of the communicative process of bilingual and multilingual speakers, which contrasts with the traditional bilingual-multilingual view of bilingual speakers as having two bounded systems of language that are switched by code switching. In a comprehensive state of the art review, Bonacina-Pugh, Da Costa Cabral and Huang (2021) explain the evolution of translanguaging theory from a descriptive, bilingual perspective of language use to a pedagogical view that argues that the full repertoire of a language learner's language systems is legitimate for making meaning and learning content. The theoretical reorientation has important implications for EMI contexts in particular, because it allows for thinking of the multilingual practices that were observed informally in EMI classrooms not as 'errors' in instruction but as evidence of the teacher and the students actively accessing all linguistic resources they have to perform complex communicative and pedagogical tasks.

In the context of Pakistan specifically, Panezai et al. (2023) carried out a mixed method study through classroom observation and follow up interviews with teachers along with a questionnaire survey at the University level to explore teachers' translanguaging practices. Their results confirmed that translanguaging offered an interactional space for meaning making for teachers and students, and that classroom observations showed that translanguaging moments always facilitated meaningful communication which would have been much harder to imagine in a strictly monolingual frame where English is the only language used. The teachers' answers to interviews and questionnaires also produced evidence that they consciously and deliberately adopted this pedagogical approach

using translanguaging, that is, that the teachers using translanguaging did not view it as a moment of professional failure, but as a strategic solution, indicating that there was a gap between the official perception of translanguaging and its actual use and rationalization by the teachers who use it.

A classroom-level evidence, the works of Saleem, Latif, Khan, Javaid, and Khan (2023) focus on the phenomenon of translanguaging in Pakistani Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) in broader terms, viewing it as a phenomenon of bridging the linguistic gaps, which in turn allowed students coming from diverse linguistic and socioeconomic background to experience a greater sense of engagement in classroom discourse as compared to the strict enforcement of English-only rules. This aligns with Ashraf, Turner, and Laar (2021), who report that the challenge of policy implementation and practice in Pakistan reveals that there is a persistent conflict between the policy and the practice of multilingualism. This conflict is manifested in the expectations and practices of teachers and students in many classrooms, which are monolingual and English-centred, and is further exacerbated by the lack of prior exposure to English, or the disparity in exposure to it, that these students bring to university.

In addition to the Pakistani context, the study of translanguaging in classrooms as a phenomenon in the international context has some comparative value for the present study. In this study, Oliver, Wigglesworth, Angelo, and Steele (2021) review the multifaceted aspect of implementing translanguaging in the classroom and found that teachers in the classroom face a tension between their pedagogical instincts to adopt a flexible multilingual approach to foster comprehension and institutional or policy pressures to remain within the monolingual approach, something that seems to resonate with the tension in Pakistani EMI classrooms. Amin (2025) also in her study on Investment and Identity in a Pakistani university classroom, further investigates that the relationship of students with English is influenced by their previous situation of schooling because Urdu-medium-educated students reported linguistic exclusion in the English classroom, which shows that translanguaging can be used not only as a cognitive understanding tool but also as an affective and identity-affirming tool for students who experience language marginalisation in the classroom.

The extant literature indicates several themes that are important to the present study. First, translanguaging theory provides a scaffolding that enables classroom multilingualism to be reconceptualized as a pedagogical tool and not an instructional deficit. Second, empirical studies in the Pakistani context of higher education specifically validate that translanguaging is a prevalent, meaningful, and consciously used pedagogical practice in the classroom in the school's context, even in the face of the government's English-only policy. Third, it is in perpetual conflict with the institutional policy talk, creating a mismatch between the acceptable and the practical for teacher–student interaction. Fourth, although previous studies have established that translanguaging exists and that it plays a variety of communicative roles in the Pakistani EMI context, so far less attention has been given to systematically analysing the communicative functions translanguaging serves in various classroom moments, and to the way in which teachers and students themselves represent the tension between practice and policy. This study aims to fill that void by compiling classroom observation and interview data to capture the functional pattern and experienced attitudinal conflict of translanguaging in Pakistani EMI classrooms.

Another major topic in the translanguaging literature is the difference between pedagogical translanguaging, which is intentional, planned, and taught as a strategy for instruction, and spontaneous translanguaging, which is spontaneous and happens naturally in the process of bilingual or multilingual interaction. (Cenoz and Gorter (2020) This distinction is analytically important for the present study as it poses a question of whether the translanguaging practices observed in Pakistani EMI classrooms represents intentional pedagogical decisions by teachers, spontaneous communicative behavior, or a combination of both, as is likely the case, given the mixed-methods findings of Panezai, Channa and Bibi (2023), with teachers deliberately using translanguaging in some classroom moments and spontaneously using it in others depending on the immediate communicative demands of the classroom moment.

While student-initiated translanguaging is less-developed literature within the Pakistani EMI literature reviewed above, compared to teacher-initiated translanguaging, it is important to note that the literature above has been researched mainly from a teacher's perspective. This relative lack of student-initiated translanguaging, especially translanguaging by peers as opposed to a teacher, during small-group or pair work activities instead of teacher-fronted small group or whole class activities is a specific and consequential gap that the present study aims to address, as student-initiated translanguaging may demonstrate different functions, motivations and attitudinal dynamics than teacher-initiated translanguaging, which has been more widely studied in the literature to date.

It would also be beneficial to place the focus of this study in the context of the language-in-education policy of Pakistan in general. Pakistan's language policy has been dynamic since independence, oscillating between the promotion of Urdu as national language and the maintenance of English as the language of access to the elite and connections to the outside world, while at least rhetorically recognizing the nation's considerable regional linguistic diversity, including Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Baloch, and many other, smaller, language communities. This oscillation has created a policy landscape where official proclamar for multilingual equity have been juxtaposed with the reality

of official English as the gatekeeping language in the context of higher education and professional career development, thus enabling a historical background that helps understand the pedagogical, political and identity-related significance of translanguaging in Pakistani EMI classrooms for the teachers and learners who engage in it.

3. Methodology

A qualitative classroom-based ethnographic research design was used, which involved non-participant classroom observation, follow up semi-structured interviews with the teachers and students, and audio-recorded lesson excerpts. This design was chosen because translanguaging is a dynamic, emergent and immediate process, and its functions and patterns can be captured by a close analysis of naturally occurring classroom talk, as well as the participants' own analysis of the talk.

The study was carried out over three English medium instruction departments namely English Literature, Business Administration and Social Sciences in a large public sector university of Punjab in order to include variation in the content of the disciplines as well as the varying level of technical and/or specialized vocabulary required from students. After formal institutional access negotiation, 24 non-participant classroom observation sessions were carried out in 3 departments, each session lasting for the duration of a normal 50-minute lecture. These observations were complemented with audio recording of classroom interaction with the consent of instructors and students, and detailed field notes recording contextual and non-verbal information not included in the audio recording. After observation, 12 teachers and 18 students of three departments were selected to participate in semi-structured interviews based on the criteria of a good mix of disciplines, teaching experience, and students' prior schooling (including both English-medium and Urdu-medium).

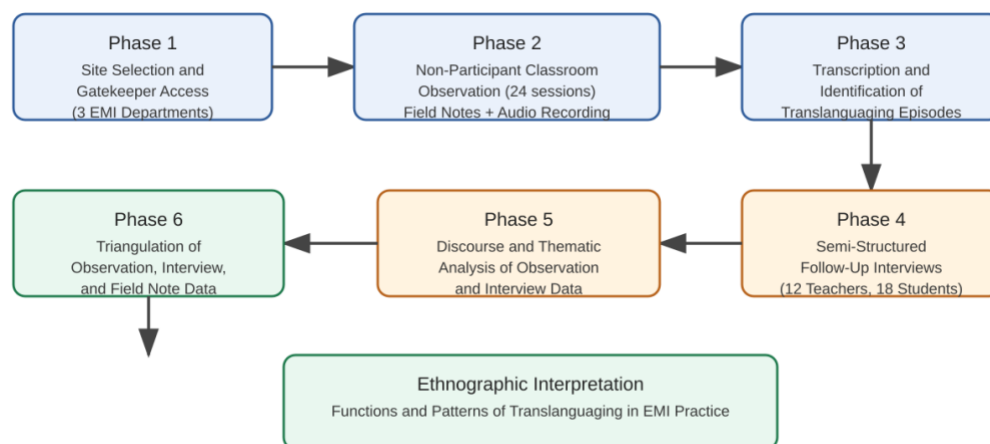


Figure 1. Qualitative classroom-based ethnographic research design illustrating the six-phase observation, transcription, and interview procedure.

Data collection was carried out in 6 phases (as shown in Figure 1). The first phase of the research process involved negotiating access to the sites, and obtaining departmental and instructor consent within the three participating departments. For phase 2, 24 non-participant observation sessions in classrooms were held using field notes and audio recording of classroom discourse. The third phase involved verbatim transcription of the audio recordings, and a systematic review of the transcripts to identify translanguaging episodes, which were considered instances in which a teacher or a student changed from English to Urdu or a regional language – or from Urdu to English – within a single sequence of interaction. To gain deeper insight into how the teachers and students understood and justified the identified episodes of translanguaging, semi-structured follow-up interviews were held in the fourth phase, involving 12 teachers and 18 students. During the fifth phase, both the observational transcripts and the interview data were analyzed by implementing a hybrid approach of discourse analysis for the categorization of the communicative function of each translanguaging episode and reflexive thematic analysis for the identification of recurring attitudinal themes in the interview data. In the sixth and final phase, the observation, field note and interview data were

triangulated for an integrated ethnographic portrayal of the functions of translanguaging and the tensions that occur in the context of using translanguaging.

Qualitative data were collected from observation and discussion/questioning with the aim of analyzing them using two complementary procedures. Translanguaging episodes were transcribed and then analyzed using discourse analysis to classify the main communicative function of the episodes based on an inductively developed coding scheme that was developed through multiple readings of the transcripts. Thematic analysis of the interview data was conducted using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) consisting of the following phases: familiarization, coding, building themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and write-up, to find out the important patterns of the attitudes of respondents towards the legitimacy, stigma, and connection of translanguaging to the official policy.

A second trained coder independently coded a randomly selected 20% subsample of the transcribed episodes in a second coding, using the same five-category functional scheme, in order to establish the reliability of the discourse analytic coding scheme used for the observed translanguaging episodes, and inter-coder agreement, measured by Cohen's kappa, was acceptable, at 0.79, with discrepancies being resolved during discussion between the two coders prior to the remaining episodes being coded by the main researcher. A second member of the research team also reviewed a subset of interview transcripts independently during the thematic analysis phase to further establish the stability and defensibility of emerging attitudinal themes, and to discuss and agree on boundaries of the themes prior to coding the entire dataset of interviews.

Ethical approval was granted by host university's research ethics committee and, as it was extremely sensitive that live classroom teaching was observed and audio-recorded, extra care was taken to ensure informed consent was achieved from both the instructor of record for each observed classroom session and from all students present at the classroom observation, who were seated beyond the range of the audio recorder and not included in the transcriptions, but still allowed to attend the classes normally. A point made to instructors was that observation data would be de-identified before analysis and that no individual information would be provided to the departmental administration, which seemed to be crucial in encouraging honest participation due to the concerns raised by some instructors about the stigma associated with the data.

4. Findings

Table 1 shows the frequency and main function of the five types of translanguaging identified in 246 episodes observed. Content clarification and comprehension-checking were the most common functions, with just over a third of the total number of observed episodes falling into this category, and they were mostly used by teachers wanting to ensure that students understood the disciplinary concepts that they believed to be complex. Two additional functions which were, once again, teacher-initiated were classroom management and rapport building, which used Urdu for about a third of the episodes. Peer negotiation of meaning (more than a fifth of the episodes) occurred most often when students discussed content among themselves before responding to the teacher's question, and identity and affiliation marking (also mainly student-initiated) was a smaller but not insignificant share of episodes.

Translanguaging Function	Observed Episodes (N=246)	% of Total Episodes	Predominant Initiator
Content clarification / comprehension check	87	35%	Teacher
Classroom management / discipline	41	17%	Teacher
Rapport-building / humor	38	15%	Teacher
Peer negotiation of meaning	52	21%	Student
Identity / affiliation marking	28	11%	Student

Table 1. Frequency and predominant initiator of translanguaging functions across 246 observed classroom episodes.

Table 2 shows the main themes that emerged for the teachers and students during the 30 follow-up interviews. The majority of teachers and students agreed that the use of translanguaging for comprehension was an important strategy, indicating a high level of agreement that the switch into Urdu or a regional language was helpful in comprehending challenging content. A significant number of both groups were also aware of the disconnect between official policy and actual classroom practice, and were often candid and non-defensive in their descriptions of this. A

smaller, but still significant, percentage reported ambivalence or worry about the stigma or sense of unprofessionalism that may come with students' departure from English-only norms, especially for teachers who were worried about being judged negatively by administrators or colleagues. Last but not least, most teachers and students had a positive attitude towards the formal policy reform, which would explicitly recognise and validate translanguaging as a sanctioned pedagogical approach and not as an implicit tolerated but officially discouraged approach.

Theme	Teachers (n=12)	Students (n=18)	Attitudinal Tone
Translanguaging aids comprehension	10	16	Favorable
Stigma / perceived unprofessionalism	7	9	Ambivalent
Policy-practice disjuncture acknowledged	11	13	Critical
Desire for official policy reform	8	14	Favorable

Table 2. Frequency and attitudinal tone of qualitative themes among teacher and student interview participants.

A closer examination of the distribution of the observed episodes across disciplines also uncovered that content clarification episodes were significantly more common in the Business Administration and Social Sciences observation sessions than in the English Literature sessions, which is likely explained by the fact that the coursework in the former disciplines is much more likely to be dense in terms of technical and conceptual terms, whereas the latter is much more likely to be dense in terms of extended discussion about interpretation and theme, even though both disciplines are taught in English. This disciplinary variation implies that the functional need for translanguaging as a comprehension scaffold may not be consistent across disciplines, but may increase as a function of the number of technical words in a discipline that students are learning and the number of unfamiliar concepts that they are learning, both in the discipline and in English.

Another trend that emerged from the interview data was the language of change, which was not fully represented in the tabulated themes, but which did appear: participants' descriptions of shifts in their attitudes toward translanguaging over the course of their teaching and/or learning careers. Some of the more senior instructors spoke of a more rigid English-only norm they previously had, sometimes developed during formal training as teachers, but changing to a more flexible, translanguaging-accepting approach as they gained experience in the classroom and saw the benefits of multilingual practice for student understanding in their own experience. This developmental trajectory, from the officially internalized monolingual norm to experience-based multilingual pragmatism, implies that teachers' attitudes toward translanguaging may not be stable but change as a result of long-term in-class experiences, which could have implications for the ways in which translanguaging is taught in pre-service and in-service teacher training programs.

5. Discussion

The majority of content clarification and comprehension checking is being used as the main function of translanguaging in this study directly corroborates the finding of Panezai, Channa and Bibi (2023) which states that translanguaging provides an indispensable interactional space for meaning making in Pakistani university classrooms, further supporting the claims of translanguaging as a pedagogically viable approach instead of an inadvertent failure to discipline teaching. This is further extended by the significant number of student-initiated peer negotiation episodes, which further illustrate that translanguaging can also be used as a student resource for creating understanding of challenging topics, a dimension that has been less well documented from previous studies conducted in a Pakistani context.

The significant findings of the study are that the near universal recognition of the tension between policy and practice among both interview participants and wider findings highlight the relevance of this tension beyond merely theoretical issues and provide empirical evidence to support the broader policy-practice conflict identified by Ashraf, Turner and Laar (2021), a disjuncture that is experienced by teachers and students directly, rather than just theorized. Importantly, however, the results of this study indicate that this disjuncture is not experienced uniformly as a source of institutional anxiety; although a meaningful minority of participants indicated that they were worried about stigma that they might experience if they did not conform with the norm of English, most participants in this study signaled an unapologetic acceptance of translanguaging as a worthwhile and necessary pedagogy, and a specific desire for it to be formally recognized by the institution rather than continue to be tolerated quietly.

The identity and affiliation marking function identified in this study is less common than other functions but still exists and is similar to what Amin (2025) found; that students' relationship to English in Pakistani university classrooms is multifaceted, involving more than just a cognitive comprehension function, and that students may use translanguaging as an important affective function to assert belonging and confidence in an English-dominant institutional space, especially those with Urdu-medium schooling backgrounds. In summary, it is argued that an EMI policy framework in Pakistan that is more linguistically realistic and formally recognizes translanguaging, as opposed to simply tolerating it, would decrease the tension that occurs in relation to stigma that a significant minority of the participants experienced, and would validate what is already a legitimate and widely-used pedagogical tool.

Its technical differences in the way content clarification translanguaging was used across this study from the literary discussion in which it was mainly seen in this study, which was also the case in the study by Bonacina-Pugh, Da Costa Cabral, and Huang (2021), can further elaborate on the theoretical picture that translanguaging is a scaffolding tool for comprehension, rather than a uniform classroom phenomenon across different contents, but perhaps rather more closely associated with the specific cognitive and terminological demands of a content area. This refinement has practical consequences for the approach toward policy reform in EMI: a single policy that supports translanguaging throughout the university may be replaced by guidance specific to individual disciplines that explicitly assumes that the need for translanguaging is greater in some disciplines than in others, e.g., in fields such as technical or engineering disciplines, as opposed to disciplines such as literary studies where the content is already communicated primarily in extended English prose.

When viewed from the historical point of view of Pakistani language policy presented above, the preference shown by both teachers and students for reform of policy to recognize translanguaging can be seen as a reflection of a larger, historic conflict between the rhetoric of multilingual equity and the lived realities of English-dominated institutional life in Pakistan. The results of this study must be read not as a study that begins and ends with classroom pedagogy alone, but rather as merely a localised, empirically grounded data point in this much longer national conversation about how to respond to the multilingual reality in Pakistan in the formal language-in-education policy architecture.

Lastly, it is important to note that, while the three departments analyzed in this study were carefully chosen to reflect a spectrum of disciplinary content and terminological density, Pakistani universities also include a variety of other disciplines that may have other combinations of translanguaging functions even more distant. Further research in this kind of disciplinary comparison in other branches of academics would enable one to gain an understanding of the extent to which the pattern of disciplinary-sensitivity that was found in this study is generalizable across all of Pakistani higher education

6. Conclusion

In this study the communicative functions which translanguaging practices serve in Pakistani EMI classrooms and tensions arising with respect to this use in relation to the official policy expectations on English-only were recorded. The results confirm that translanguaging serves mostly as a strategy to clarify what is being taught and to understand its meaning; that teachers and students are fully aware of the discrepancy between this multilingual classroom reality and the official monolingual policy, which they prefer to see updated; and that translanguaging serves a significant secondary function in classroom management, peer negotiation of meaning, rapport building, and affirmation of identity, with teachers generally preferring to see official policy to be more accommodating of these functions.

The following are limitations of this study. The findings may, however, be limited to the findings of a single public sector university, the other departments, academic disciplines, or regions of Pakistan with different linguistic demographic. The non-participant observation method, which was more appropriate for the purpose of capturing naturally occurring classroom discourse, may have experienced some degree of observer effect, in the sense that participants (teacher and students) were aware that the audio was being recorded. Longitudinal ethnographic designs that enable the tracking of translanguaging practices and attitudes over a whole academic term would benefit future research; comparative research across public and private university settings; and studies that directly address the possible impact of formal translanguaging-inclusive policy reform on student learning outcomes and translanguaging sense of belonging in higher education in Pakistan.

In addition to the methodological boundaries and restrictions outlined here, the results of this study suggest a research trajectory for further study that draws on translanguaging research in the classroom and links to the national policy debates that are discussed throughout this paper. Further studies could usefully explore the possibility of the discipline-sensitive translanguaging patterns found in this research being observed in other academic disciplines, the extent to which formal policy recognition of translanguaging leads to increased teachers' receptivity to this practice in

the classroom, and whether students' academic outcomes and sense of belonging to the institution differ across more linguistically realistic policies.

Overall, this study's findings indicate that Pakistani EMI classrooms are already functioning as functionally multilingual classrooms, despite the policy bans, and that the most promising way ahead with regard to language-in-education policy could be building on teachers' and students' own experiences and pedagogically incorporating the translanguaging of the students. This would not entail giving up on the institution's goal of English-medium instruction, but rather an alternative understanding of how best to arrive at this goal in a linguistic context where students have widely varying prior language exposure, where multilingual scaffolding is seen as a valid pathway to English, and not a strategy to be avoided.

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