

PERCEPTIONS OF TRANSLANGUAGING IN ENGLISH VOCABULARY LEARNING AMONG NON-ENGLISH MAJORS AT DONG A UNIVERSITY

NHẬN THỨC VỀ CHUYỂN NGỮ TRONG VIỆC HỌC TỪ VỰNG TIẾNG ANH CỦA SINH VIÊN KHÔNG CHUYÊN NGỮ TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC ĐÔNG Á

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Abstract - Effective vocabulary learning has always been a significant challenge for low-proficiency language learners in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Although translanguaging has received growing scholarly attention, learners' perceptions of its use in vocabulary instruction is still under-explored. This mixed-method study investigates perceived benefits and challenges of translanguaging amongst non-English majors at Dong A University, drawing on survey data from 318 students and semi-structured interviews with 19 students. Findings indicate generally positive perceptions, with translanguaging viewed as a critical scaffolding tool for constructing meaning, reducing anxiety, enhancing confidence, and promoting engagement. However, its use in formal academic tasks was less supported, which reflects the influence of English-only ideologies. These findings highlight the pedagogical and practical value of translanguaging in vocabulary instruction for low-proficiency EFL students in Vietnam.

Key words - Translanguaging; vocabulary learning; students' perceptions; EFL context; non-English majors

1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalised context, English serves as a key medium for communication across educational, social, and professional domains. However, many EFL learners, particularly non-English majors, still face challenges in developing sufficient vocabulary for effective communication.

Indeed, insufficient lexical knowledge is often blamed for restricting learners' ability to comprehend texts, express ideas, and engage confidently in interaction [1]. In addition to difficulties in understanding word meanings, EFL learners still struggle with retaining vocabulary, recognising word forms in context, and using formulaic language such as collocations and idiomatic expressions appropriately [2]. These challenges are further intensified in EFL settings, where exposure to authentic language input is often limited.

In response to these challenges, EFL teachers commonly draw on students' first language (L1) alongside English as a pedagogical resource to facilitate their vocabulary learning [3]. Within this perspective, translanguaging has emerged as an effective instructional approach particularly for learners with lower proficiency. By strategically integrating L1 and L2 through practices such as translation, clarification, and contextualisation, translanguaging can facilitate comprehension, reinforce

Tóm tắt - Học từ vựng hiệu quả luôn là thách thức lớn đối với người học tiếng ở trình độ thấp trong bối cảnh tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ (EFL). Mặc dù chuyển ngữ ngày càng được quan tâm, chưa có nhiều nghiên cứu về nhận thức của người học trong dạy học từ vựng. Bằng phương pháp kết hợp dữ liệu khảo sát từ 318 sinh viên và phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc với 19 sinh viên, nghiên cứu tìm hiểu các lợi ích và thách thức khi sinh viên không chuyên áp dụng translanguaging trong học từ vựng tại Trường Đại học Đông Á. Kết quả cho thấy, các nhận thức tích cực về translanguaging như công cụ hỗ trợ quan trọng trong kiến tạo nghĩa, giảm lo lắng, tăng tự tin, thúc đẩy sự tham gia. Tuy nhiên, sinh viên ít ủng hộ sử dụng translanguaging trong các nhiệm vụ học thuật chính thống, cho thấy ảnh hưởng của quan điểm "chỉ dùng tiếng Anh". Nghiên cứu làm rõ giá trị sư phạm và thực tiễn của việc áp dụng translanguaging trong dạy học từ vựng cho người học tiếng ở trình độ thấp tại Việt Nam.

Từ khóa - Chuyển ngữ; học từ vựng; nhận thức của sinh viên; bối cảnh EFL; sinh viên không chuyên tiếng Anh

meaning-making and foster class rapport [4]. This approach challenges the more traditional monolingual assumptions by recognising the value of learners' full linguistic repertoire in facilitating student language development [5]. This study thus examines how non-English majors at Dong A University perceive the use of translanguaging in English vocabulary learning.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Translanguaging and Language Learning

There has been increasing research evidence on the importance of translanguaging as a mediating device for learners to make meaning and internalize vocabulary knowledge. For example, translanguaging was investigated amongst bilingual adolescent students [6] and it was found that the strategy enabled them to express complex ideas, explain concepts, and participate more actively in classroom activities.

The importance of additional language support is particularly evident in higher education settings where English is adopted as the medium of instruction (EMI). A systemic review of research on EMI in tertiary education [7] reports limited empirical evidence that EMI leads to significant improvements in students' English proficiency in the absence of structured language support.

While these studies highlight the pedagogical value of translanguaging, limited attention has been given to learners' perceptions, especially in EFL university contexts. This suggests the need to further explore students' perceptions of translanguaging in such specific areas as vocabulary acquisition and learning.

2.2. Translanguaging in Vocabulary Learning

Translanguaging has been widely employed to support vocabulary learning by enabling learners to connect new English lexical items with prior knowledge in their first language (L1). For example, Cenor and Gorter examined translanguaging in multilingual education and found that it facilitates meaning-making and deepens learners' conceptual understanding of new vocabulary [8].

In a similar vein, a study by [9] involving bilingual primary students reported that students demonstrated improved English vocabulary comprehension when drawing on their home language besides English to express ideas during classroom interaction. Despite these findings, most of these studies have largely focused on learning outcomes and instructional practices, with relatively limited attention to learners' perceptions of translanguaging in vocabulary learning, particularly in EFL higher education contexts.

2.3. Learners' Perceptions of Translanguaging

Beyond vocabulary acquisition, translanguaging has also been associated with enhanced learner engagement and identity development. In a mixed-methods study conducted in a Canadian English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programme, Galante found that integrating students' L1 with English learning supported not only vocabulary development but also increased confidence, engagement, and identity in multilingual contexts [10].

A study in an EFL high school in Jiangsu similarly reported that translanguaging enhanced students' motivation, vocabulary learning, and positive attitudes while promoting a more inclusive classroom environment [11]. Yet, most research on learners' perceptions has been conducted in ESL or non-Vietnamese contexts, with little attention paid to non-English majors in EFL tertiary settings, highlighting the need for further investigation.

2.4. Research Gap

Although translanguaging has been shown to support vocabulary learning, engagement, and cognitive processing, empirical evidence in EFL higher education contexts, particularly in Vietnam, remains limited. More critically, few studies have examined non-English majors' perceptions of translanguaging specifically in vocabulary learning. This combined gap underscores the need to explore how learners perceive and utilise translanguaging in EFL university settings. Accordingly, the present study investigates non-English majors' perceptions of translanguaging in vocabulary learning at a Vietnamese university (Dong A University), drawing on translanguaging theory and sociocultural theory.

3. Theoretical Background

3.1. Translanguaging Theory

The term "translanguaging", derived from the Welsh word "tranwsieithu" and first introduced by Cen Williams

in 1994, originally refers to the pedagogical practice in bilingual Welsh/English classrooms where students are asked to alternate languages for receptive or productive purposes. Since its introduction, the concept has been expanded in the literature to describe both the dynamic and fluid language practices of bilinguals and the pedagogical approaches that draw upon these practices [12]. Rather than treating languages as separated systems, translanguaging theory conceptualizes them as part of a unified linguistic repertoire. Within this integrated system, language students can flexibly mobilise their full range of linguistic resources to construct meaning and engage in classroom learning. In this study, translanguaging is conceptualised as the purposeful integration of Vietnamese and English as complementary linguistic resources to support vocabulary learning and comprehension.

Translanguaging theory advocates the purposeful integration of learners' full linguistic repertoire to enhance understanding and communication. Unlike code-switching, which typically involves alternating between languages, translanguaging enables learners to flexibly draw on multiple languages to negotiate meaning across different skills [13], [14]. In this sense, translanguaging serves as an effective pedagogical resource by facilitating comprehension, reducing cognitive load, and promoting active engagement in learning.

When used strategically, the L1 can support classroom communication [15], [16], and aid the acquisition of new concepts or language patterns [17]. Through practices like translation, explanation and comparison, and across linguistic comparisons, learners can better understand word meanings and minimise confusion, particularly at early stages of learning [7]. This process encourages deeper cognitive processing of vocabulary, contributing to improved retention, accuracy, and confidence, as evidenced in EFL research [18], [19].

As such, translanguaging should be viewed as a strategic and temporary scaffold rather than a substitute for English use in the classroom. When applied purposefully, it supports learners in building a foundational lexical repertoire that enables them to become independent users of English over time. This approach is thus relevant for lower-proficiency EFL learners, whose limited vocabulary knowledge may otherwise hinder active participation and meaningful learning. Examining students' perceptions of its effectiveness can therefore provide valuable insights into the role of translanguaging in facilitating meaningful vocabulary learning.

3.2. Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural theory, proposed by Lev Vygotsky [20], has had a profound influence on educational research and practice. Central concepts within this framework, particularly mediation and Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), have been widely applied in EFL settings. From a sociocultural perspective, language learning occurs through social interaction. This means learners gradually internalize knowledge through guided interaction with more knowledgeable others, such as teachers and peers, using language as a mediational tool.

3.2.1. Mediation in Language Learning

According to Vygotsky, mediation refers to the use of cultural and psychological tools that individuals employ to solve problems and achieve learning goals, with language regarded as the most significant of these tools [20]. In this study, learners’ L1 (Vietnamese) is conceptualised as a mediating tool that helps them access meaning and supports their acquisition of English vocabulary.

3.2.2. Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Another concept of sociocultural theory relevant for this study is the ZPD, introduced by Vygotsky [20]. In his terms, the ZPD is the distance between a learner’s actual level of development, as demonstrated through independent problem solving and their level of development, which can be achieved by virtue of guidance from a teacher or collaboration with more capable peers. In the context of vocabulary learning, translanguaging can function as scaffolding within the ZPD. By using L1 to clarify meaning, learners can maintain understanding and extend their lexical knowledge beyond their current level. Now the focus is shifted into translanguaging and sociocultural theory.

3.3. Translanguaging and Sociocultural Theory

Grounding on the concepts of mediation and ZPD as presented above, translanguaging is a practical application of sociocultural theory in the language classroom, which allows students to draw on their full linguistic repertoire to construct knowledge and develop L2 proficiency.

From this perspective, translanguaging represents the use of L1 as a mediating tool that supports vocabulary learning within the ZPD. Through this process, learners can bridge gaps in understanding, internalise new vocabulary, and develop confidence. Importantly, students’ perceptions of L1 use play a key role in determining how effectively translanguaging supports their vocabulary learning. These theoretical constructs also informed the design of the questionnaire, with items focusing on L1 use for meaning clarification, confidence, interaction, and vocabulary understanding. Furthermore, they provide an analytical lens for interpreting the findings, particularly in explaining how students perceive translanguaging as a cognitive and social support in vocabulary learning.

perceptions of translanguaging in vocabulary learning. Such design is deemed as relevant as it allows the researcher to capture both general trends and in-depth insights through quantitative and qualitative data [21].

The study was carried out at Dong A University, a multidisciplinary private university located in the city of Da Nang. A total of 318 second-year non-English majors at A1-A2 level (CEFR) were selected randomly from General English classes across different faculties, including both male and female students from diverse academic backgrounds. Besides, 19 students from the survey sample were selected for semi-structured interviews to further explore their experiences with translanguaging.

The questionnaire was adapted from previous studies [22], [23], [24], [25] and comprised two main sections: background information and a five-point Likert-scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*. The Likert-scale items were divided into two subscales with Items 1-9 examining translanguaging in L2 learning and Items 10-13 focusing specifically on vocabulary learning. The interview questions, adapted from [26], explored the benefits and challenges of translanguaging experienced by the students. Participation was voluntary, and students were informed that all responses would be treated confidentially and used solely for the research purposes.

Prior to data collection, the questionnaire was reviewed and refined to ensure clarity and contextual relevance to the Vietnamese EFL setting. A pilot test was conducted to assess the reliability of the instrument, yielding Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was 0.793 for the L2 learning subscale and 0.835 for the vocabulary learning subscale, indicating acceptable to good internal consistency. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and mean scores) in IBM SPSS Statistics 2024, while qualitative data were analysed following the six-phase thematic analysis framework proposed by [27].

5. Results

5.1. Students’ Perceptions of Translanguaging in L2 Learning

The results from Items 1 to 9, as shown in Table 1, reveal that students generally hold positive perceptions of translanguaging in L2 learning. Most students endorsed the benefits of translanguaging once it was in use (Item 5; $M = 4.45, SD = 0.880$). Similarly, high mean scores for Item 1 ($M = 4.43, SD = 0.875$) and Item 2 ($M = 4.38, SD = 0.918$) indicate that students believe translanguaging improves their language learning. Relatively high scores were also recorded for Item 9 ($M = 4.36, SD = 0.912$), Item 7 ($M = 4.34, SD = 0.863$), and Item 8 ($M = 4.28, SD = 0.919$), suggesting that students attributed their increased confidence to using translanguaging as a tool for clarification. In addition, Item 6 ($M = 3.75, SD = 1.283$) shows that students almost agree that translanguaging supports peer interaction in classroom communication.

Nevertheless, the data also reveal several noteworthy contrasts. A smaller proportion of students supported the use of translanguaging in completing university assignments (Item 3, $M = 3.63, SD = 1.430$). This pattern

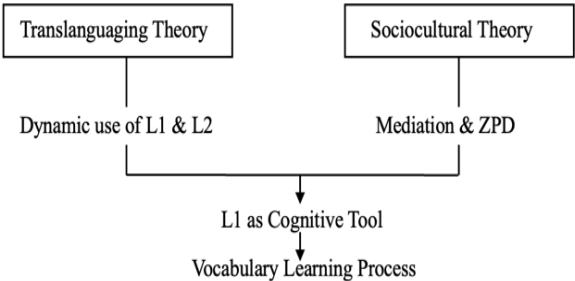


Figure 1. Integrated Theoretical Framework of the Study

4. Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method approach, integrating a structured survey questionnaire and semi-structured follow-up interviews to investigate students’

indicates that students differentiate between informal learning support and formal academic expectations. A similar pattern can be found in Item 4, where students somehow disagreed that translanguaging by instructors is unprofessional ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.564$), which may reflect the continued influence of traditional monolingual norms. Overall, the findings reveal that while students strongly value translanguaging as a tool for comprehension and classroom support, they are more cautious about its use in formal academic contexts.

Table 1. Students' Perceptions of Translanguaging in L2 Learning

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Translanguaging helped me learn a second language better.	4.43	0.875
2. Translanguaging is essential for learning a new language.	4.38	0.918
3. Students should be able to engage in translanguaging to complete university assignments.	3.63	1.430
4. Translanguaging by a university instructor is unprofessional.	3.04	1.564
5. If an instructor used translanguaging in class, it would be helpful for the students.	4.45	0.880
6. Translanguaging helps me engage in conversations with my classmates.	3.75	1.283
7. Translanguaging may help in the development of students' communicative skills in the language classroom.	4.34	0.863
8. Translanguaging can be viewed as a tool for clarification in a language classroom.	4.28	0.919
9. I feel more confident in classrooms where instructors use translanguaging, rather than those who use English all the time.	4.36	0.912

5.2. Students' Perceptions of Translanguaging in Vocabulary Learning

Table 2. Students' Perceptions of Translanguaging in Vocabulary Learning

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
10. I use my first language to check the meaning of a new word or a new concept.	4.42	0.836
11. I understand new vocabulary more easily when it is explained in both English and my first language.	4.58	0.705
12. I feel less anxious when I can use Vietnamese to check the meaning of new English words.	4.39	0.844
13. Discussing new vocabulary in both English and Vietnamese with classmates helps me understand it better.	4.44	0.811

In Table 2, the participants expressed very positive perceptions of utilising translanguaging to acquire new vocabulary. Item 10 recorded a high mean score ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 0.836$), indicating that students frequently rely on their L1 to check the meaning of unfamiliar words or concepts in English. Stronger evidence is reflected in Item 11 ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.705$), suggesting that students

perceive bilingual explanation as an effective scaffold for vocabulary comprehension. The finding indicates that learners strategically mobilise both English and Vietnamese to mediate meaning, especially when processing unfamiliar or abstract lexical items. Rather than viewing L1 as interference, they purposefully utilise their integrated language resources to reduce ambiguity, strengthen semantic connections, and support deeper-level vocabulary retention.

Item 12 received a high mean score of ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 0.844$), indicating that L1 use helped reduce learners' anxiety when processing unfamiliar vocabulary. Likewise, Item 13 recorded a very high mean score ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 0.811$), suggesting that students view bilingual peer discussion as effective in deciphering the meaning of new vocabulary. It can be said that respondents perceived translanguaging as beneficial for vocabulary learning, text comprehension, and peer interaction. The benefits of translanguaging together with its associated challenges will be further explained using qualitative interview data.

5.3. Benefits and Challenges of Translanguaging

From an overall perspective, interview respondents expressed positive perceptions of translanguaging in relation to vocabulary learning, emotional comfort, and classroom communication. First, participants reported that translanguaging facilitated clearer and more efficient understanding of new vocabulary, with the use of Vietnamese enabling faster comprehension and reducing ambiguity, particularly when encountering unfamiliar lexical items. As one student noted, "Using both English and Vietnamese helps me learn faster and understand more deeply" (S1). Second, translanguaging was perceived as supporting vocabulary retention. Students explained that linking English words with Vietnamese meanings enabled longer-term recall and more accurate contextual use. For example, one student (S2) noted her understanding of the word "investment *climate*" through Vietnamese '*môi trường đầu tư*' supports the appropriate usage of the polysemous word '*climate*' in its context.

Third, students highlighted its affective benefits, reporting increased confidence and decreased anxiety. For instance, S3 reported that using Vietnamese allowed them to check their understanding and alleviate fear of making mistakes. Fourth, translanguaging was found to facilitate teacher-student communication, with interviewees reporting greater ease in asking questions and receiving clearer explanations (S11). Finally, students reported increased motivation and confidence in learning vocabulary. As one student noted, "When I know for sure what a word means and can explain it in my mother tongue, I have no hesitation in using it" (S2).

However, the findings reveal several challenges. A prominent concern was the potential for over-reliance on the first language. As one participant admitted, "Sometimes I rely too much on Vietnamese, so I don't practice thinking in English" (S1). This suggests that excessive dependence on L1 may limit opportunities for direct engagement with L2. Besides, students reported experiencing confusion when resorting to more than one

language, particularly when lexical items did not have exact equivalents. These difficulties highlight the need for a balanced, strategic use of translanguaging to maximise its benefits while minimising potential drawbacks.

6. Discussion

Questionnaire findings, as presented above, generally reflect EFL students' positive perceptions of translanguaging as a valuable support for both L2 learning and vocabulary acquisition. From a translanguaging perspective, learners strategically draw on their full linguistic repertoire to construct meaning and facilitate comprehension, which may explain the consistently high agreement across Items 1, 2, and 11. This supports the view that the first language should not be regarded as an obstacle to language learning, but rather as a cognitive resource that supports deeper lexical processing [8], [25]. Such interpretation is then reinforced by interview data, whereby students reported that using Vietnamese enabled them to grasp the meaning of unfamiliar or abstract concepts. This suggests that translanguaging may be beneficial for low-proficiency learners, whose limited lexical repertoire in English often constrains direct comprehension through the target language alone.

From a sociocultural perspective, the findings emphasize translanguaging as a mediating tool that facilitates learning through interaction and scaffolding. High scores on Items 7, 8, and 13 indicate that students use bilingual resources to negotiate meaning, clarify misunderstanding, and collaborate with peers in their vocabulary learning tasks. Within Vygotskian notions of the ZPD, the first language can function as a form of cognitive mediation that eases learners' processing efforts in acquiring and retaining new vocabulary [20]. By making unfamiliar vocabulary more accessible, translanguaging allows learners to focus more on meaning construction. As a result, they can engage more effectively with teacher and peer support, thereby facilitating scaffolding within the ZPD. This is consistent with interview responses, in which students reported that they did not simply rely on direct translation; rather, they used Vietnamese to interpret word meanings, distinguish between multiple interpretations of polysemous words while deciding on contextual appropriateness. This indicates that translanguaging may support not only surface-level comprehension but also deeper semantic awareness and lexical precision.

Another important finding concerns the affective dimension of translanguaging. High levels of agreement for Items 10 to 12 indicate that translanguaging facilitates comprehension and lowers levels of anxiety during vocabulary learning [6], [28]. Students frequently reported feeling more confident when they were able to confirm meanings through Vietnamese, particularly in situations involving complex vocabulary items. This mirrors previous research suggesting that translanguaging creates a more supportive and inclusive learning environment by reducing fear of misunderstanding and encouraging engagement [29]. The findings also underscore the social dimension of translanguaging in vocabulary learning. The strong agreement on Item 13 suggests that bilingual peer

interaction facilitates collaborative learning and co-construction of meaning. Through discussion in both Vietnamese and English, students were able to clarify the distinct meanings, share interpretations, and support one another's understanding of the lexical nuances. This reflects sociocultural perspectives that conceptualise learning as a socially mediated process [20].

Despite the benefits, the study also reveals a persistent tension between translanguaging practices and English-only norms in academic settings. Neutral responses to Item 3 and Item 4 signify that students continue to associate formal academic learning with exclusive English use even while recognising the pedagogical value of translanguaging. This aligns with prior research, mentioning the continuing influence of monolingual ideologies within higher education, where English proficiency is often equated with maximal target-language exposure [30], [31]. Interview findings further indicate that some students were concerned that excessive reliance on Vietnamese might reduce opportunities to think in English or weaken immersion in the target language. This critical tension corroborates that translanguaging remains a negotiated practice in EFL higher education, accepted in classroom interaction yet less legitimised in formal contexts.

Overall, the findings highlight translanguaging as a multidimensional tool that scaffolds not only cognitive processing but also social and emotional engagement. It also reveals certain constraints dictating translanguaging practices among low-proficiency EFL learners in Vietnamese university contexts.

7. Conclusion

This study investigated non-English majors' perceptions of translanguaging in English vocabulary learning at Dong A University. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, the findings provide rich insights into how students perceived translanguaging as supporting language development, especially at the lexical level. The study highlights translanguaging as a multidimensional scaffold facilitating cognitive processing, social interaction, and emotional engagement, while revealing the contextual constraints, especially the influence of English-only norms, that shape its implementation in EFL university settings.

For the tension between pedagogical practices and institutional expectations, the study offers some implications for EFL instruction. It suggests that language teachers adopt a balanced approach to translanguaging, using L1 as a strategic resource to support comprehension and confidence, while progressively increasing learners' exposure to, and use of, English. In addition, clearer pedagogical guidance may be needed to legitimise the appropriate use of translanguaging in academic contexts without undermining target language development.

This study contributes to the literature by providing perception-based evidence of translanguaging in vocabulary learning among non-English majors in an EFL higher education context in Vietnam, an area that remains under-researched. It thus extends current understandings of

translanguaging beyond general language skills to the specific domain of lexical development, offering both theoretical and pedagogical insights for future research and practice.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The sample was restricted to low-proficiency students at a single university and included a gender imbalance, which may have influenced attitudes toward translanguaging [32]. The cross-sectional design, with data collected at a single point in time, may not capture potential changes in perceptions over time. Besides, the study relied on self-reported questionnaires and interview responses, focusing on students' perceptions rather than actual learning outcomes, which may hinder objectivity. No subgroup analyses (e.g., by gender, major, or proficiency level) were conducted, thus restricting more multi-faceted insights. Finally, the study focused solely on vocabulary rather than encompassing all four language skills.

These limitations could necessitate directions for future studies, involving more diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and broader skill areas. Further investigation into teachers' perceptions and classroom practices would also contribute to providing a more comprehensive understanding of translanguaging in Vietnamese EFL contexts.

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