

Translanguaging through Visual Arts in Early Childhood: A Case Study in a Hong Kong Kindergarten

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Abstract

Over the decades, western academic literature has embraced the power of visual arts as the first language with which children connect with the people and environment of their world. However, children in Hong Kong, a multi-cultural region in a Chinese context, have limited experiences in using visual language in the kindergartens due to pre-schools' academic-oriented atmosphere and focus on primary school readiness. Rather than engaging in visual arts, students are forced to start writing Chinese characters and English alphabets at age four or even younger. Though previous literature has explained that mixing languages in culturally-diverse classrooms has a positive influence on students, the integration of visual language has seldom been studied. This study, conducted through the lens of contemporary linguistics, examines how translanguaging emerged in children's artworks in four K3 level (aged 5-6) classes in a Hong Kong kindergarten. Altogether, 88 children participated in the study (N = 32 girls and 56 boys), of whom 57 were Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong citizens and the rest were non-Cantonese speaking children (26 Mainland Chinese; two Nepalese; three Pakistanis). Children participants' artworks were collected from an activity designed by the researcher and, through content analysis, divided into three categories: (1) exploratory experiences; (2) object references; and (3) visual components. These ground-breaking findings indicate that translanguaging does not exist only in verbal languages; the participating children tried to make good use of visual language, along with Chinese and English words they had learnt, to share their ideas, thoughts, and feelings. This study may inspire early childhood educators in culturally diverse region such as Hong Kong to explore how visual arts can help children from diverse backgrounds to express their voices.

Keywords: translanguaging, early visual arts, early childhood education

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Introduction

Western literature supports visual languages as important tools to help children express their thoughts, ideas, and feelings. Most scholars support that visual arts are children's innate means of communication (Wright, 2014). In Hong Kong's context, children learn various knowledge and skills related to language, cognition, social and emotional development, and motor coordination through theme- or inquiry-based learning in kindergartens. Unfortunately, even though the government expects kindergartens to provide learning experiences that nurture children's holistic development (Curriculum Development Council, 2017), most kindergartens emphasize writing exercises and cognitive training to ready children for primary school (Rao, Ng, & Pearson, 2009).

Visual arts can be culture-free or language unbounded. Indeed, it is not surprising that children's work very often connects verbal and visual languages, as that sort of creative expression embraces children's creativity and adaptability. However, there has been limited research on the integration and expression of children's verbal and visual languages. As this research gap deserves investigation, this study aims at exploring how children integrate verbal and visual languages in their artworks and the extent to which visual arts activities encourage children to express themselves in culturally-diverse classrooms.

Previous Literature on Translanguaging

In this study, the concept of translanguaging is applied to explain the integration of children's verbal and visual languages. The concept, "Translanguaging is the act performed by bilinguals of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximize communicative potential," was first introduced by García (2009, p. 140). García (2009) used the term translanguaging to refer to how bilingual people naturally use their linguistic resources without considering the named language categories. Translanguaging has been further studied in relation to naturally occurring interactions, such as conversations among bilingual individuals, or in the context of bilingual education (García & Li, 2014). Li (2011) related this concept to cultural perspectives and argued that translanguaging encompasses and comes across

various linguistic structures and systems through a translanguaging space. In this context, a space is a transition between cultural traditions and a sense of connectedness in multilingual practices in a creative or critical way. The idea of translanguaging builds on the psycholinguistic notion of languaging, which refers to the process of using language to gain knowledge, to make sense, to articulate one's thought, and to communicate about using language (Li, 2011).

Building on the work of García and Li (2014), other scholars have used the concept of translanguaging to conduct arts-based studies. Bradley, Moore, Simpson, and Atkinson (2017) created a translanguaging space in which creative practitioners used a variety of creative arts methods with young people to explore the linguistic landscapes of Leeds. McKay and Bradley (2016) developed an arts-based workshop to study how arts practices engage with narratives of migration in refugee communities. Alvarez (2014) studied how bilingual youth in immigrant families perform in their translanguaging homework. In Hong Kong, Lee (2015) regarded "translanguaging" as a resource for linguistic creativity in communication and for critical engagement with one's sociolinguistic or sociocultural reality. His study examined how translanguaging operates in two visual art installations by the contemporary Chinese artist Xu Bing, who is well-known for his creative artistic use of language, words, and text.

Visual Arts as Children's Languages

For decades, visual arts have been recognized by scholars as children's language. Vygotsky (1967) theorized that drawing is a symbolic medium that allows children to communicate better by using symbolic representations; in other words, drawing is a kind of speech graphically (Dyson, 1982). Gardner (1980) has pointed out that children's drawings are "interesting mixes of graphic and linguistic resources, in the service of complex conceptualization" (p. 154). Malaguzzi (1993) emphasized the hundred languages of children in the Reggio Emilia approach, one of the world's most famous early childhood education curricula, wherein children's voices were respected and expected to be expressed in multiple ways. McKay and Kendrick (2001) explored the images of literacy that children construct in their lives and found that children's drawings about reading and

writing provide valuable insights into their metalinguistic knowledge.

Wu (2009) studied children's graphical representations and emergent writing in the Asian context. She observed that children drawings showed a mixture of symbols with conventionally written and graphical representation. She termed these representations as follows: (1) object correspondence, which refers to "a graphical object representation to conventionally written symbolization" (p. 4) and (2) contextual correspondence, which she defined as "all the graphical representations along with corresponding linguistic representations that reveals a set of objects identified by the child representing the child's experience with objects within a social context" (p. 7). In Hong Kong, Leung (2017) introduced exploring hermit crabs into children's projects and children applied drawing and painting to show their understanding of the hermit crabs. Although numerous articles have discussed the importance of visual arts as a language for children, there have been only a few studies on early visual arts in Hong Kong.

Given this fact, it would be fascinating to understand how Hong Kong children perform their translanguaging by combining their drawing and writing and to see how and to what extent translanguaging operates in drawings by children of different nationalities. The main purpose of this research is to address the knowledge gap in this area through the following research questions:

- (1) How do children integrate their graphical representations and emergent writing?
- (2) How and to what extent does translanguaging operate in drawings from children of different nationalities in a kindergarten in Hong Kong?

Method

Participants

Convenience sampling was conducted to recruit a Hong Kong kindergarten that had both bilingual children and non-Chinese children. This case involved four kindergarten classes at the level K3 (aged 5-6) that enrolled a total of 88 children (N = 32 girls and 56 boys), including 57 Hong Kong citizens, 26 mainland Chinese, two Nepalese, and three

Pakistanis.

Procedures

In this study, a total of 88 children's drawings were collected and analyzed. The children were interviewed during the drawing process, using an open-ended interview approach without predetermined questions. Dialogues with children were started by using puppets to ask questions and speak in English to non-Chinese children. The specific data collection procedure was as follows:

1. Collect data during children's free-play sessions (four sessions of 25-35 minutes each).
2. Record the number and gender distribution of participants.
3. Record the names of participants with their artworks.
4. Greet the class teachers and children in a friendly manner by introducing the activity (telling the children that today is Bear's birthday and asking them to draw a picture with Chinese and English words on the artwork as a birthday gift).
5. Switch on the researcher's mobile phone for voice recording.
6. Write down what is done, talked about, and expressed.
7. Focus on two to three children in the class (especially non-Chinese children from a bilingual background); observe their behaviors and describe what they said and drew in the process; casually ask them some open-ended questions.
8. Collect and seal all the artworks in an envelope.

Content analysis was applied in this case study (Patton, 2002). This methodological approach has found its way into linguistics, psychology, sociology, history, arts, etc. in recent decades and had been refined to accommodate different models of communication—e.g., analysis of non-verbal aspects, contingency analysis, and computer applications (Gerbner, Holsti, Krippendorff, Paisley, & Stone, 1969; Mayring, 2000). The visual data in this study (the drawings collected) were defined in terms of Chinese words, English words, geometrical figures, and basic visual elements (i.e., lines, dots) as units of analysis to enable us to count the number of occurrence of similar forms or styles. Next, sub-categories and coding scheme had been developed, in both inductive and deductive manners, for further analysis such as correct words, incorrect or incomplete words, and basic visual elements (e.g., pattern).

Research Ethics

A cover letter and attached informed consent form were sent to the principal of the kindergarten, its teachers, and the parents of the participating children, notifying them of the study's purposes, procedures, confidentiality, anonymity, and data storage guidelines. They all signed and returned the forms, indicating their agreement with the terms therein. Strict research ethics were observed regarding the collection, management, and storage of data collected in this study. Additionally, ethical guidelines for classroom observation of children's free play were followed by seeking children's consent to photograph their works, encouraging children to understand their own right to decide whether they wish to participate and checking with children before quoting their significant interview contributions (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Dockett, Einarsdottir, & Perry, 2009).

Results

How Do Children Integrate Their Graphical Representations and Emergent Writing?

The following exemplars explain how children combined their graphical representations and emergent Chinese writing in this study in three forms of presentation: (1) exploratory experiences; (2) object references; and (3) visual components.

Exploratory Experiences

Children could engage in exploratory experiences in "trial-and-error" performances, in which words and visuals were combined experimentally and randomly.

Child A drew different shapes with various colors. There were green and black triangles, blue and orange circles, a purple rectangle, some colored dots, and outlined shapes. Additionally, there were six colored gift boxes drawn that Child A said, "All gifts I drew for the bear. I wish him have a happy birthday." Child A wished to write "happy birthday" bilingually, but it came out as "happy b" and a wrongly-written "happy birthday" (生日快

樂) (*saang yat faai lok*). The words expressed were in the contextual correspondence (Wu, 2009), but the child encountered difficulties in word recognition and spelling verbally (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Child A



Figure 2. Child B

Child B drew a fish outlined in a red oval and several reversed “c’s” to symbolize fish scales. There were also many blue circles, representing as “bubbles in the sea.” Child B wrote seven Chinese characters on his drawing and said, “Cats love to eat fish, so I drew a fish for the cat. I know these words. That’s why I wrote these to the cat for his birthday.” The words expressed were out of context and may have been retrieved randomly from the child’s learning experiences (see Figure 2).

Child C drew a crocodile outlined in green, with green dots for its scales and yellow skin and feet. Child C wrote several Chinese characters, including “teacher” (老師) (*lousi*), “hand” (手) (*sau*), “knife” (刀) (*dou*), “a Cantonese surname ‘Pang’” (彭) (*paang*), “wood” (木) (*muk*), “fruit” (果) (*gwo*), “forest” (森) (*sam*), and a phrase “swimming” (游水) (*jau sei*). Child C explained that “A Cantonese surname ‘Pang’ (彭) is my name and originally I wished to write ‘fruit’ (水果) (*sei gwo*), but I didn’t know how to write ‘water’ (水) (*sei*) and the other words there were those I know.” Again, the child was exploring possibilities by putting words and visuals together without concrete meanings (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Child C

Object References

Children could create object references in their work by drawing and writing on their work in a “show-and-tell” manner to encode the meaning.

Child D drew a bear as the core character and included two fishes, flowers, hearts, a cup of water, a balloon, and a piece of meat. The child said, “The bear needs a cup of water (水) (*sei*) and to eat meat (肉) (*juk*) and fish (魚) (*jyu*) too. I like the bear, so I gave him (心) (hearts)” (see Figure 4). The child was using drawing as “a form of encoding meaning” (Wu, 2009, p. 70).



Figure 4. Child D

Child E drew a bottle of honey, a piece of meat, and a fish in a less recognizable way. The child wrote down a few Chinese characters—“honey” (蜜糖) (*mat tong*), “meat” (肉) (*juk*), “fish” (魚) (*jyu*)—and draw few lines to connect the characters with the objects drawn, explaining, “The honey is for the Pooh; the meat is for the bear and the fish is for the cat.” Again, the Chinese characters here served as a supporting description of what the child intended to express visually (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. Child E

Child F drew a ladybug in green color and used the same color pastel to write the name of this object, “ladybug” (甲蟲) (*gaap cung*), saying, “I like ladybugs very much and I wished to draw it as a birthday gift for the bear.” The picture (see Figure 6) shows the

child's pictorial and linguistic representation of a ladybug.



Figure 6. Child F

Visual Components

Children could infuse words into visuals when they regarded words as visual components like patterns or lines. Words themselves had visual meaning in a child's work.

Child G drew a number of balloons, gift boxes, flowers, and a cat with the bilingual phrase, "happy birthday" (生日快樂) (*saang yat faai lok*). The child said, "It is a birthday card for the bear and I wish the bear to have a happy birthday." The child also creatively placed the English capital letters "A, B, C, D, E" into the card like a part "graphic design" for this birthday card. The English letters served as visual pattern elements (see Figure 7).

Child H drew a number of several flowers and hearts in the picture and also creatively placed the Chinese characters "on" (上), "under" (下), "force" (力), "health" (生) into the drawing like a part "graphic design," saying, "I like the words 'on' (上) (*soeng*), 'under' (下) (*haa*), 'force' (力) (*lik*), and 'health' (生) (*saang*), most of which I learnt in my K1. I wish to put them inside the flowers and hearts." The Chinese characters, as "lines" represented in the picture, were visually consistent with the outlined objects (see Figure 8).



Figure 7. Child G



Figure 8. Child H



Figure 9. Child I

Child I drew two planes and a rail train in the picture with a Chinese phrase “happy birthday” (生日快樂) (*saang yat faai lok*) and then also wrote some English letters on the body parts of the planes and trains, “The ‘I YnHa’ is a brand of this train and then the ‘m’ there because the plane belongs to MacDonald’s and another one with a door there is a household plane.” The English letters in this drawing became creative input to make this artwork unique and exclusively meaningful to the child himself (see Figure 9).

How and To What Extent Does Translanguaging Operate in Drawings by Children of Different Nationalities?

The following exemplars show there are several factors affecting expression among children from different nationalities. Levitt (2001a, 2001b) argued that the transnational experience should be conceptualized as taking place within social fields containing institutions, organizations, and experiences that generate categories of identity for individuals or groups; for example, school and home are important social fields to children. This study considered how long ago the child had immigrated to Hong Kong, how long he or she had lived in the community, how long the child had been in the school, how the child’s family background reinforced or blocked his or her use of language, and what the child’s home language was and how well he or she applied it as their second language. In short, it considered the influence time, context, and home language had on a child’s translanguaging expression.



Figure 10. Child J

Child J was a Hong Kong male student whose mother tongue is Cantonese, but who was familiar with both Chinese and English. The researcher talked with him in Cantonese. He was a bit shy, but after a while was willing to share his ideas with the researcher (see Figure 10).

R: Why there are cats in the picture?

J: Because cats are very important to this picture.

R: Including that cat in the balloon?

J: He is a fake one. Another two in the garden they are real.

R: How interesting, you drew the house in blue and green at the center. Is there any reason?

J: Coz' they are my favorite colors, so I wish to give the colors I like to the cat.

R: Why the English letters P, R, O, O, Y are here?

J: They are the letters I like most and they are the gifts to the cat too.

Child K was a Hong Kong male student who was familiar with both Chinese and English. His mother tongue was Cantonese and the researcher talked with him in Cantonese. He was quite expressive and eager to share a lot with the researcher (see Figure 11).



Figure 11. Child K

R: Why there are so many colors in the picture?

K: Because I made it as a colorful birthday cake to make the bear happy.

R: What are they? (pointed to three □ (*hau*) (mouth))

K: Yes, they are mouths and we use our mouth to eat the cake.

R: What are these words then? (pointed to “happy birthday” (生日快樂) (*saangyatfaailok*))

K: It means “happy birthday” to the bear. I drew (wrote) some to the lower part because I didn't have enough space.

Child L was a newly-arrived Nepalese male student in the K3 class. He had difficulty speaking in Cantonese and reading Chinese. His family spoke their mother language at home. He was very shy and reacted very slowly at the very beginning of this activity. The researcher talked with him in English. He was more relaxed after listening to English (see Figure 12).

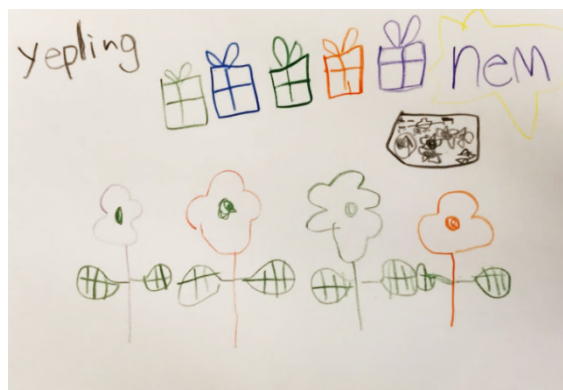


Figure 12. Child L

R: What is this?

L: (delayed response to the researcher) Flowers and gifts.

R: What are these letters?

R: (And he pointed to the name tag to explain to the researcher) “Yepling” is my family name.

R: Are these gifts for the bear? (pointed to the gifted boxes)

L: (Nodded his head) It’s “new” (wrongly written as “nem”).



Figure 13. Child M

Child M was a newly-arrived mainland Chinese female student who spoke Mandarin. The teacher reported that she had difficulty speaking and understanding Cantonese. The researcher talked to her in Mandarin. She expressed her thoughts comfortably to the researcher.

R: What is this?

M: It's a dragon who has a lot of scales. (See Figure 13)

R: What is this dragon doing?

M: He is walking.

R: Any word that you wish to write on this for the bear?

M: "A Cantonese surname 'Kung'" (龔) (*gung*) (She wrote this Chinese character on the drawing).

This is my surname indeed. And see this part (pointed to the upper part of the character) ... it means "dragon" (龍) (*lung*).

R: Anything you want to share with the bear?

M: I remember that my mom taught me how to draw a family with a heart. Here it is... this is my family (that was shown in the lower right-hand corner of the drawing).

Child N was a Pakistani female student in the K3 class. She found it difficult to speak in Cantonese and to read Chinese. Her family spoke their mother language at home. The researcher talked with her in English and she responded slowly (see Figure 14).



Figure 14. Child N

R: What is this?

N: Rabbit.

R: What are these letters? Can you read this for me?

N: A, B, C, D, E, F, G.

R: Are they the gifts for the bear?

N: (Nodded her head)

Child O was also a Pakistani female student. Her mother and father spoke English to her at home. She did not know how to speak Cantonese although the teacher said she was able to follow simple instructions in Cantonese. The researcher talked with her in English. She smiled and interacted in a friendly manner with the researcher (see Figure 15).



Figure 15. Child O

R: Who are they? (pointed to two human figures in the drawing)

O: They are my parents.

R: What is it at the center?

O: This is my home. You can come. Birthday party is inside.

R: What makes you so happy? (pointed to the happy face)

O: I hope the bear will feel happy.

R: Why the numbers 6,7,8,9 are here?

O: I guess the bear wants to learn them too.

Discussion

Create Opportunities for Free Expression

This study was an exploratory study investigating whether translanguaging appeared in a Hong Kong kindergarten during a free play activity. A child-centered learning environment (Cheung, Ling, & Leung, 2017) help children express themselves freely without being bounded by language forms. In studying children's artworks and their interactions with their works, it was found that the children integrate their graphical representations and emergent writing when they were free to do so. Wright (2014) explained that aesthetic decisions are made about the selection, execution, framing, and reframing of their ideas in relation to these visual features through the children's art-based play.

Collage Verbal and Visual Languages in a Translanguaging Space

Children in this study integrated verbal and visual languages in a translanguaging space. Indeed, the children were in-born multilingual users who did not consider the named language categories (i.e., whether the words were Chinese or English). Moreover, the children regarded Chinese words as visual graphics. In addition to having a sound system, the Chinese language includes a character system groups of characters are classified by “understand a word based on the pictorial cue of that word” (象形) (*zoeng jing*), “understand a word based on the symbols and signs of that word” (指事) (*zi si*), “understand a word based on the combination of the parts of that word” (會意) (*wui ji*), “understand a word based on the sound of that word” (形聲) (*jing seng*), “understand a word based on the cultural and historical transformation of that word” (轉注) (*zyun zyu*), and “understand a word based on the sound of another existing word” (假借) (*gaa ze*) (Forrest, 1948; Wieger, 1914). Unlike a syllabic language, “understand a word based on the pictorial cue of that word” (象形) (*zoeng jing*) characters are mainly image shapes representing simplified drawings of objects (Wu, 2009). The children in this study simply applied the artistic technique of collage to make sense of their translanguaging behavior in the artworks. Collage enables children to draw together and create visual “texts.” The

process itself is “a gathering together of modes in an ensemble of meaning making” (Pahl, 2014, p. 59).

Incorporate Art-based Pedagogies to Early Childhood Curriculum

In addition, this study has highlighted the possibility of incorporating art-based pedagogies in early childhood curriculum. Currently, improper practices are highlighted in kindergartens; writing has been banned in classes with three-year-old children in Hong Kong (Curriculum Development Council, 2017), indicating the importance of visual languages. Wright (2014) described art as one of the oldest communication forms in the long history of human beings, one of which involves human intelligences with reasoning and actions. In general, a translanguaging pedagogy for writing in early childhood would be an alternative for children’s language learning (Alvarez, 2014; Arpacik, 2015; Meier, 2004). Visual languages provide an easy platform for children to communicate and to learn, as they can use drawing and painting to describe relationships, elaborate ideas, and communicate what they think.

Support Inclusive Education in Culturally-Diverse Classrooms

Though this study has investigated children of different nationalities, it is important to note that non-Chinese children should not be labeled generally as new-comers to the school and society. Their specific backgrounds and languages showed their performances differently in the study. A multiculturalism-informed curriculum review of early childhood education (Curriculum Development Council, 2017), adopting appropriate strategies for the cultural inclusion and individual differences of children as transnational bodies in kindergartens (Li, 2011), is essential.

Conclusion

This case study was conducted in a Hong Kong kindergarten and thus may not be

representative of kindergartens in different regions of the world. However, it can be seen as an important reference for kindergartens in Chinese societies or multicultural settings. It is essential to compare the work of children from various backgrounds with that of a class of students mostly from Hong Kong to see the effect of multiculturalism on communication and language among young learners. Future systematic studies could enlarge the sample size.

In summary, this study highlights that the power of visual arts should be acknowledged, especially for kindergarteners who may feel comfortable using visual language to express their ideas. This is especially crucial for education systems in the Asia-Pacific region, where parents and the public often over-value children's academic achievement. While this study involved Chinese and non-Chinese children from Hong Kong, mainland China, Nepal, and Pakistan, there are numerous multicultural classrooms in Hong Kong that are not limited to the nationalities studied here; globalization has taken place in early childhood education and respect for diversity is therefore critical.

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