

# Translanguaging Under Conditions of Extreme Linguistic Heterogeneity: Evidence from Urban Primary Classrooms in Zambia

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## ABSTRACT

Translanguaging has become a major framework for understanding multilingual meaning-making in education, yet much of the literature has tended to assume classroom contexts in which learners and teachers share relatively stable or sufficiently overlapping linguistic repertoires. This article examines how translanguaging operates in highly heterogeneous urban primary school classrooms in Livingstone, Zambia, where no single shared learner language can be consistently assumed. Drawing on a qualitative interpretivist case study, the study used classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with twenty teachers and twenty pupils from selected primary schools to investigate patterns of language use, instructional practice, learner participation, and teachers' engagement with language-in-education policy. The findings show that multilingual classroom interaction was not random but systematically patterned according to communicative role and pedagogical function. English was more prominent in formal teacher-led and teacher-directed interaction, while Nyanja featured strongly in peer clarification and collaborative meaning-making, with Tonga and Lozi appearing in more context-specific ways. Teachers used multilingual practices strategically to scaffold understanding, clarify tasks, and sustain lesson flow, while learners relied on peer-mediated multilingual processing before producing formal classroom responses. The study further found that classroom interaction was shaped by partial linguistic overlap, requiring teachers to make moment-to-moment decisions across unevenly shared linguistic resources. It also revealed a clear mismatch between formal language-in-education policy and the realities of multilingual urban classroom practice. The article argues that in such contexts translanguaging should be understood not only as fluid repertoire mobilisation, but as pedagogical coordination under conditions of incomplete commonality, institutional constraint, and interactional necessity. By foregrounding classroom-based evidence from an underrepresented African urban context, the article extends translanguaging theory and contributes to more context-sensitive understandings of multilingual pedagogy, teacher agency, and language policy enactment.

**Keywords:** Translanguaging; multilingual education; classroom heterogeneity; pedagogical coordination; urban primary schools; Zambia; language-in-education policy

## INTRODUCTION

Multilingual classrooms are no longer marginal to educational debate; in many parts of the world, they are the ordinary condition of schooling. This is especially true in African contexts, where linguistic diversity is not an exception to be managed but a routine feature of everyday social and educational life. Learners often enter school with repertoires shaped by home, neighbourhood, mobility, peer interaction, and community language practices, and these repertoires do not always align neatly with the language arrangements assumed by formal schooling. As a result, the language ecology of the classroom is central to questions of access, participation, comprehension, and educational equity (UNESCO, 2025). In multilingual settings, classroom interaction is not simply a medium for transmitting content; it is one of the main conditions through which knowledge becomes accessible or restricted.

Within this broader field, translanguaging has emerged as one of the most influential frameworks for understanding multilingual meaning-making in education. Its central contribution has been to challenge monolingual assumptions and to show that multilingual speakers draw on their available linguistic resources in flexible and strategic ways to communicate, learn, and participate (García & Wei, 2014). In educational research, translanguaging has been especially important because it has shifted attention away from deficit views of multilingual learners and toward the pedagogical potential of multilingual practice. Recent scholarship continues to show that translanguaging can support comprehension, participation, and engagement with academic content, particularly in classrooms marked by linguistic and cultural diversity (Moraru et al., 2025; Tai, 2022). However, the rapid growth of translanguaging scholarship has also revealed an important limitation: much of the literature still tends to work with contexts in which learners and teachers share relatively stable, recognisable, or sufficiently overlapping linguistic repertoires.

That limitation becomes especially significant in highly heterogeneous classrooms, where linguistic overlap is partial, uneven, and interactionally negotiated rather than given in advance. In such settings, teachers and learners do not necessarily share one common “local language” through which explanation, clarification, and participation can be smoothly organised. Instead, classroom interaction often proceeds through layered and improvised forms of multilingual coordination. This means that multilingual classroom practice cannot always be understood simply as fluid movement across a shared repertoire. In many urban classrooms, it is also the practical work of assembling temporary understanding across unevenly shared linguistic resources. This is where current translanguaging theory requires further refinement. If translanguaging is framed too broadly as flexible repertoire mobilisation without sufficient attention to weak or fragmented linguistic commonality, institutional pressure, and interactional contingency, it risks obscuring the very conditions that make multilingual teaching complex in many real classrooms.

This problem is both theoretical and pedagogical. Theoretically, it raises questions about how translanguaging should be understood in classrooms where sharedness cannot be assumed. Pedagogically, it points to the reality that when no single language guarantees access for all learners, multilingual practice becomes less an optional enrichment strategy and more a practical response to the task of making learning possible. Teachers in such contexts are not merely expressing multilingual fluidity; they are often coordinating instruction across linguistic asymmetries, varying proficiencies, and competing institutional demands. Existing studies have shown that teachers frequently use multilingual practices to support understanding where monolingual delivery would limit access to curriculum meaning (Tai, 2022). What remains insufficiently theorised, however, is how this process unfolds in highly heterogeneous African urban classrooms, where mobility, language contact, and uneven linguistic overlap intensify the complexity of classroom communication.

Zambia provides a particularly important context for examining this issue. The country’s language-in-education framework recognises the use of familiar Zambian languages in the early grades, with the Zambia Education Curriculum Framework specifying familiar local languages as media of instruction in Grades 1 to 4 before English assumes greater instructional prominence in later grades (Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education [MESVTEE], 2013). At policy level, this reflects an important commitment to grounding early learning in languages learners know. In practice, however, implementation becomes far more complex in urban settings, where migration, mixed settlement patterns, and multilingual social life produce classrooms that do not fit easily into a one-language instructional model. Livingstone Urban is especially significant in this regard. As a socially mobile and linguistically mixed urban setting, it brings together learners whose repertoires may include Tonga, Nyanja, Lozi, English, and other linguistic resources in shifting combinations. Existing research from Livingstone already suggests that multilingual classroom practice is shaped by this heterogeneity, making the district a productive site for reconsidering how translanguaging operates under conditions of intense diversity rather than relative linguistic stability (Simachenya & Mambwe, 2023; UNICEF Zambia, 2023).

Drawing on classroom observations and semi-structured interviews in selected primary schools in Livingstone Urban, this article examines how translanguaging operates in classrooms marked by uneven linguistic overlap. It argues that translanguaging in highly heterogeneous urban classrooms should be understood not only as

flexible repertoire mobilisation, but as pedagogical coordination under conditions of incomplete commonality, institutional constraint, and interactional necessity. This argument matters at three levels. Empirically, the article contributes classroom-based evidence from an underrepresented African urban context. Theoretically, it extends translanguaging scholarship by foregrounding the problem of heterogeneity itself and by showing that multilingual practice in such settings involves the assembly of workable understanding across only partially shared resources. Practically, it offers a more realistic basis for thinking about multilingual pedagogy, teacher preparation, and language-in-education policy in urban classrooms where linguistic complexity exceeds the assumptions of stable policy categories.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Translanguaging, Multilingualism, and the Problem of Classroom Heterogeneity**

Translanguaging has become one of the most influential concepts in multilingual education because it challenges the assumption that teaching and learning must proceed through clearly separated languages. Rather than treating multilingual speakers as moving between sealed linguistic systems, translanguaging scholarship has shown that speakers draw on their available linguistic resources in integrated and strategic ways to make meaning, participate socially, and engage with academic content (García & Wei, 2014). In educational contexts, this shift has been especially significant because it has moved the debate away from deficit understandings of multilingual learners and toward a more resource-oriented view of classroom language use. Under this perspective, multilingual practices are not treated as signs of confusion, interference, or pedagogical failure, but as part of the ordinary processes through which understanding is built and classroom participation is sustained.

The appeal of translanguaging in education lies partly in its explanatory and partly in its political value. Analytically, it helps explain how multilingual learners and teachers negotiate meaning in classrooms where the official language of instruction is not the only resource available to them. Pedagogically, it has opened important space for recognising that multilingual practices can support comprehension, participation, and academic engagement. Recent scholarship continues to show that translanguaging can function as an inclusive pedagogical resource, especially in settings where linguistic and cultural diversity are central features of classroom life (Moraru et al., 2025; Tai, 2022). In this respect, the concept has done important work in unsettling monolingual norms and in giving theoretical legitimacy to practices that teachers and learners have long used, often without formal recognition.

At the same time, the growth of translanguaging scholarship has revealed an important limitation. Much of the literature still tends to assume contexts in which learners and teachers share relatively stable, recognisable, or sufficiently overlapping repertoires. Even where diversity is acknowledged, translanguaging is often theorised as fluid movement across a multilingual space whose communicative resources are broadly available to participants. What is less fully theorised is the classroom in which overlap itself is uncertain: where learners do not all share one common “home” or “local” language, where the teacher cannot presume a single familiar linguistic base, and where communicative coordination depends on uneven and shifting access to different languages. In such contexts, translanguaging cannot be understood only as flexibility across shared resources. It also involves the practical work of creating temporary bridges across only partially shared linguistic repertoires.

This limitation matters because it exposes a gap between prevailing conceptual models and the realities of many multilingual classrooms, especially in urban African contexts. If translanguaging is understood too generally as fluid repertoire mobilisation, it may understate the difficulty of teaching where sharedness cannot be assumed. It may also obscure the extent to which multilingual practice is shaped by asymmetries in language access, language value, and institutional recognition. In highly heterogeneous classrooms, multilingual interaction is not simply a matter of drawing from a common pool of resources. It is often a negotiated process in which teachers and learners work through incomplete overlap, variable proficiency, and interactional uncertainty. This raises the need for a more context-sensitive account of translanguaging, one that takes classroom heterogeneity seriously as a structuring condition rather than treating it as background diversity.

A second limitation in parts of the translanguaging literature is the tendency to underplay language hierarchy and institutional constraint. Although translanguaging theory has been powerful in challenging monolingual assumptions, classroom language use is never shaped by communicative need alone. It is also organised by policy expectations, assessment systems, curriculum structures, and broader language ideologies that assign unequal value to different languages. In many postcolonial educational systems, English continues to function as the language most closely associated with academic legitimacy, examination success, and future mobility, even where local languages are recognised in principle (Heugh, 2015; UNESCO, 2025). Under such conditions, translanguaging is not simply an unrestricted expression of multilingual repertoire. It is constrained by what counts as acceptable school language and by teachers' need to balance comprehension with institutional expectations. A contextually grounded account of multilingual classroom practice therefore requires attention not only to linguistic flexibility, but also to the structures of value and authority within which that flexibility is enacted.

This is where multilingualism as a sociolinguistic perspective remains essential. Multilingualism in education is not simply the presence of several languages in one setting; it also involves the historical and institutional organisation of those languages through unequal forms of legitimacy, access, and status. A multilingual classroom is therefore not a neutral space of coexisting codes. It is a social and pedagogical space in which languages do different kinds of work and carry different kinds of authority. From this perspective, the significance of multilingual classroom practice lies not only in the number of languages present, but in how those languages are positioned within relations of power. This sociolinguistic perspective complements translanguaging theory by reminding us that multilingual interaction always takes place within structured language hierarchies, and that the flexibility of practice cannot be understood apart from the inequality of language value.

These issues become especially pronounced in African urban classrooms. Urban multilingualism is often shaped by migration, mobility, interethnic contact, informal settlement, and the layered coexistence of local, regional, and global languages. As a result, classrooms may bring together learners whose linguistic resources are diverse, asymmetrical, and only partially overlapping. In such settings, the assumption that one designated local language can function as a stable bridge for all learners is often empirically weak. Teachers must instead manage understanding in classrooms where no single code can be presumed to reach everyone equally. Yet multilingual education theory has not always fully kept pace with this reality. Urban heterogeneity is frequently acknowledged descriptively, but its implications for how translanguaging itself should be conceptualised are less often examined directly. This gap is important because it affects precisely the kinds of classrooms in which multilingual teaching is most interactionally demanding and pedagogically inventive.

The Zambian context offers a particularly important case for addressing this issue. The national curriculum framework recognises the use of familiar Zambian languages in the early grades, reflecting an important policy commitment to grounding instruction in accessible languages (MESVTEE, 2013). However, the practical meaning of "familiar language" becomes unstable in multilingual urban settings, where learners may not share the regionally designated instructional language to the same degree. In Livingstone Urban, this issue is especially visible. The district's social and linguistic composition reflects movement, diversity, and shifting patterns of language use that complicate the assumption of a stable common local-language base. Existing research from Livingstone already points to multilingual classroom practices in which teachers and learners routinely draw on multiple languages to support communication and learning (Simachenya & Mambwe, 2023). What remains underdeveloped, however, is a conceptual account of what these practices mean for translanguaging theory itself.

It is within this gap that the present study is positioned. The study does not reject translanguaging theory; on the contrary, it starts from its central insight that multilingual speakers mobilise available linguistic resources in purposeful ways. However, it argues that this insight needs to be extended if it is to remain analytically useful in highly heterogeneous classrooms. The issue is not whether translanguaging occurs, but how it occurs when linguistic commonality is uneven, when participants do not all share the same familiar language, and when institutional pressures continue to privilege particular codes. In such contexts, multilingual classroom practice is better understood not simply as fluidity across repertoire, but as the coordination of instruction, participation, and meaning-making across only partially shared resources.

## Theorising Translanguaging in Conditions of Extreme Linguistic Heterogeneity

This article therefore adopts translanguaging theory and multilingualism as a sociolinguistic perspective as a combined analytical lens. Translanguaging is useful because it directs attention to what teachers and learners actually do with language in interaction: explaining, clarifying, scaffolding, negotiating meaning, and sustaining participation. Multilingualism as a sociolinguistic perspective is equally necessary because it foregrounds the broader structures through which languages are differently valued, authorised, and tied to educational legitimacy. Used together, these perspectives allow the analysis to move beyond a celebratory account of multilingual flexibility and toward a more grounded understanding of classroom language practice as simultaneously interactional, pedagogical, and constrained.

From this combined perspective, translanguaging in highly heterogeneous classrooms is understood here in a more specific way. It is interactional because it is accomplished in real-time classroom exchanges rather than existing as an abstract linguistic capacity. It is pedagogical because it is tied to the work of teaching, including explanation, clarification, repair, and the management of participation. It is constrained because teachers' choices are shaped by policy expectations, assessment demands, and the continuing institutional authority of English. It is improvised because classrooms marked by linguistic diversity do not always offer a stable shared pathway for communication. It is also shaped by uneven language legitimacy, since some languages carry more recognised academic authority than others within the school system. Most importantly, it is conditioned by the absence of a universally shared classroom language, which means that understanding often has to be assembled across fragmented and only partially overlapping resources.

The conceptual move made in this article is therefore not to abandon translanguaging, but to specify more precisely what it becomes under conditions of extreme classroom heterogeneity. In this setting, translanguaging is understood not only as flexible repertoire mobilisation, but as pedagogical coordination under conditions of incomplete commonality, institutional constraint, and interactional necessity. This formulation allows the study to explain not merely that multilingual practices occur, but why they take the forms they do in Livingstone Urban primary classrooms. It is this more context-sensitive understanding that the article advances through its empirical analysis.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research design

This article draws on a qualitative, interpretivist case study because the central aim was to examine how multilingual classroom interaction is enacted, negotiated, and experienced in naturally occurring school settings. An interpretivist orientation was appropriate because the study was concerned with language use as a socially situated practice whose meanings are shaped through interaction, institutional context, and participant interpretation rather than as a fixed variable to be measured (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A case study design was equally suitable because it allowed close engagement with classroom processes in real institutional settings and supported an in-depth analysis of multilingual practice in context rather than as decontextualised language choice. In the thesis from which this article is drawn, the study is explicitly framed within an interpretivist qualitative design focused on multilingual classroom interaction in selected urban schools.

### Study context

The study was conducted in selected government primary schools in Livingstone Urban, Zambia. Livingstone was chosen not simply as a convenient site, but because it offered a theoretically revealing urban context in which linguistic diversity, learner mobility, and mixed classroom repertoires were especially visible. In qualitative inquiry, site selection is strongest when the setting is analytically productive, that is, when it makes the phenomenon under investigation more visible in practice (Patton, 2015). In this case, Livingstone Urban provided a context in which the tension between language-in-education policy and everyday classroom interaction could be observed clearly. The broader study consistently describes the district as a socially mobile

and linguistically heterogeneous urban space in which multilingual classroom practice is shaped by real diversity rather than simplified assumptions of a stable shared local language.

### **Participants and data sources**

The study involved forty participants drawn from ten government primary schools in Livingstone Urban: twenty teachers and twenty pupils. Within each school, two teachers were purposively selected, one from lower primary and one from upper primary, in order to capture variation across instructional stages and classroom language demands. Two pupils were also selected from the same classrooms in which lessons were observed so that learner accounts could be directly connected to observed interactional practices. In addition, twenty lessons were observed, comprising one lower primary and one upper primary lesson in each school. This sampling strategy provided both breadth across cases and sufficient depth within each school to examine how multilingual classroom interaction was organised in practice. The wider thesis also indicates that efforts were made to include teachers with varying experience and learners with differing participation profiles and, where possible, diverse linguistic backgrounds, so that the data did not reflect only highly visible or more confident classroom actors.

Purposive sampling was appropriate because the study required participants who were directly involved in day-to-day multilingual classroom interaction and could speak meaningfully to language choice, learner participation, and instructional decision-making (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). Sampling adequacy was treated as an analytic rather than purely numerical question. As documented in the thesis, data collection and preliminary analysis proceeded iteratively, with later cases contributing more to the deepening and stabilisation of themes than to the emergence of entirely new categories.

### **Data generation**

Data were generated through two complementary qualitative methods: classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. This combination was methodologically important because observations captured what teachers and learners actually did with language during lessons, while interviews provided access to how those practices were understood, justified, and experienced by participants. Observation is particularly valuable in classroom research because it makes it possible to document interaction in real time rather than relying only on retrospective self-report (Cohen et al., 2018). Semi-structured interviewing, by contrast, allows the researcher to pursue participants' reasoning, perceptions, and experiences while retaining sufficient consistency across cases for comparative analysis (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

The classroom observations focused on multilingual language use across lesson phases, including explanation, questioning, learner response, peer interaction, and classroom management. A structured observation protocol was used to support consistency across the twenty lessons observed, while still allowing attention to unexpected interactional episodes. The interview component comprised separate semi-structured interview guides for teachers and pupils. Teacher interviews explored pedagogical decision-making, language preferences, policy interpretation, and reasons for shifting between languages. Pupil interviews focused on language use in classroom participation, peer clarification, understanding, and experiences of inclusion or exclusion. The broader methodology indicates that teachers were sometimes invited to comment on particular classroom episodes that had been observed, which strengthened the link between observed practice and retrospective explanation.

All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Where participants used more than one language within an utterance, transcripts preserved those language shifts rather than normalising them into a single code. Observation notes were expanded immediately after school visits so that contextual detail not captured in audio recordings could be retained in the dataset. This was especially important in a study concerned with translanguaging, because meaning often resided not only in what was said, but also in when and why language shifts occurred during interaction.

### **Data analysis**

The data were analysed thematically, using a reflexive and interpretive approach to identify patterned meanings

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classroom observations and interview transcripts. Thematic analysis was appropriate because it provides a flexible but rigorous way of moving from detailed qualitative material to analytically coherent themes while remaining sensitive to context and participant perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). In this study, analysis was iterative rather than linear. Observation records, interview transcripts, and analytic memos were reviewed repeatedly, first within individual school cases and then across cases, in order to track recurring patterns in language choice, pedagogical function, learner participation, and policy negotiation.

The coding strategy combined deductive and inductive logics. Deductively, the analysis drew on the article's theoretical framing, particularly translanguaging as repertoire-based meaning-making and multilingualism as a sociolinguistic condition shaped by hierarchy, legitimacy, and institutional constraint. Inductively, open coding was used to capture unanticipated classroom realities, especially those linked to specific lesson phases, subject demands, and local urban classroom conditions. In practical terms, lesson data were coded primarily at the level of the interactional episode, such as explanation, clarification, group work, feedback, or discipline, because the meaning of language choice is often most visible in the function it performs within a sequence rather than in isolated utterances. Interview data were coded in meaning segments so that participants' accounts of intention, constraint, and experience could be compared with observed classroom practice. This hybrid approach made it possible to avoid both under-theorised description and overly rigid imposition of prior categories on the data.

Across the analytic process, observation and interview data were brought into dialogue. For example, a teacher's explanation for shifting into Nyanja during instruction was read against observed classroom episodes and, where relevant, against pupil accounts of how such shifts affected understanding and participation. The themes reported in the article therefore reflect patterns that were developed through sustained cross-case comparison and triangulation rather than through a single data source alone.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was strengthened through methodological triangulation, systematic documentation, reflexive analysis, and contextual depth. In qualitative research, trustworthiness rests on the transparency and credibility of the interpretive process rather than on statistical representativeness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, credibility was enhanced by integrating classroom observations with teacher and pupil interviews, allowing the researcher to compare what participants did with how they explained their actions. Dependability was supported through the use of a structured observation protocol, separate interview guides for teachers and pupils, and consistent procedures for transcription and data handling. Confirmability was strengthened through analytic memoing, iterative coding, and explicit attention to preserving multilingual meaning during transcription and translation. Transferability was addressed through thick contextual description of Livingstone Urban and the inclusion of ten school cases, enabling readers to judge the relevance of the findings to comparable multilingual educational settings. These trustworthiness strategies are described explicitly in the broader thesis.

### **Ethical considerations**

Ethical practice was central to the study because the research involved both adult participants and children in school-based settings. Ethical clearance was obtained through the relevant institutional structures, and formal permission to access government schools was secured through the appropriate education authorities and school leadership. Teacher participation was based on informed consent, while pupil participation required both parental or guardian consent and learner assent. These procedures ensured that participation was voluntary and that participants understood the purpose of the study, what their involvement would entail, and their right to decline participation or withdraw (BERA, 2024).

Ethical sensitivity extended beyond formal approval procedures. Because the study focused on classroom language practices that are closely connected to identity, authority, and institutional accountability, care was taken to maintain a non-evaluative stance during fieldwork. Pupil interviews were conducted in a supportive and conversational manner, and learners were permitted to express themselves in languages with which they felt comfortable. This was important both ethically and methodologically, since restricting learners to a single

interview language would have contradicted the very phenomenon under investigation. Schools and participants were anonymised through pseudonyms, identifying details were removed from transcripts, and data were stored securely throughout the research process.

### **Findings: Translanguaging Under Conditions of Heterogeneity**

This section presents the empirical findings on multilingual classroom interaction in selected primary schools in Livingstone Urban. The results are drawn from classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with teachers and pupils and are organised around recurring patterns in language choice, instructional use, learner participation, and policy-related practice. Across the observed classrooms, language use was not uniform. Instead, teachers and learners drew on Nyanja, English, Tonga, and, in some cases, Lozi and other familiar linguistic resources in ways that varied according to lesson purpose, participant role, and immediate communicative need. The results below focus on what was observed and reported, showing how multilingual resources featured in everyday classroom activity.

### **Findings: Translanguaging Under Conditions of Heterogeneity**

This section presents the findings from classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with teachers and pupils in selected primary schools in Livingstone Urban. Consistent with the thematic analysis described in the methodology, the findings are organised around five interrelated themes: patterned multilingual language use in classroom interaction, translanguaging as instructional scaffolding, multilingual mediation of learner participation, interaction under conditions of partial linguistic overlap, and teachers' negotiation of language-in-education policy. The section focuses on presenting the empirical patterns that emerged from the data, supported by observational evidence and participant excerpts, without moving into broader interpretation.

### **Theme 1: Patterned Multilingual Language Use in Classroom Interaction**

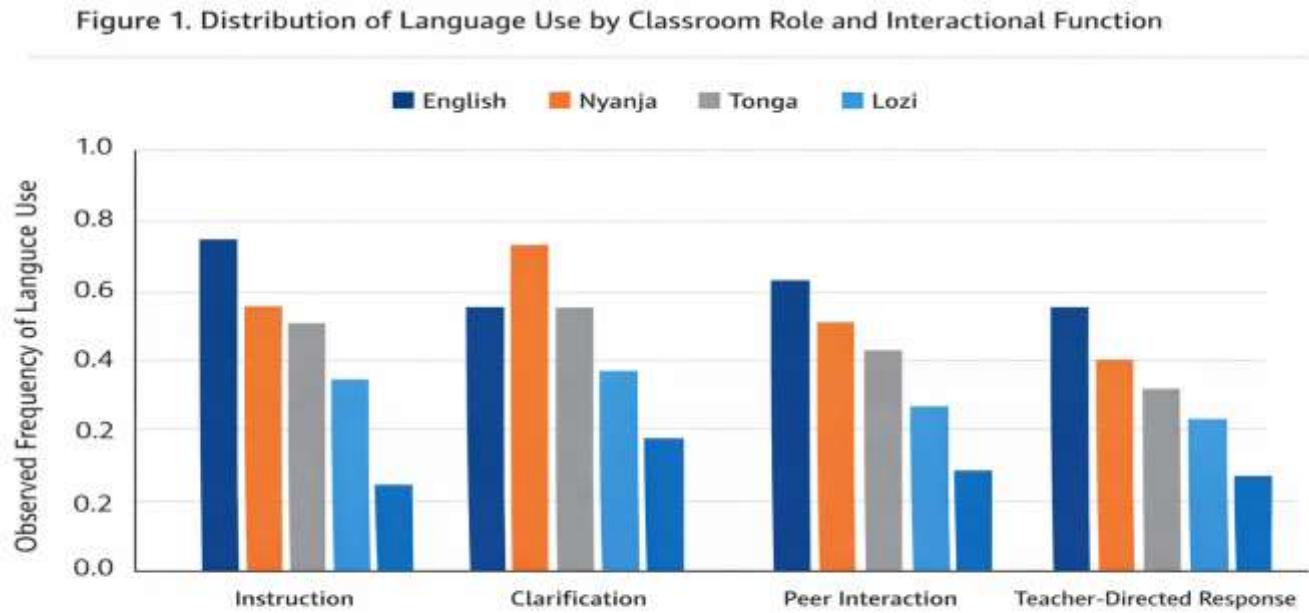
A central finding of the study was that language use across the observed classrooms was patterned rather than random. English, Nyanja, Tonga, and Lozi appeared in different parts of classroom interaction, but they did not occur with equal frequency or in interchangeable ways. Instead, their use was associated with particular participant roles and communicative functions. Across the observed lessons, English was most visible in formal teacher-led explanation, writing on the board, textbook-linked activity, and teacher-directed learner responses. Nyanja appeared strongly in peer interaction, clarification, and informal collaborative exchange. Tonga remained visible in instructional talk and in contexts tied more closely to policy-linked expectations, while Lozi appeared less frequently and mainly in learner-to-learner interaction associated with familiarity and shared background.

Observation data showed that learner-to-learner talk was especially likely to shift into Nyanja when pupils were checking understanding, comparing answers, or asking for help. One pupil explained, "When I don't understand, I ask my friend in Nyanja because it is easier for us to talk and explain" (Pupil 7). Another stated, "When the teacher asks a question, I try to answer in English, but when I am talking to my friends, I use Nyanja" (Pupil 12). These accounts aligned with what was observed during group and pair work, where learners repeatedly turned to classmates in Nyanja before giving more formal responses in English.

Teachers also described language choice as dependent on the classroom situation rather than on one fixed code. One teacher noted, "In class, I can start in English, but when learners are not following, I change to Nyanja so they can understand better" (Teacher 4). Another remarked that they did not always remain in one language because comprehension varied across learners and across phases of the lesson. These accounts were consistent with classroom observations showing regular movement between English, Nyanja, and Tonga depending on whether the teacher was introducing content, clarifying a point, managing behaviour, or eliciting response.

As shown in Figure 1, the observed use of English, Nyanja, Tonga, and Lozi varied according to classroom role and interactional function, with English appearing more prominently in formal instructional and teacher-directed contexts, and Nyanja occurring more strongly in clarification and peer interaction.

**Figure 1. Distribution of Language Use by Classroom Role and Interactional Function**



As shown in Figure 1, the observed use of English, Nyanja, Tonga, and Lozi varied according to classroom role and interactional function, with English appearing more prominently in formal instructional and teacher-directed contexts, and Nyanja occurring more strongly in clarification and peer interaction.

### Theme 2: Translanguaging as Instructional Scaffolding

The findings further showed that teachers used multilingual alternation as a routine instructional resource for supporting learner comprehension. This was especially visible in moments where concepts introduced in English or Tonga did not appear to produce sufficient uptake. In such cases, teachers frequently restated, simplified, or elaborated the same point using Nyanja. These shifts occurred across grade levels and across subjects, particularly where the lesson required conceptual unpacking, explanation of unfamiliar vocabulary, or clarification of procedural instructions.

In one observed Grade 3 mathematics lesson, subtraction was introduced in English and then restated in Nyanja to clarify the process. In another Grade 6 English lesson, the teacher first defined the word *fragile* in English and then explained it in Nyanja using a more concrete illustration. Similar patterns appeared in lessons where teachers repeated directions before written tasks, pair work, or oral response activity when the initial instruction had produced silence, hesitation, or uncertainty. Observation notes also showed that multilingual repetition was used in managerial talk, including calls for attention, correction of off-task behaviour, and restoration of order.

Interview data supported these observations. One teacher said, “Sometimes when I explain in English, they don’t respond. But when I repeat in Nyanja, they start answering, so I know they understand” (Teacher 9). Another explained, “We use different languages because learners do not all understand one language. You have to help them using what they know” (Teacher 2). These excerpts indicate that teachers’ multilingual practices were closely tied to moments when they needed to secure understanding and keep lessons moving.

A further pattern was that teachers often did not shift only once. In several lessons, explanation moved from English to Nyanja and then back to English once a concept had been clarified. This sequence was especially visible in upper primary lessons where English retained prominence in formal academic activity but multilingual clarification remained necessary for lesson progression. The data therefore showed that translanguaging functioned as a recurring instructional strategy embedded within the flow of classroom teaching rather than as an isolated departure from the official language of instruction.

### Theme 3: Multilingual Mediation of Learner Participation

The findings showed that learner participation was frequently mediated through multilingual processes rather than occurring through a single language pathway. In whole-class interaction, English was commonly used in teacher-directed responses, especially in upper primary and in lessons oriented toward formal academic performance. However, observation data showed that many learners processed questions, checked answers, and built confidence through peer talk in Nyanja before responding publicly. Participation therefore often unfolded through a sequence in which understanding was negotiated in a more familiar linguistic space before being expressed in a more formal classroom code.

This pattern was strongly reflected in pupil accounts. One pupil stated, “We first talk in Nyanja to understand the answer, then we say it in English when the teacher asks” (Pupil 3). Another noted, “If I don’t understand, I ask my friend in our language, then I can answer the teacher” (Pupil 15). A teacher confirmed this process by observing, “Learners help each other using Nyanja, and then when I ask, they try to respond in English” (Teacher 6). These excerpts corresponded closely with observation data from pair and group work, where peer explanation frequently preceded public response.

The data also showed that peer clarification was not incidental to participation. In several lessons, learners who initially remained silent were observed contributing after speaking briefly with classmates. This was especially common when task instructions were unclear or when learners appeared unsure of how to formulate an answer in English. Nyanja was the language most frequently used in these low-stakes collaborative moments, although Tonga and Lozi also appeared selectively among learners who shared those languages. The findings therefore showed that multilingual participation was socially mediated and often depended on access to peer-based linguistic support within the classroom.

Figure 2 illustrates this participation pathway, showing how learners often moved from teacher explanation to partial understanding, then to peer-mediated clarification in a familiar language, before producing a more formal teacher-directed response.

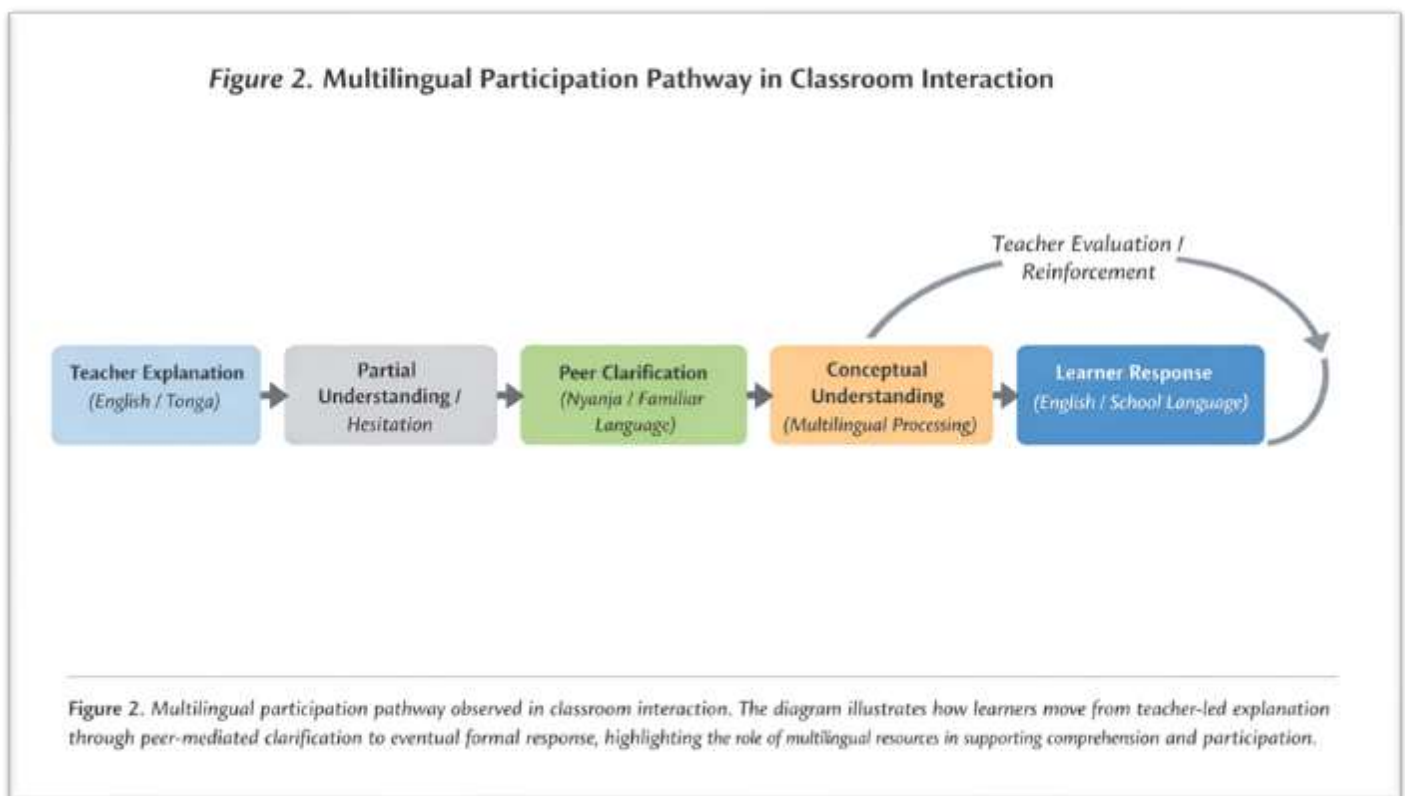


Figure 2 illustrates this participation pathway, showing how learners often moved from teacher explanation to partial understanding, then to peer-mediated clarification in a familiar language, before producing a more formal teacher-directed response.

### Theme 4: Interaction Under Conditions of Partial Linguistic Overlap

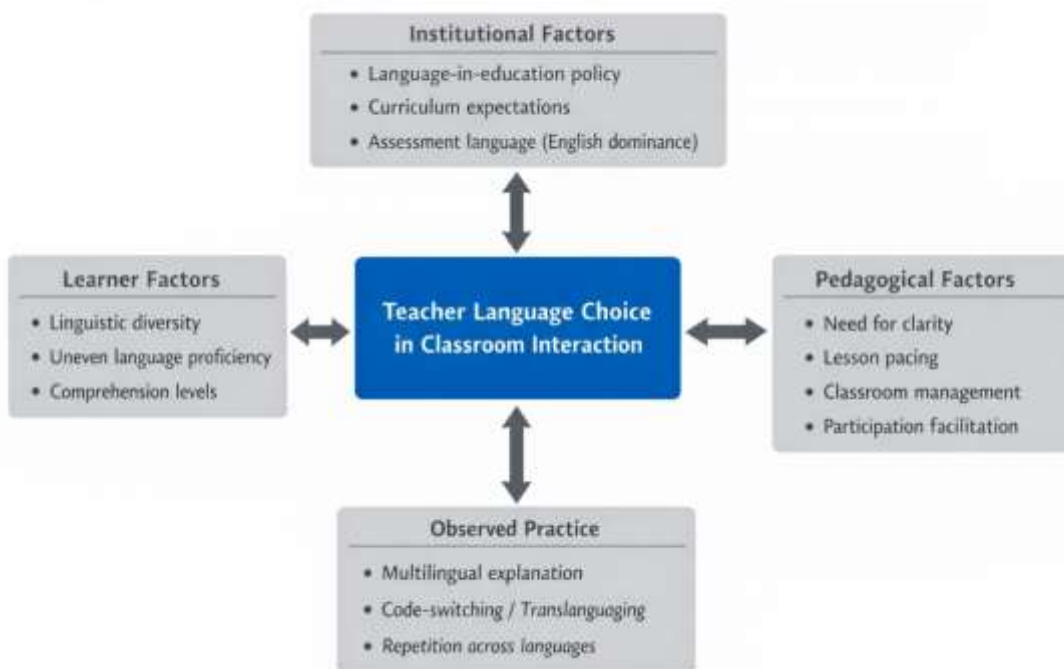
A further theme in the data was that classroom interaction occurred under conditions of uneven linguistic overlap. Teachers and learners did not always operate from the same stable linguistic base, and the observed classrooms varied in the extent to which Tonga, Nyanja, English, or other languages were accessible to all participants. In some classrooms, one group of learners appeared more comfortable with Tonga, while others relied more heavily on Nyanja or English. This uneven distribution of linguistic access was visible both in observation data and in participant accounts.

Teachers were often observed adjusting their language choices in response to this unevenness. They shifted languages when learners were silent, appeared confused, or responded weakly to initial explanations. One teacher stated, “In my class, some understand Tonga, others don’t. So I have to mix languages so everyone can follow” (Teacher 11). Another explained, “You cannot stick to one language because not all learners understand it. You have to change depending on the learners” (Teacher 8). Pupil interviews reflected the same dynamic. One learner remarked, “I don’t understand Tonga very well, so I listen when the teacher explains in Nyanja or English” (Pupil 10).

Observation records showed that this did not take the form of a one-time accommodation. Rather, teachers often moved repeatedly across English, Tonga, and Nyanja within the same lesson segment. In several cases, the sequence involved a formal explanation in English or Tonga, a clarification in Nyanja, and then a return to a more school-aligned code once understanding had been established. Learners similarly appeared to navigate these conditions by selecting peers with whom they shared a more accessible linguistic base during collaborative activity. In some classrooms, this produced small clusters of interaction organised around mutually understood codes. The data therefore showed that multilingual classroom interaction was shaped not only by the presence of several languages, but by the fact that those languages were not equally shared by all participants.

As reflected in Figure 3, teachers’ language choices were shaped by a combination of learner-related, pedagogical, and institutional factors, resulting in multilingual classroom practices that were responsive to comprehension needs and interactional demands.

Figure 3. Teacher Language Decision-Making in Multilingual Classrooms



As reflected in Figure 3, teachers’ language choices were shaped by a combination of learner-related, pedagogical, and institutional factors, resulting in multilingual classroom practices that were responsive to comprehension needs and interactional demands.

## Theme 5: Teachers' Negotiation of Language-in-Education Policy

The final theme concerned teachers' views of the current language-in-education policy and its implementation in multilingual urban classrooms. Interview data showed that teachers generally supported the principle of promoting Zambian languages in education and affirmed the place of Tonga as an important regional language. At the same time, they consistently raised concerns about the practicality of implementing Tonga as the sole or dominant instructional language in classrooms where learners came from linguistically mixed backgrounds.

Teachers repeatedly described a gap between the assumptions of policy and the realities of the classroom. One teacher stated, "The policy says we use Tonga, but in class, many learners do not know Tonga. So you have to use other languages" (Teacher 5). Another said, "It is good to use local languages, but in urban areas, learners come from different backgrounds. One language is not enough" (Teacher 14). A third teacher added, "We follow the policy, but we also adjust because learners need to understand. That is the most important thing" (Teacher 1). These accounts showed that teachers did not reject local-language education in principle, but they did describe its implementation as more complicated than the formal framework appeared to assume.

Across the teacher interviews, multilingual flexibility was presented as necessary for sustaining teaching and learning. Participants explained that they relied on more than one language because this was often the only way to ensure that learners understood concepts, followed instructions, and remained engaged. Several teachers indicated a preference for a more flexible multilingual approach in which Tonga, English, Nyanja, and other familiar local languages could be used more openly according to classroom composition and lesson need. The data therefore showed that teachers positioned themselves as working both within and beyond the current policy framework in order to make instruction workable in practice.

Taken together, the findings show that multilingual language use was a routine and structured feature of classroom interaction in the selected Livingstone Urban primary schools. Language choice varied systematically according to role, function, and classroom need. Teachers used multilingual practices to support explanation, clarification, and lesson flow, while learners relied on peer-mediated multilingual processing to support participation. Classroom interaction was shaped by partial linguistic overlap, and teachers described policy implementation as requiring adaptation to urban classroom realities. These patterns were visible across observation data and were consistently reflected in teacher and pupil interview accounts.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how translanguaging operates in highly heterogeneous urban primary school classrooms in Livingstone, Zambia, and to consider what such practices reveal about multilingual pedagogy under conditions of uneven linguistic overlap. The findings show that classroom multilingualism in this context is neither incidental nor disorderly. Rather, it is organised, functional, and closely tied to the practical demands of teaching and learning in classrooms where no single language can be assumed to guarantee comprehension for all learners. Taken together, the findings suggest that translanguaging in these classrooms is best understood not simply as flexible repertoire mobilisation, but as a form of pedagogical coordination through which teachers and learners assemble workable understanding across unevenly shared linguistic resources.

### Language, hierarchy, and the organisation of classroom interaction

One of the clearest contributions of the study is the demonstration that multilingual classroom talk was patterned according to role and communicative function. English appeared more strongly in formal teacher-led and teacher-directed moments, while Nyanja was more visible in peer clarification and collaborative interaction. Tonga remained present in instructional contexts linked to policy expectations, and Lozi appeared more selectively in socially grounded learner exchanges. This matters because it suggests that multilingual classroom practice was not structured by random alternation, but by the differentiated communicative and institutional work that languages performed in the classroom. In this respect, the findings support translanguaging scholarship which argues that multilingual speakers do not simply move between sealed systems, but draw on available resources in response to the demands of participation and meaning-making (García & Wei, 2014).

At the same time, the findings complicate any simplified celebration of fluid multilingual practice. The observed distribution of languages shows that not all linguistic resources carried the same status or the same classroom value. English retained a clear association with formal academic display, teacher-facing response, and the performance of legitimate school knowledge, while Nyanja functioned more strongly as an accessible resource for collaborative understanding and clarification. This indicates that multilingual classroom practice was shaped not only by communicative flexibility, but also by unequal language legitimacy within schooling. That interpretation aligns with multilingualism as a sociolinguistic perspective, which stresses that the presence of several languages in one setting does not mean those languages circulate on equal terms. Rather, they are differently valued, authorised, and linked to educational legitimacy (Heugh, 2015). The present study extends that insight by showing how language hierarchy is enacted interactionally in urban primary classrooms: learners often build understanding through familiar multilingual resources, yet formal response remains oriented toward institutionally authorised codes.

This matters theoretically because it places translanguaging more firmly within structures of power. In some accounts, translanguaging risks being read as though multilingual practice were inherently open, egalitarian, and unconstrained. The Livingstone findings suggest a more complex reality. Translanguaging occurred within a classroom order shaped by language hierarchy, curricular expectations, and the continuing institutional authority of English. The study therefore confirms that translanguaging is a useful lens for understanding multilingual classroom practice, but it also shows that such practice cannot be understood apart from the unequal value attached to different languages in school settings. In that sense, the article confirms the value of translanguaging theory while challenging more weakly contextualised applications of it.

### **Translanguaging as instructional necessity rather than optional enrichment**

A second major insight concerns the use of translanguaging as instructional scaffolding. Teachers' movement across English, Tonga, and Nyanja was not simply an expression of multilingual fluidity; it was a practical teaching strategy used to restate concepts, simplify meaning, clarify procedures, and keep lessons moving. This pattern strongly supports research showing that multilingual practices can function as pedagogical resources where monolingual delivery would restrict access to curriculum meaning (Tai, 2022). In the present study, multilingual alternation was woven into ordinary classroom teaching rather than appearing as a peripheral or exceptional practice. Teachers did not merely shift languages because multilingualism was present in the classroom; they did so because lesson progression often depended on it.

This is an important interpretive step because it shifts translanguaging from the level of general pedagogical preference to the level of instructional necessity. Much multilingual education literature appropriately emphasises that translanguaging can be affirming, inclusive, and empowering. The present study does not contradict that position, but it shows that in highly heterogeneous classrooms there is an additional dimension that deserves greater emphasis: translanguaging is often necessary because the classroom itself does not offer one stable linguistic pathway for learning. In these circumstances, teachers' multilingual practices become less a matter of optional enrichment and more a response to the practical requirement to secure comprehension under conditions of uneven language access. What this article newly adds, therefore, is a more grounded understanding of translanguaging as part of the labour of teaching in linguistically fragmented classrooms.

This finding also has methodological significance for how multilingual pedagogy is studied. If teachers' language shifts are treated only as deviations from policy or as broad examples of multilingual fluidity, then the specificity of their pedagogical function can be missed. The Livingstone data suggest that translanguaging needs to be examined more closely at the level of interactional sequence and lesson purpose. Teachers were not only switching languages; they were using them to solve particular instructional problems. That sharper focus allows the article to move beyond description and to argue that translanguaging in such settings is pedagogically organised, functionally differentiated, and closely linked to the work of maintaining instructional continuity.

### **Participation, mediation, and classroom equity**

The findings on learner participation deepen this argument further. Participation in the observed classrooms was

frequently mediated through multilingual processes, especially through peer discussion in Nyanja before formal response in English. This suggests that learner participation was not simply a matter of individual competence in the expected language of instruction. Rather, it was often built through a process in which understanding was first negotiated in a more accessible linguistic space before being translated into a teacher-facing academic response. That pattern aligns with literature emphasising that translanguaging can support knowledge construction and participation by enabling learners to process ideas through familiar resources before engaging with more formal school language demands (García & Wei, 2014; Tai, 2022).

However, the findings also sharpen that literature in an important way. In the Livingstone classrooms, multilingual mediation was not merely supportive of participation; it was often the condition that made participation possible. This is especially important for questions of equity. If learners rely on peer-mediated multilingual processing before they can respond publicly, then participation cannot be interpreted narrowly as evidence of isolated linguistic ability. It reflects access to collaborative linguistic support, the availability of mediating resources in the classroom, and the extent to which learners can draw on their social and linguistic networks during the learning process. In this sense, participation is socially and interactionally produced rather than simply individually possessed.

This insight challenges deficit interpretations of hesitation, silence, or delayed response in multilingual classrooms. Such moments may not indicate inability in any simple sense. They may instead reflect the mismatch between available linguistic resources and the demands of formal classroom interaction. This position is consistent with UNESCO's emphasis on multilingual education as central to equitable access and meaningful participation in learning (UNESCO, 2025). What the present study contributes is a classroom-based demonstration of how that equity question plays out interactionally in an urban African setting. It shows that multilingual participation is not just about whether multiple languages are present; it is about whether learners can use those languages to build a pathway into formal classroom performance.

### **Partial linguistic overlap and the extension of translanguaging theory**

The most theoretically significant finding concerns the role of partial linguistic overlap. Much translanguaging literature assumes, either explicitly or implicitly, that participants share sufficiently overlapping repertoires to sustain fluid multilingual interaction. The Livingstone findings show a more complex reality. Teachers and learners were operating in classrooms where linguistic commonality was uneven, unstable, and asymmetrically distributed. Some learners were more comfortable in Tonga, others in Nyanja, and others relied more heavily on English. Under these conditions, translanguaging cannot be understood simply as the mobilisation of a broadly shared multilingual repertoire. Rather, it involves the continual assembly of provisional understanding across only partially shared resources.

This is where the study makes its strongest conceptual intervention. The findings suggest that translanguaging in highly heterogeneous classrooms should be reconceptualised as pedagogical and interactional coordination under conditions of incomplete commonality. Teachers were not simply drawing flexibly from a known and commonly shared pool of languages. They were making moment-to-moment judgments about which language, or combination of languages, might create the widest possible bridge for understanding in a fragmented classroom ecology. That reconceptualisation extends translanguaging theory by foregrounding the problem of heterogeneity itself. It responds to the limitation in existing literature whereby multilingual practice is too often theorised in contexts where overlap is stronger or more predictable than it is in many African urban classrooms. Recent systematic work has highlighted the need for more context-sensitive translanguaging scholarship capable of accounting for diverse multilingual settings rather than assuming a single template of multilingual interaction (Moraru et al., 2025). The present study answers that call by showing that in Livingstone Urban, translanguaging is as much about managing uneven sharedness as it is about expressive fluidity.

This mismatch between formal policy assumptions and classroom realities is summarised in Figure 4, which highlights the gap between policy expectations of structured and controlled language use and the observed classroom reality of flexible, multilingual, and context-driven communication.

**Figure 4. Policy–Practice Gap in Multilingual Classroom Interaction**



*Figure 4. Policy–practice gap in multilingual classroom interaction.* The figure illustrates the misalignment between formal language-in-education policy expectations and the realities of classroom language use in linguistically heterogeneous urban settings.

The figure makes visible the structural tension that ran through the study: policy assumes a more orderly and stable language arrangement than the classroom can actually sustain. This is not a minor implementation difficulty. It is a conceptual problem for language-in-education policy in multilingual urban settings. If classroom communication depends on flexible coordination across partial overlap, then policy frameworks built on the assumption of one sufficiently shared local language are likely to remain misaligned with practice.

### **Policy, teacher agency, and pedagogical realism**

The findings on teachers’ views of language-in-education policy further illuminate the structural conditions within which classroom multilingual practices occur. Teachers did not reject the principle of local language education. On the contrary, they generally supported it. What they questioned was the practical adequacy of a policy model that assumes a designated local language can function smoothly as a common instructional medium in linguistically mixed urban classrooms. This distinction is important because it shows that the study is not simply documenting teacher resistance to policy. Rather, it is revealing a tension between a relatively stable policy model and a much more fluid classroom reality. In this respect, the findings resonate with previous Zambian work showing that multilingual classroom practices often exceed the assumptions built into implementation frameworks (Simachenya & Mambwe, 2023; UNICEF Zambia, 2023).

The policy implications of this are substantial. If urban multilingual classrooms are characterised by partial linguistic overlap, then language-in-education policy cannot rely solely on regionally assigned or administratively designated language categories. It must also account for mobility, linguistic mixing, and the practical conditions under which teachers organise understanding in real classrooms. This does not imply abandoning local language education. Rather, it calls for a more flexible and context-responsive model of multilingual policy, especially in urban schools. The findings therefore support a shift away from one-language assumptions toward adaptive multilingual frameworks that recognise the realities of classroom heterogeneity.

Teacher agency is central here. The study shows that teachers were not passive implementers of policy, nor were they simply acting outside it. They were working within institutional constraints while also adapting language use to meet immediate pedagogical needs. This confirms earlier scholarship that emphasises teachers’ role as active mediators of language policy in classroom settings, but it also extends that work by showing how such mediation becomes more demanding in classrooms marked by incomplete commonality. Teachers in this study

were not only interpreting policy; they were coordinating understanding in contexts where the assumed shared language base was itself unstable. That is a more complex form of pedagogical work than many policy models acknowledge.

### Reconceptualising translanguaging in highly heterogeneous classrooms

Taken together, the findings make three contributions. Empirically, the study provides classroom-based evidence from an underrepresented urban African context, contributing fine-grained analysis to a field that has often relied either on policy-level debate or on less interactionally grounded accounts of multilingual education. Theoretically, it extends translanguaging scholarship by showing that in highly heterogeneous classrooms translanguaging operates not only as fluid meaning-making across repertoire, but as pedagogical coordination across unevenly shared linguistic resources. Practically, it points to the need for teacher education and professional development that prepare teachers not merely for bilingual transition models, but for the complex realities of multilingual classrooms in which language choice must be adaptive, strategic, and interactionally responsive.

The findings of this study therefore suggest that translanguaging in highly heterogeneous classrooms cannot be understood solely as fluid movement across linguistic repertoires. Instead, it emerges as a structured and context-responsive pedagogical process shaped by classroom diversity, institutional expectations, and teacher decision-making. This reconceptualisation is illustrated in Figure 5, which presents translanguaging as pedagogical coordination emerging from the interaction of classroom conditions, institutional constraints, and teacher agency.

Figure 5. Translanguaging as Pedagogical Coordination in Highly Heterogeneous Classrooms

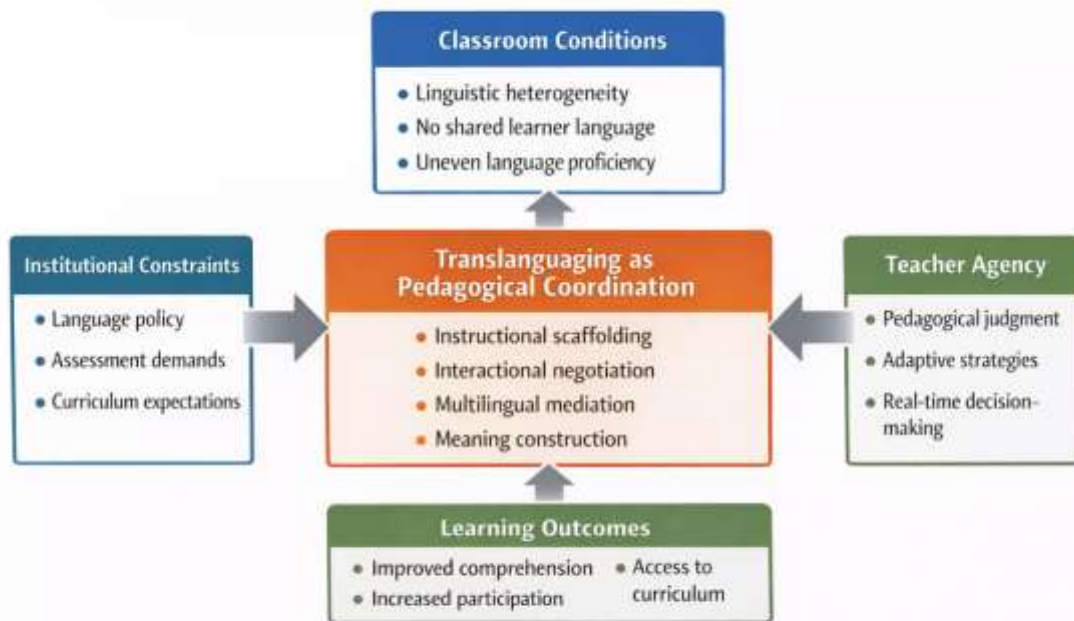


Figure 5. Reconceptualising translanguaging as pedagogical coordination in highly heterogeneous classrooms. The model illustrates how multilingual classroom conditions, institutional constraints, and teacher agency interact to produce translanguaging as a structured instruction

As shown in Figure 5, the present study conceptualises translanguaging in highly heterogeneous classrooms as a coordinated pedagogical response to structurally complex multilingual environments rather than as simple fluid movement across languages. The top layer of the model, classroom conditions, captures the realities that shaped interaction in the observed schools, including linguistic heterogeneity, the absence of a single shared learner language, and uneven language proficiency. These conditions meant that classroom communication could not depend on one fixed instructional code. Instead, meaning had to be built across partially shared linguistic resources, often through flexible and sequential movement between English, Nyanja, Tonga, and other familiar

languages. In this respect, the model reflects the study's finding that multilingual practice emerged from the communicative demands of the classroom itself rather than from abstract preference alone.

The model also highlights the interaction between institutional constraints and teacher agency, demonstrating that translanguaging is shaped not only by communicative need but also by policy expectations, curriculum structures, and assessment demands. This supports earlier work showing that classroom language practices are influenced by broader sociolinguistic and institutional forces (Heugh, 2015; UNESCO, 2025). At the same time, the study underscores the central role of teachers as active decision-makers who adapt language use in real time to support learner understanding and participation. This resonates with research showing that translanguaging practices are often strategic and pedagogically driven rather than incidental (Tai, 2022). The lower part of the model, learning outcomes, captures the practical significance of this process: multilingual coordination widened participation, supported comprehension, and improved learner access to the curriculum. In this sense, Figure 5 does not merely summarise the study; it makes explicit the article's central theoretical contribution. The study confirms that translanguaging remains a powerful framework for understanding multilingual classroom practice, challenges weaker assumptions of stable shared repertoires, and newly adds a context-sensitive model of translanguaging as pedagogical coordination under conditions of incomplete commonality.

### Limitations and future research

The study has limits that should be recognised. Because it is qualitative and focused on selected schools in one urban district, its aim is analytical depth rather than statistical generalisability. Its value lies in illuminating processes and conditions that may resonate with other multilingual urban settings, not in claiming that all classrooms operate in identical ways. In addition, the study focused primarily on classroom interaction, teacher accounts, and pupil perspectives rather than on system-level actors such as policymakers, curriculum developers, and assessment specialists. Those broader institutional voices remain important for future inquiry.

Even so, the findings open several avenues for further research. Comparative studies across urban and rural settings would help clarify whether the forms of partial overlap identified here are especially characteristic of urban multilingualism or more widely distributed across school contexts. Subject-specific studies could also deepen understanding of how multilingual coordination varies across disciplines. Finally, closer examination of how assessment regimes shape the possibilities and limits of translanguaging would strengthen ongoing debates about the relationship between multilingual pedagogy and educational legitimacy.

The discussion suggests that multilingual classroom practice in Livingstone Urban is best understood neither as policy failure nor as unstructured code-mixing, but as a situated and necessary response to the realities of teaching in heterogeneous linguistic environments. The article therefore calls for a more grounded understanding of translanguaging, one that takes seriously the interactional complexity, institutional constraint, and pedagogical work through which multilingual learning is made possible in urban African classrooms.

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