Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Linguistics and Education

Creating translanguaging spaces in students' academic writing practices

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Postgraduates increasingly write in multilingual contexts. Studies have focused on developing bilingual expertise or harnessing expressions of writer identity. Yet, the role of students' linguistic ideologies and their writing experiences has so far not been problematised. Based on Busch's sociolinguistic model of linguistic repertoire (2012), this paper investigates how students develop their academic writing across language codes and registers in the multilingual contexts of a Swedish university. The qualitative, longitudinal study presents data from two students including interviews based on the students' written text relating to their master's thesis. Findings show that students' linguistic ideologies and their experiences can enable or restrict their capacity to draw on their varied repertoires. When enabled, students create translanguaging spaces for meaning making in collaboration with peers and institutional actors. I argue that the metaphor of translanguaging space can be fruitfully applied as a pedagogic tool.

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1. Introduction

University students in Europe and worldwide increasingly study in multilingual contexts where English occupies a dominant position (Mazak, 2017; Palfreyman & Van der Walt, 2017). Higher education institutions often support the use of English in research-based writing at postgraduate level as part of their internationalisation aims (Mortensen, 2014). In addition, some countries, such as Sweden, introduced legislation to promote the use of the local language within academia (Björkman, 2014). Nevertheless, various studies have shown how students and lecturers use several languages in the same context, for instance, when reading academic texts (Kwon & Schallert, 2016), discussing in seminars (Söderlundh, 2012) or talking informally between seminars (Kuteeva, Hynninen, & Haslam, 2015).

Recently, researchers have started to investigate multilinguals' academic writing by combining approaches to bilingualism, second language learning and academic writing. Results indicate that students can benefit from their knowledge and experience of academic writing across language codes (Gentil, 2005; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2013). In considering how to support multilingual students' academic writing, the research often focuses on the construction of identity in writing on the one side and socio-political constraints to multilingual writing on the other side (e.g. Canagarajah, 2013).

By adopting a sociolinguistic perspective of individuals' linguistic repertoires (Busch, 2017), this article foregrounds how writers use their linguistic resources instead of distinguishing between language codes and registers. This perspective enables us to investigate how both writers' experiences of language use and their linguistic ideologies relate to their development of academic writing. The study asks more specifically how students negotiate and develop their linguistic repertoires when writing a master's thesis in the multilingual setting of a Swedish university where standard varieties of Swedish and English are the main official languages.

The article demonstrates how writing practices and interpretations of these practices are formed in collaboration between the writer and peers and supervisors, and in conjunction with institutional or departmental requirements. It thus illuminates how students collaboratively establish a "translanguaging space" (Li, 2011, p. 1222), that is, a social space where they can draw on their linguistic resources and experiences of writing practices. It explicates that such translanguaging spaces are not only created in informal situations (Li, 2011) but also in the context of institutionally governed master's thesis assignments. I, therefore, suggest that this notion of translanguaging space can be a useful pedagogic tool for students' development of academic writing across perceived language borders.

I will first outline how research on multilingual academic writing and sociolinguistic conceptions of linguistic repertoires can be fruitfully connected. This is followed by the presentation of the study's context and its methodology. I will then introduce two

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cases of humanities students engaged in master's thesis writing. The cases have been selected because the students differ in how they experience possibilities and constraints in using varieties of Swedish and English for the preparation and completion of their master's thesis.

2. Translanguaging and linguistic repertoires in academic writing

The fact that multilingual students bring a variety of linguistic resources to their academic writing has been increasingly recognised and researchers have started to investigate the social and cognitive aspects of using these diverse resources for meaning making in academia (e.g. Gentil, 2005; Mazak, 2017). Instead of directing their attention to language systems, these studies move towards a focus on individual speakers with varying linguistic experiences and literacy histories, that is, prior experiences of academic reading and writing (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Researchers agree that multilingual linguistic competence is more than the sum of any discrete monolingual competences that are part of an individual's linguistic repertoire (e.g. Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2013). Switching languages occurs naturally and is a strategy multilingual students employ intuitively (Cumming, 2013; Canagarajah, 2011; Gentil, 2005; Van der Walt, 2013).

Apart from these commonalities, these studies differ on an ontological level with regards to the perspective on language. They can broadly be distinguished on a continuum from a static view of distinct language codes to a dynamic view of languaging. Research on the more static end of the continuum has been influenced by Cummins' (2000) model of bilingualism that suggests that bilingual competence rests on the proficiency in two separate language codes and a "common underlying proficiency" (CUP) (p. 38). Gentil (2011) combines CUP with the concept of genre knowledge. Based on empirical studies, he suggests that writers can draw on their knowledge of how to go about writing a genre-specific text including, for example, how to consider an expected audience, how to organise information and construct an argument, and how to apply subject-matter knowledge. These aspects of genre knowledge are part of the CUP of multilingual writers and can be transferred to writing in similar genres in different language codes provided the lexico-grammatical resources are available to the writer.

Gentil (2011) further recognises that readers using distinct language codes must have similar sociocultural expectations about how a specific genre is realised. This means that, for instance, a specific way of argumentation needs to be accepted by the readers in both languages. Research indicates that such expectations are often shared in research-based writing across languages. For instance, Fløttum, Dahl, and Kinn (2006) observe in their study of published articles in three languages across three disciplines that disciplinary differences are often more significant than differences in their lexico-grammatical realisation in different language codes.

When researching master's theses, not only disciplinary factors need to be taken into account but also the fact that a thesis is an assignment, a "pedagogic genre" (Johns & Swales, 2002, p. 21), which is governed by local requirements irrespective of language codes (Kaufhold, 2017; Kuteeva, in press). These local contexts might further promote certain attitudes towards the use of specific languages since a language is in itself a "sociolinguistic sign" (Hymes, 1972, p. 291) associated with certain viewpoints, values and identities. While Gentil and Seror (2014) indicate that such normative considerations play some part in writers' choices, implications for possible transfer of genre knowledge across language codes are not discussed in detail.

In research situated towards the other end of the continuum with a dynamic view of language as languaging, the notion of "translanguaging" (García & Li, 2014) has become influential. Its relation to the concept of languaging signals the shift from a focus on bounded language systems to discursive practices as ongoing negotiations of a speaker's linguistic repertoire. This repertoire is negotiated in relation to specific situations of language use and dominant conventions governing this language use (Canagarajah, 2016). Since this negotiation combines personal, ideological and socio-political dimensions, translanguaging is a creative and transformative process (Li, 2011). Therefore, Li (2011) suggests that the negotiation of repertoires involved in translanguaging creates a "translanguaging space" (p. 1223), a space for the act of translanguaging and shaped by translanguaging. This space is a "social space for the multilingual language user", created by networks of social relations and shared practices, which allows to incorporate "different dimensions of their personal history, experience and environment, their attitude, belief and ideology, their cognitive and physical capacity" (Li, 2011).

The translanguaging perspective largely rejects language models that describe the separation of languages as a cognitive condition where speakers store linguistic items of various language codes separately. Instead, it suggests that the separation of language codes is conditioned by the social context with its monolingual linguistic ideologies (Heller, 2007; Makoni & Pennycook, 2006). Nevertheless, Jørgensen, Karrebæk, Madsen, and Møller (2016) demonstrate that such a separation makes sense in people's language experience. Languages are, after all, sociolinguistic signs and the use of certain features connected to a language code can index specific meanings (Blommaert, 2005). Thus, for speakers and writers, separations and distinctions have real consequences, for instance, of feeling included or excluded, empowered or disempowered (Busch, 2012).

In research on academic writing from a translanguaging perspective, hereafter referred to as "translingual writing" (Canagarajah, 2016, p. 26; Pavlenko, 2014), researchers have looked at the possibilities and consequences of utilising multilingual writers' resources (Horner, Lu, Royster, & Trimbur, 2011). This body of work considers mainly combinations of language codes and language varieties (Draya-Hansen, Barfod, & Schwarz, 2017). A seminal example is Canagarajah's (2011) study of a student's "codemeshing" in her academic writing, that is, her strategic inclusion of Arabic language features in her English coursework. In recent work on pedagogic implementations of translingual writing, Canagarajah (2016) recognises the need to include translanguaging of registers, that is variation in language use according to domain (Lillis, 2013), when he describes how students "meshed different texts [in standard English] (from children's literature, popular discourses, and academic register) to develop translinguality" (p. 270). Going beyond the level of the text, Van der Walt (2013) observes translanguaging in the language practices multilingual students engage in when composing their texts. These studies highlight how translingual writing is both "identity work" (Lillis, 2013, p. 124) and ideological statement.

In sum, approaching students' academic writing in multilingual settings from a translanguaging perspective entails that the attention shifts from the transfer of genre knowledge to the negotiation of the writer's linguistic repertoires (Canagarajah, 2006). These linguistic repertoires are labelled multilingual to distinguish this perspective from monolingual views of separate language codes. Multilingual repertoires, as used in this article, not only include the knowledge of and ability to use features associated with two or more language codes but also features associated with distinct registers. The shift in perspective from stable language systems to individuals' linguistic repertoires allows to take into account the role of linguistic ideology and identity work when investigating the development of academic writing and genre knowledge. A useful analytical framework that connects these aspects systematically is