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Translanguaging: Why Bahasa Rojak is The Secret to Mastering English

**RUHIL NADIAH ABU BAKAR, NOOR SHAHARIAH SALEH,
NURUL SYAFAWANI HALIM & SHARINA SALMI AZMI**

UiTM CAWANGAN NEGERI SEMBILAN KAMPUS SEREMBAN

For decades, the sound of "*Bahasa Rojak*," or code-mixing, in a Malaysian classroom has been met with a teacher's frown or a sharp "English only!" rule. Traditionally, we have been taught that mixing languages in the learning process is a sign of a weak mind. Nevertheless, as we conclude the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2013), a revolutionary research trend is turning this old taboo into a pedagogical term called **Translanguaging**. Translanguaging can be defined as the fluid use of speakers' full language repertoire to learn and make meaning, as well as a pedagogical approach to teaching in which educators support this ability, which has gained the interest of various scholars (Cummins, 2019; Canagarajah, 2011; Creese & Blackledge, 2010; García & Wei, 2014). It suggests that our national habit of "mixing" might actually be the key to producing the most fluent English speakers Malaysia has ever seen (García & Wei, 2014).

The Silent Classroom Crisis

If we enter any rural secondary school during an English lesson, we will often find a silent classroom. Students sit with heads bowed, terrified of making a grammatical mistake or being teased or mocked for speaking in broken English. When we force these students into a strict English-Only zone, we are not just teaching a language, but we are unintentionally shutting down their ability to think. According to the Affective Filter Hypothesis, high anxiety and fear of failure act as a mental block that prevents students from absorbing new information (Krashen, 1982). Banning their first language appears to remove the only means they have to connect to their second language.

Introducing: The "Brain Bridge" Strategy

To help students utilise both languages in effective language learning, there is a concept known as Pedagogical Translanguaging. We can think of it as a scaffold in building a house. As Baker and Wright (2021) explain, the bilingual brain does not function as two separate compartments but as one integrated system. So, to build a tall, sturdy English "house," we need the scaffolding of one's native language to reach the high points. Once the house is finished, one can take down the scaffolding. However, if you try to build the roof without any support, the whole structure collapses.

How a "Translingual" Classroom works:

Stage	Focus	Process	Goal
1. The Spark	Native Language (L1)	Students discuss complex topics (e.g., climate change and social ethics) in their most comfortable language.	To unlock high-level creative and critical thinking without linguistic barriers.
2. The Bridge	Linguistic Mix	Students draft outlines and main points using a strategic mix of languages to ensure logical flow (Wei, 2018).	To organise thoughts and bridge the gap between conceptual understanding and English expression.
3. The Polish	Target Language (English)	With teacher scaffolding, students "translate" and refine their mixed-language drafts into formal, English-only outputs.	To produce high-quality, academic English essays ready for assessment or the SPM.

Lessons from the 2025 SPM Results

The data from the recent **SPM 2025** examinations tells a compelling story. In schools where teachers allowed strategic language mixing during the learning phase, the National Average Grade (GPN) showed a significant improvement (MOE, 2025). So instead of struggling to find basic words, these students used their bilingual brains to compare meanings and find synonyms. This approach aligns with the **CEFR Companion Volume**, which now recognises "plurilingual competence"—the ability to call upon multiple languages to solve a problem—as a core 21st-century skill (Council of Europe, 2020).

A Call to Action for 2026 and Beyond

As the Ministry of Education (MOE) begins drafting the next phase of national education policy, the focus must shift from "English Monolingualism" to **"Malaysian Multilingualism."** We must stop shaming students for their code mixing or *Bahasa Rojak* and start teaching them how to use it as a professional tool. The "Brain Bridge" strategy can offer a path toward an inclusive, high-achieving future where every Malaysian student can succeed on the global stage. For future researchers, it is hoped that they will explore the use of translanguaging strategies in language learning to make a real impact in the world.



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