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Translanguaging and agency  
in intercultural education:  
A case study of Chinese  
students in Portuguese  
language

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**Abstract\_** This study examines the roles of translanguaging and learner agency in developing intercultural competencies among Chinese undergraduate students studying Portuguese as an additional language. Using a qualitative case study of students' performance in an intercultural studies course assessment, the research identifies how students strategically employ their multilingual repertoires to overcome linguistic challenges and demonstrate intercultural understanding. Findings highlight translanguaging as an essential strategy in promoting agency, confidence, and intercultural competence in multilingual academic environments.

**Keywords\_** translanguaging; learner agency; intercultural education; multilingualism.

**Contents\_** 1. Introduction. 2. Literature Review. 3. Methodology. 3.1. Participants. 3.2 Data Collection. 3.3 Data Analysis. 3.4. Operationalization and counts. 4. Results. 4.1. Translanguaging as a meaning-making strategy. 4.2. Intercultural understanding through multilingual expression. 4.3. Agency and comfort in a multilingual assessment environment. 5. Discussion. 6. Conclusion. References. Appendixes.

### **Translinguagem e agência do estudante na educação intercultural: Um estudo de caso com estudantes chineses de língua portuguesa**

**Resumo\_** Este estudo examina os papéis da translinguagem e da agência do estudante no desenvolvimento de competências interculturais entre estudantes universitários chineses que estudam português como língua adicional. Utilizando um estudo de caso qualitativo sobre o desempenho dos estudantes em uma avaliação da disciplina de estudos interculturais, a pesquisa identifica como os estudantes empregam estrategicamente seus repertórios multilíngues para superar desafios linguísticos e demonstrar compreensão intercultural. Os resultados destacam a translinguagem como uma estratégia essencial na promoção da agência, da confiança e da competência intercultural em ambientes acadêmicos multilíngues.

**Palavras-chave\_** translinguagem; agência do estudante; educação intercultural; multilinguismo.

**Sumário\_** 1. Introdução. 2. Revisão da Literatura. 3. Metodologia. 3.1. Participantes. 3.2. Coleta de Dados. 3.3. Análise de Dados. 3.4. Operacionalização e contagens. 4. Resultados. 4.1. Translinguagem como estratégia de construção de significados. 4.2. Compreensão intercultural por meio da expressão multilíngue. 4.3. Agência e conforto num ambiente de avaliação multilíngue. 5. Discussão. 6. Conclusão. Referências. Apêndices.

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This research was supported by the Macao Polytechnic University (Research Code: RP/FLT-03/2023).

## 1.

**Introduction**

In recent decades, globalization and the internationalization of education have heightened the importance of intercultural competencies in higher education, particularly in the context of language learning. For Chinese students acquiring Portuguese as an additional language in the non-immersive context of Macau, navigating linguistic and cultural barriers illustrates the complex realities of multilingual education. Learners frequently encounter obstacles such as anxiety and tension stemming from unfamiliar linguistic structures, differing academic expectations, and intercultural contrasts (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; He et al., 2021; Özdemir & Seçkin, 2025). As both Byram (1997) and Deardorff (2006) emphasize, developing intercultural competence requires more than linguistic accuracy; it involves a nuanced understanding of cultural perspectives and behaviors. However, assessing this competence, particularly in formal or summative contexts, presents notable challenges.

Educators are increasingly seeking innovative pedagogical strategies that can facilitate the development of intercultural competencies while addressing the diverse linguistic needs of students. One such approach is translanguaging, defined as the dynamic and fluid use of one's entire linguistic repertoire to make meaning (García & Wei, 2014), has emerged as a transformative pedagogical strategy in multilingual education. As Otheguy et al. (2019: 71) note, "when bilingual speakers translanguage, they transcend named languages by going beyond them". This approach departs from traditional language-learning paradigms that emphasize rigid separation of languages, instead encouraging students to integrate their linguistic resources (Chinese, Portuguese, and English in this context) to enhance comprehension and expression in intercultural settings (Canagarajah, 2011; Lin & He, 2017). By fostering flexible, creative communication, translanguaging aligns with the growing recognition that multilingual competence is not a static mastery of distinct languages, but a dynamic, adaptive skill set suited for globalized environments (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; Li, 2018).

Equally critical is the concept of learner agency, which emphasizes students' active role in shaping their learning strategies and outcomes. Studies suggest that granting students autonomy to draw on their linguistic and cultural backgrounds enables deeper engagement with complex intercultural concepts while mitigating the anxiety associated with high-stakes assessments (Duff, 2012; Miller, 2012; Norton, 2013). The interplay between agency and translanguaging highlights the potential of these approaches to foster not only linguistic proficiency but also intercultural competencies crucial for success in diverse educational contexts.

This study positions translanguaging within the theoretical context of intercultural education, highlighting its transformative potential to foster student empowerment and create inclusive learning environments. By analyzing the translanguaging practices of fourth-year Chinese students enrolled in a Portuguese Studies program during their final examination in an intercultural studies course, this research investigates translanguaging as a strategic tool for effective communication. Furthermore, the study examines how students' deployment of diverse linguistic repertoires demonstrates agency and intercultural competence. The findings underscore critical considerations for assessment design within intercultural education, advocating for approaches that embrace multilingualism and prioritize intercultural comprehension rather than strictly enforcing linguistic accuracy.

By addressing these dimensions, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on translanguaging, agency, and intercultural education (García & Wei, 2014; Canagarajah, 2011; Lin & He, 2017). Ultimately, it underscores the transformative potential of translanguaging in fostering inclusive educational practices that accommodate the diverse needs of multilingual students. Given the absence of a control condition, our claims

concern students' reported experiences and observable practices during the exam; we avoid counterfactual statements about monolingual performance.

## 2.

### Literature Review

Translanguaging, as defined by García and Wei (2014), is the flexible and dynamic use of one's full linguistic repertoire to make meaning, challenging rigid boundaries between named languages. Differently from code-switching, which tends to reinforce existing language boundaries, translanguaging explicitly rejects the separation between languages. Otheguy et al. (2019) clearly distinguish translanguaging from code-switching, defining translanguaging as "the deployment of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages" (p. 3). Such a perspective has significant implications for social justice in bilingual education. While monolingual students typically have unrestricted access to their full linguistic resources during both learning and assessment, bilingual students rarely enjoy the same privilege. This restriction often results in their silence and disengagement from classroom activities and assessment processes. Complementing this view, Baynham and Lee (2019) treat translanguaging not as movement between sealed codes but as open-ended repertoire work, contrasting with goal-oriented models of translation. This helps frame learners' mixed-mode practices as ongoing sense-making rather than departures from target-language use.

This theoretical perspective redefines multilingualism as an integrated practice rather than the parallel use of discrete linguistic systems. It has gained prominence as a pedagogical strategy in multilingual classrooms, enabling learners to draw on their linguistic and cultural resources to enhance understanding and expression (Canagarajah, 2011). The ability of translanguaging to foster linguistic creativity and adaptability is particularly critical in globalized contexts, where complex intercultural interactions demand flexible communication skills (Li, 2018). For classroom analysis, Baynham and Lee (2019) conceptualize translanguaging as repertoire-based assembly across verbal, visual, gestural and embodied modes, locally occasioned by context and task affordances.

Recent studies have highlighted the role of translanguaging in intercultural education, particularly within transnational and English-medium educational contexts. Ou and Gu (2018), in their investigation of intercultural communication among Chinese students at a Sino-US joint venture university in China, show that translanguaging facilitates students' negotiation of linguistic diversity and supports the construction of an empowered multilingual Chinese identity. According to the authors, translanguaging enables these students to mobilize their linguistic resources, shifting from "the vulnerable ESL speaker positioning in intercultural communication to seeing themselves as integration of diverse linguistic and cultural elements and realizing how their linguistic repertoire can help them function well in this multilingual and multicultural setting" (Ou & Gu, 2018, p. 12). Thus, translanguaging serves as a meaningful counterpoint to dominant monolingual ideologies prevalent in higher education contexts.

Similarly, Fang and Xu (2022) emphasize that the integration of translanguaging with Global Englishes offers a powerful means to promote equitable and inclusive English language education. Rather than treating translanguaging and Global Englishes as separate frameworks, they argue for their conflation to confront monolingual ideologies and foster a critical, decolonizing pedagogy. As they note, "both paradigms should be recognised and incorporated into current English language education... to promote equality from the critical pedagogy perspective and the decolonising pedagogy perspective" (p. 10). Their conceptual analysis highlights the potential of combining translanguaging and Global Englishes to empower learners to draw on their full

linguistic and semiotic repertoires, not only to enhance communicative competence but also to challenge native-speakerism and linguistic imperialism. In doing so, translanguaging emerges as a transformative practice that supports the formation of hybrid identities and more just, inclusive approaches to intercultural communication and English language teaching.

To situate our case more broadly, we draw on Baynham and Lee's (2019) views that translation can be understood as an enactment of translanguaging—mobilizing one semiotic repertoire across perceived language boundaries to achieve meaning, stance taking and identity work. From this lens, students' strategic moves between Portuguese, English and Chinese are not "departures" from target language use but evidence of repertoire wide sensemaking. This view strengthens the pedagogical rationale for assessment designs that value crosslinguistic resources in intercultural learning.

The implications of translanguaging extend beyond linguistic adaptability; it also challenges dominant monolingual ideologies by creating equitable spaces for communication. Helm and Dabre (2017) explored how translanguaging transformed power dynamics in a "contact zone", fostering mutual understanding and disrupting deficit-oriented narratives about language learners. Building on these insights, Lin and He (2017) highlight translanguaging as an effective tool for mediating cultural knowledge in content and language-integrated learning contexts. By challenging entrenched norms, translanguaging promotes inclusivity and supports students' multilingual identities, making it an essential component of modern educational practices.

The concept of agency provides another critical dimension to understanding the dynamics of translanguaging in multilingual education. Agency reflects the active role of learners in shaping their linguistic and communicative practices, allowing them to make strategic choices in response to contextual demands (Duff, 2012). This shift from passive language acquisition to active, situated practice empowers learners to navigate complex academic and intercultural challenges. Norton (2013) highlights the role of identity in agency, showing that learners who perceive themselves as legitimate participants in a linguistic community are more likely to exhibit autonomy. Wang and Shen (2024) further demonstrate that translanguaging in intercultural communication classes enhances student engagement and competence, even in English-as-a-medium-of-instruction settings that often reinforce monolingual norms.

Intercultural competencies, encompassing the skills, attitudes, and knowledge required for effective interaction across cultural boundaries, provide another layer to this interconnected framework. Deardorff (2006) identifies critical components of intercultural competencies, including cultural self-awareness, openness, and adaptability in communication strategies. Translanguaging emerges as a vital tool for demonstrating and fostering these competencies. García and Wei (2014) argue that translanguaging practices enable learners to integrate cultural insights into their communication, fostering a deeper understanding of intercultural dynamics. Zhu (2015) expands on this perspective, suggesting that translanguaging allows learners to reconceptualize cultural identities and navigate intercultural complexities beyond static cultural binaries. Recent research highlights how pedagogical translanguaging practices can enhance students' intercultural communication competence (ICC) by encouraging the integrated use of their full linguistic and cultural repertoires. Wang and Shen (2024), in a study of an English-as-a-medium-of-instruction (EMI) intercultural communication class, demonstrate that translanguaging was strategically employed by the teacher for various purposes, including concept clarification, engagement monitoring, contextualization of knowledge, and fostering positive classroom relationships. These practices not only supported students' development of ICC but also received largely positive responses from students, despite some concerns about conflicting expectations in EMI settings. This aligns with Byram's (1997) assertion that multilingual learners are uniquely positioned to critically reflect on cultural differences and similarities, an essential process for developing intercultural competence. Guo and Xu (2023) similarly observed that translanguaging during virtual

intercultural exchanges enabled students to navigate multimodal and multilingual resources effectively. The interconnectedness of translanguaging, agency, and intercultural competencies highlights the transformative potential of these practices in multilingual and intercultural education. Translanguaging facilitates meaning-making while empowering learners to assert their agency and develop critical intercultural skills. This interplay underscores the importance of pedagogical approaches that value and integrate the diverse linguistic and cultural resources students bring to the learning process. As the reviewed literature shows, fostering linguistic diversity and adopting inclusive educational strategies are essential for preparing students to navigate the complexities of today's multilingual and multicultural realities.

### 3.

#### Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study design, following the methodological guidelines outlined by Yin (2018), to explore how fourth-year students enrolled in a Portuguese Studies degree program utilize translanguaging, demonstrate agency, and reflect intercultural competencies during a high-stakes academic assessment. Case study research is particularly well-suited for investigating contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined. In line with this rationale, the current study seeks to generate an in-depth, holistic understanding of students' language practices and intercultural reflections in a complex academic environment. Multiple sources of evidence, such as classroom observations, student-produced texts, and reflective interviews, are incorporated to ensure data triangulation and construct validity. The qualitative approach allows for rich, context-specific insights into the dynamic and situated nature of translanguaging in intercultural education, as also emphasized in recent studies on multilingual language learning.

#### 3.1. Participants

The participants were 10 fourth-year students enrolled in the Portuguese Studies degree program at a university in Macao SAR, China: nine Chinese students and one Filipina student who completed her prior schooling in a local Chinese-medium school giving her sustained exposure to Cantonese/Mandarin in addition to Tagalog (L1). Each student completed the second undergraduate year through an exchange program in Portugal, which provided extended immersion in Portuguese-speaking academic and social contexts. The cohort had progressed through an intercultural curriculum integrating linguistic and cultural dimensions across coursework. Their advanced proficiency in Portuguese (as assessed by the program's end-of-semester placement) and routine navigation of multilingual environments made this group well suited for investigating translanguaging practices and intercultural competences, in line with prior work on multilingual learners in real academic and intercultural contexts (e.g., Canagarajah, 2011; García & Wei, 2014).

The study adhered to institutional ethical standards. Participants received written information about the study's aims and procedures, provided informed consent, and were assured anonymity and the right to withdraw at any time. Because the course instructor is this manuscript's first author, we mitigated bias by (i) finalizing course grades before any coding, (ii) anonymizing all student work before analysis, and (iii) maintaining reflexive memos throughout.

Table 1 summarizes each participant's self-reported first language(s), English proficiency (self-rated on CEFR bands), Portuguese level (program's end-of-semester placement), and any other languages reported.

**Table 1.** Linguistic background of participants

<b>ID</b>	<b>L1</b> <i>(self-report)</i>	<b>English level</b> <i>(self-rated CEFR)</i>	<b>Portuguese level</b> <i>(end-semester placement)</i>	<b>Other languages</b> <i>(self-report)</i>
S01	Mandarin	C1	Advanced	—
S02	Mandarin	B2	Advanced	—
S03	Mandarin	B2	Advanced	—
S04	Cantonese	B2	Intermediate	—
S05	Mandarin	B2	Advanced	—
S06	Cantonese	B1	Intermediate	—
S07	Cantonese	B1	Intermediate	Japanese (basic)
S08	Tagalog	C1	Intermediate	Mandarin, Cantonese
S09	Mandarin	B2	Advanced	—
S10	Cantonese	B1	Intermediate	Korean (basic)

### 3.2. Data Collection

Data for this study were primarily derived from the analysis of students' written responses to the final exam in the "Intercultural Studies" course, supplemented by contextual observations during the exam period. The exam served as a high-stakes assessment, requiring students to engage with complex intercultural scenarios and demonstrate their understanding of intercultural competencies. Recognizing that students in their fourth year of study faced significant pressure to achieve high marks –marks that could ensure their eligibility for postgraduate studies abroad– the exam was designed to mitigate anxiety and foster authentic engagement.

To encourage fuller expression of ideas, responses were primarily in Portuguese, and students could also use English when needed for precision (see Appendix A). This approach aimed to empower students to draw on their full linguistic repertoire, facilitating deeper engagement with the exam's intercultural themes. Following the exam, all 10 participating students were interviewed to reflect on their experiences, including how they felt about using multiple languages during the assessment. These interviews (see Appendix B) provided additional insights into the students' perspectives on translanguaging and their ability to navigate linguistic and cultural complexities.

The three-hour exam period allowed the instructor to note contextual behaviors, such as moments of hesitation or linguistic shifts, as part of the broader examination experience. These informal observations complemented the analysis of written responses by providing a contextual understanding of how students navigated the high-pressure assessment environment.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

We conducted reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) following Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021), proceeding through familiarization, generative coding, theme development and refinement, and analytic writing. We combined deductive coding (a priori domains: translanguaging practices; intercultural competence per Deardorff; learner



agency) with inductive codes emerging from the data. A transparent audit trail was maintained (codebook, memos, iteration logs). The working codebook appears in Appendix C. In addition, we drew on Baynham and Lee's (2019) moment analysis to relate micro-episodes of semiotic action (e.g., a switch, gesture, register shift) to broader, polycentric evaluative regimes, supporting close reading of exam scripts and reflections while linking local practices to circulating ideologies.

Guided by García and Wei (2014) and Li (2018), we treated translanguaging as fluid mobilization of the full repertoire. Coding traced how students deployed Portuguese, English, and occasionally Chinese to construct meaning, clarify ideas, and negotiate complex academic content.

Intercultural competencies were examined through Deardorff's (2006) framework (attitudes, skills, knowledge), assessing the extent to which responses articulated nuanced understandings of intercultural dynamics (e.g., critical reflection, empathy, and openness), while reading linguistic choices as indices of intercultural awareness.

To analyze student agency, we drew on Norton (2013) (identity/investment), van Lier (2008) (ecological agency and mediation), and Gao (2010) (strategic learner agency), focusing on how learners navigated affordances and constraints of the exam setting and appropriated languages to assert meaning on their own terms. Consistent with an ecological stance, we attended to teacher mediation—recognizing, scaffolding, and amplifying agentive moves in situ.

Finally, following Canagarajah (2011), we compared students' multilingual strategies with the teacher's grading practices to assess whether translanguaging and intercultural expression were acknowledged and valued within the program's multilingual instructional context.

This multi-dimensional approach clarifies how translanguaging, agency, and intercultural competence interact in academic performance and underscores pedagogical and evaluative implications for linguistically and culturally diverse higher-education classrooms.

### 3.4. Operationalization and counts

We defined a translanguaging instance as the insertion of a word, phrase, or sentence from a language different from the matrix language of the clause/sentence, or an explicit metalinguistic gloss drawing on two languages (e.g., a parenthetical translation or side-by-side terms).

Counting proceeded at the script level under a contiguous-segment rule: embedded English tokens within a Portuguese clause counted as one instance for each uninterrupted segment; brief bilingual glosses (e.g., X (Y)) counted as one instance; and longer stretches produced in another language counted as a single instance until a switch back to the matrix language occurred.

Proper nouns and platform/brand names were excluded unless they functioned as meaning-bearing glosses; URLs, emojis, and numerals were likewise excluded. Ambiguities were resolved in a second pass by re-examining the full script context.

Because scripts vary in length, we estimated words per script as (number of lines) × (7 words per line) and report length-normalized rates as instances per 100 words.

In Appendix D, we provide a worked example that illustrates how codes were applied (definitions, labels, and bilingual excerpts). This table is illustrative and not used for quantitative counts.



## 4.

## Results

## 4.1. Translanguaging as a meaning-making strategy

Translanguaging was observed for all students (10/10). In total, 312 instances were coded across 6,310 words, yielding 4.94 instances per 100 words. Per student (N=10), we had the following results: M=31.2, SD=7.7, median=29.5, IQR=10.5. Table 2 summarizes cohort-level results.

Table 2. Translanguaging frequency across exam responses

Metric	Value
Students with $\geq 1$ instance	10/10=100%
Total words (all scripts)	6,310
Total instances (all scripts)	312
Instances per 100 words (pooled)	4.94
Mean instances per student (SD)	31.2 (7.7)
Median instances per student (IQR)	29.5 (10.5)

Translanguaging frequency did not vary systematically by proficiency (see Table 3): Advanced participants presented an average of 5.13 translanguaging instances per 100 words vs. Intermediate participants having an average of 4.84 translanguaging instances per 100 words. Intermediate students showed greater dispersion (range 3.49-6.74), including both the lowest and highest individual rates. Overall, proficiency does not appear to be the primary driver of translanguaging frequency.

Table 3. Per-student translanguaging counts and length-normalised rates (instances per 100 words) by Portuguese proficiency level

ID	Portuguese level	Instances	Words	Instances / 100 words
S01	Advanced	38	610	6.23
S02	Advanced	42	850	4.94
S03	Advanced	26	520	5.00
S04	Intermediate	22	630	3.49
S05	Advanced	30	600	5.00
S06	Intermediate	44	770	5.71
S07	Intermediate	29	430	6.74
S08	Intermediate	32	700	4.57
S09	Advanced	26	580	4.48
S10	Intermediate	23	620	3.71

Qualitatively, students used translanguaging as a tool for making meaning and completing the exam tasks. In their written answers, they naturally alternated between Portuguese and English to express complex ideas or fill lexical gaps. For instance, S08 wrote about her family story: “A vida deles foi muito *difficult* e eu aprendi a ser *thankful* porque a vida em Macau é melhor.” [“Their life was very hard and I learned to be thankful because life in Macau is better.”]. In this sentence, the student switches to English for words like “difficult” and “thankful” using her full linguistic repertoire to convey precise meaning. Another exam response, by S07, on intercultural experiences combined languages mid-sentence: “...eu tenho o *knowledge* sobre *different* culturas and *I can apply that experience* quando comunico com pessoas de fora” [“...I have knowledge about different cultures and I can apply that experience when communicating with outsiders.”]. Here, the English words “knowledge” and “different cultures” are embedded within a Portuguese sentence, suggesting that the student found these terms more exact or accessible in English. This pattern of translanguaging appeared frequently, indicating that students strategically drew on whichever language best conveyed their intent.

As S10 explained in her post-exam interview, “All of the answers are written based on Portuguese thinking. English plays a role as a supporter. When I forget some words of Portuguese, I use a word in English to replace it.” Indeed, several students noted that certain concepts or terminology were easier to express in English. S01 gave the example of “cyber bullying”, reasoning that “these particular words were created in the English language” and thus came more naturally to her in English during the exam.

While we did not include a control condition, participants’ reflections suggest that being able to draw on more than one language helped them articulate ideas more fully during the exam.

#### 4.2. Intercultural understanding through multilingual expression

The content of students’ responses and their reflections suggest that using multiple languages enabled deeper intercultural expression and understanding. Many exam prompts related to cultural experiences, and students answered by drawing on their diverse backgrounds with the help of two languages. S08 described how interacting with peers from different countries broadened her perspective, writing:

As minhas *interactions and conversations* na escola secundária com pessoas de diferentes nacionalidades foram muito importantes porque eu sinto que os meus horizontes foram *widely open*. *I believe intercultural competence is an ongoing skill that requires continuous development*. Nunca deixamos de aprender e *improve*.

The translanguaging here reflects the content: her linguistic choices mirror the blending of cultures she is describing. By using both Portuguese and English, she signals an ability to think across cultural concepts: the Portuguese parts situate her experience in the context of her Portuguese studies, while the English insertions evoke global or cross-cultural terms.

The student’s multilingual response demonstrates how code-switching enhances intercultural reflection. By blending Portuguese for personal experiences (“horizontes foram *widely open*”) and English for broader concepts (“intercultural competence is an ongoing skill”), they highlight the dynamic nature of cultural learning.

In general, students’ bilingual answers often referenced culturally specific ideas that benefit from cross-language explanation. For example, S01 noted in the interview that certain Portuguese terms carry cultural meanings that are hard to translate; she mentioned “the word ‘saudade,’” stating that it’s easier to understand in Portuguese but when explaining it to someone from a different culture, she would use “another language (the mother language) to describe it... to make them understand.” This highlights how translanguaging can

bridge cultural concepts: the student recognizes that some ideas need to be expressed in another language to be fully grasped by others.

Likewise, S04 described a real-life conversation with a Portuguese professor about football, where she “mixed English and Portuguese to exchange our opinions” because certain sports terms (like “off-side” or “goalkeeper”) came to mind more readily in English. These examples from the reflections reinforce that students perceive multilingual communication as integral to intercultural understanding. In the exam setting, having the freedom to use both languages allowed them to mirror these real-world intercultural communication practices. S07 explicitly connected the exam format to authentic interaction, saying that using two languages in the exam reflects “real-life intercultural communication scenarios” and helped her think of ways to explain ideas to different people.

Overall, this theme reveals that translanguaging in the exam did more than help with vocabulary – it enabled students to express intercultural knowledge and empathy. They not only conveyed facts or answers but also illustrated their understanding of cultural nuances through multilingual narratives. In doing so, they demonstrated intercultural competence, using language as a tool to connect different cultural references and to show awareness of an audience beyond a single linguistic community. The multilingual expressions in their writing became evidence of intercultural learning, as students comfortably referenced diverse cultural contexts (Macau, international schools, global concepts of friendship and media, etc.) in whichever language best fit the context. In short, translanguaging provided a medium for students to articulate intercultural insights in a nuanced way that a single language might not have allowed.

#### **4.3. Agency and comfort in a multilingual assessment environment**

The data indicate that allowing translanguaging in the exam empowered students and increased their comfort level. Both the exam responses and the post-exam interviews reflect a sense of student agency –that is, students felt in control of how they expressed their knowledge. Many described feeling more confident and less anxious because they were not constrained to one language. “During the exam, using two languages makes me feel more confident and comfortable,” S02 wrote plainly in her reflection, capturing a sentiment echoed by most participants.

Students reported that being able to switch languages gave them the freedom to ensure their answers truly conveyed what they intended, rather than being stuck searching for a word in Portuguese while the clock ticked. In one reflection, S10 noted that having the option to use English as a fallback “made it easier for me to answer the questions... and it gives me more room for error.” In other words, she felt a safety net—if she didn’t know a term in Portuguese or was unsure about phrasing, she could say it in English and move on, thus maintaining the flow of her ideas.

This flexibility contributed to a greater sense of control over the exam situation. Indeed, when asked if switching languages made her feel more in control of her responses, S05 answered, “Yes... my overall writing mindset is still based on Portuguese, [with] English as a substitute for words or expressions I can’t remember...” By actively managing two codes, students exercised agency in how they constructed responses, rather than feeling at the mercy of their second-language limitations. Crucially, the multilingual format also reduced performance anxiety.

Several students commented that the bilingual option lowered their stress and allowed them to write with more confidence. In their answers, S07 even addressed the experience directly, writing: “When the teacher allows me to use more than a language in the exam or test and it’s not so picky about my Portuguese, sinto

mais confiante..." – "I feel more confident" – "sinto que o professor também está a praticar her intercultural competencies." This statement from an exam response reveals two things: first, the student's boost in confidence, and second, her recognition that the teacher's flexibility was itself an act of intercultural openness.

The students felt validated and "heard" when they were permitted to use all their language resources; this validation likely contributed to their comfort and willingness to express themselves more fully. Moreover, the agency afforded by translanguaging had motivational effects—students described feeling more engaged and willing to take risks in elaborating their answers because they knew they could find a way to say what they meant. S07 mentioned during the interview that using both languages helped her "express [her] thoughts more clearly," and S09 said it "made it very comfortable for me... The relationship of the two languages is complementarity." This complementary use of languages gave students a pragmatic sense of control: they could draw on "two kinds of language thinking," as S01 put it, to organize and present their answers.

It is worth noting that alongside these positive outcomes, a few challenges were identified by the students – though they did not outweigh the benefits for most. A couple of students (S01 and S02) reflected that mixing languages sometimes led to minor confusion or concern about accuracy. For example, S01 admitted that while translanguaging helped her communicate more clearly, it resulted in "less correct usage of grammar, vocabulary and spelling" in Portuguese. S02 noted the challenge of maintaining strict grammatical rules when switching, and one wrote that "some words I [for]got in two languages", pointing to the occasional phenomenon of a concept being elusive in both codes under exam pressure.

These challenges reflect the complexity of managing two languages at once. However, despite such difficulties, no student indicated a desire to revert to a monolingual exam format. In fact, when asked if they would want this flexibility in future exams, the students unanimously responded in favor. "I would be so happy if [we] have this flexibility. It's easier to make my answer right," S06 wrote, while S04 simply stated, "Yes... I prefer [it] in the future." Even S01, who worried about grammar, acknowledged that using both languages made her answers "more clear," if not perfectly correct. The consensus was that the gains in understanding, expression, and confidence far outweighed the drawbacks.

This approach can be particularly beneficial in a context where stress, competition, and extreme pressure characterize the educational journey of Chinese students, often resulting in notable consequences for their health (Cheng & Lin, 2023; Wu et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2015). The intense academic demands placed on these students can lead to increased anxiety, depression and burnout, making it essential to alleviate some of this pressure. Methods that promote flexibility and acceptance of students' linguistic and cultural repertoires acknowledge the diverse backgrounds of learners and foster a more inclusive atmosphere. Educators can help mitigate the stress associated with traditional learning environments and encourage greater participation and engagement in the classroom.

This approach can enhance student participation in class, particularly in terms of oral expression. Several authors argue that the concept of "face" in Chinese culture significantly influences the classroom environment and language learning specifically, as students may feel inhibited to participate (Chang, 2008; Jin & Cortazzi, 2011; Liu et al., 2014). Errors or perceived lack of proficiency can traditionally be interpreted as a loss of face for the student, contributing to their introversion and reluctance to expose their difficulties or weaknesses. Through a translingual perspective, the classroom atmosphere can become more motivating, allowing students to fill gaps in the foreign language in a manner that is both open and inclusive.

In other words, giving students agency to use multiple languages resulted in a more comfortable assessment environment, where they felt empowered to demonstrate their knowledge. The translanguaging approach

transformed the exam from a test of Portuguese language proficiency alone into a more authentic assessment of content learning and critical thinking, with students actively steering their own use of language as a tool. The outcome was not only richer answers, but also students who felt supported and in control during the evaluation process.

## 5.

### Discussion

The findings from this case study align closely with recent scholarship on translanguaging pedagogy, student agency, and intercultural competence in multilingual education. In line with our observations, contemporary research emphasizes that enabling students to draw on their entire linguistic repertoire can enhance comprehension and build confidence. For instance, Akkuş and Ataş (2023) found that translanguaging “is an effective practice that students can utilize in classroom discussions and exam situations where they need to discuss content” (p. 509), and “as a cognitive strategy can facilitate critical thinking and knowledge construction in a classroom with students with diverse linguistic repertoires” (p. 509). Their findings support a broader reconceptualization of language proficiency within a translanguaging framework, where students’ abilities may vary depending on the nature and length of the text being analyzed. Rather than perceiving translanguaging as a deficiency, it should be understood as a resource that empowers learners to articulate complex ideas, including in academic contexts. Language educators, therefore, should acknowledge the pedagogical value of translanguaging and consider its integration into both teaching and assessment practices. Embracing students’ diverse linguistic resources can lead to more inclusive and effective educational approaches that support deeper reflection and language development.

Contemporary Portuguese often admits English-origin terms (e.g., email, online, playlist, password, software, brainstorming), and several scripts reflected brief vocabulary-negotiation moves around such items. We interpret these not as departures from task focus but as context-specific repertoire work. More broadly, participants’ comments suggest that English-mediated resources are routinely available in students’ communicative lives, which may help explain the prominence of English in their translanguaging during the exam.

In our study, students’ ability to mix Portuguese and English clearly helped them grasp and convey complex content (comprehension) and made them more willing to elaborate (confidence and engagement). This convergence between our case and the literature suggests that translanguaging in assessment is not merely a theoretical idea but a practical strategy that can improve educational outcomes. The Chinese students in Portuguese Studies effectively accessed different linguistic features to enhance communication by utilizing both languages as needed, which aligns with the definition of translanguaging in bilingual education research.

The bilingual exam format allowed them to deploy all their communicative resources for meaning-making, a process that matches what Velasco and García (2014) describe as a “self-regulating mechanism” in writing whereby bilingual learners use translanguaging to plan and produce text. In our case, this self-regulation was evident as students navigated around unknown words or expressions by switching languages, thereby taking control of their learning process. One of the most significant implications of our findings is the role of translanguaging in fostering student agency. Traditional monolingual assessments often position bilingual students as passive takers of a test in a second language, sometimes rendering them voiceless or constrained. In contrast, our translanguaging approach positioned students as active agents who could leverage their strengths. This is in line with García and Otheguy’s (2019) pedagogical stance that translanguaging “focuses on building the agency of the learner to language in order to act and mean as a bilingual” (p. 28).

Rather than being bound by the “power of named languages” and their hierarchies, students in our study had the autonomy to decide how to express an idea – a choice that many exercised with discernment (e.g. writing the bulk of an answer in Portuguese but code-switching for a specific term or phrase in English). Granting this autonomy made the assessment more student-centered. Our participants’ feedback – describing how they felt more in control and could organize their answers more easily – attests to this sense of ownership. This resonates with broader calls in the literature to reconceptualize assessments as opportunities for learners to use language rather than be tested on a single language. In a very real sense, the bilingual exam created what Wei (2011) would call a “translanguaging space,” which refers to a dynamic social and cognitive environment where students bring together different aspects of their personal histories, cultural backgrounds, and lived experiences. It goes beyond simply switching between languages—instead, students use their full linguistic repertoires to create meaning, express identity, and navigate between different cultural and linguistic norms. Within this space, their diverse knowledge and experiences are not compartmentalized but integrated into a coherent and meaningful performance, allowing them to take ownership of their learning and engage more deeply with the world around them.

The students’ personal histories and strengths in this case study (e.g. a Filipina student’s familiarity with English and Tagalog, or a mainland Chinese student’s grounding in Mandarin and English) all became relevant in that performance. Such a space validates their identities and ways of knowing, which is empowering. Our study adds further evidence that translanguaging can activate learner agency, allowing students to use language proactively as a tool for thought and expression rather than being limited by what they do not know in the target language.

In terms of intercultural competence, the integration of translanguaging in the exam provided a rich avenue for students to demonstrate and develop this competence. Intercultural education emphasizes understanding and navigating across cultural perspectives, and language is a fundamental part of that process. By writing in two languages, students were effectively operating in multiple cultural-linguistic frameworks at once, which may deepen their intercultural reflection. The content of their responses showed nuanced cultural awareness – for example, discussing how a teacher should be kind to everyone (a universally positive norm) or how different their life in Macau is compared to their parents’ life in another country. These insights were often conveyed through a mix of languages, implicitly highlighting that certain ideas “live” in certain languages or cultures. This reflects the idea that translanguaging can bridge cultural gaps. According to Javaid et al. (2025), translanguaging supports learners in engaging with their entire linguistic repertoire to make sense of content in a dynamic and interactive learning environment. Integrating multiple languages helps students navigate and connect diverse cultural and linguistic perspectives. This approach facilitates deeper understanding and promotes inclusion by valuing linguistic diversity and helping bridge the gap between language learning and cultural identity.

In our case, students used multilingual discourse to connect with culturally diverse content (such as Western concepts of “cyberbullying” or Portuguese notions of “saudade”) and to make that content their own. Moreover, the findings align with quantitative research by Gu et al. (2024), who found that students with instructors supporting translanguaging reported greater openness, flexibility, and intercultural awareness. In our study, one student explicitly recognized the teacher’s role in practicing intercultural competencies by allowing a multilingual exam. This indicates that students see language flexibility as tied to cultural openness – the teacher’s translanguaging stance modeled intercultural respect, which the student in turn appreciated and internalized.

There is a pedagogical implication here: incorporating translanguaging in assessments might not only assess intercultural learning but actually promote it, by prompting students to draw connections between languages



and cultures as they formulate their answers. It transforms the exam into a learning experience that builds intercultural communicative competence. For example, when a student explained an idea in Portuguese and then supplemented it in English (or vice versa), she was effectively practicing how to communicate an idea to different audiences – a key skill in intercultural communication. From a broader assessment perspective, our case study supports the argument that traditional monolingual tests may underestimate bilingual learners' content knowledge, whereas translanguaging offers a more equitable and authentic gauge. Scholars of multilingual education have long critiqued the monolingual bias in assessment. García (2009) emphasizes the importance of assessment practices that acknowledge and support bilingual students' ability to express their understanding through all the languages they use. Rooted in a heteroglossic view of bilingualism, this approach encourages educators to adopt translanguaging strategies to enhance students' grasp of academic content while simultaneously developing their oral and written expression across languages. When applied to assessment, translanguaging enables students to engage in more sophisticated and flexible language use, allowing them to demonstrate their knowledge and competencies in the language(s) that best support their learning process.

The success of our students in conveying sophisticated ideas when allowed to translanguage is a clear illustration of this principle. Had these same students been required to write only in Portuguese, some might have produced halting answers or simplified ideas, not for lack of understanding but for lack of linguistic means. By contrast, the bilingual format enabled them to demonstrate higher-order thinking (such as drawing analogies, giving examples, critiquing a scenario) without being impeded by second-language limitations. This is in line with the concept of "validity" in assessment – the exam was more valid as a measure of intercultural learning because it was not confounded by language proficiency barriers.

Additionally, our findings speak to the pedagogical value of translanguaging in assessment. Allowing multiple languages can transform an assessment into a learning opportunity in itself. Students in our study remarked that using both languages actually helped them think more critically about the content. This suggests that translanguaging on the exam not only measured what students knew, but also enhanced their cognitive processing during the test (by enabling critical thought in whichever language felt most natural for a given idea). Such outcomes echo the idea that students choose what makes the most sense to communicate based on the cultural and social context – in this case, the context being an exam setting where content understanding was key. When we, as educators, permit that choice, we likely obtain a more complete picture of student learning.

Of course, there are important considerations and limitations to discuss. One consideration is how to balance language development goals with content assessment. A few students in our study worried that using English might hamper their Portuguese accuracy or development. This is a valid concern: if students over-rely on L2-1 (English) for convenience, they might invest less effort in learning expressions in L2-2 (Portuguese). However, the pedagogical literature suggests that this risk can be mitigated by thoughtful task design and scaffolding (Sah & Kubota, 2022). For instance, teachers can allow translanguaging in demonstrating knowledge while still encouraging students to expand their academic vocabulary in the target language through feedback and revision.

In our case, the instructor's approach was to grade content knowledge and intercultural insight primarily, while also noting language errors for improvement – an approach that could be refined in future iterations (e.g. perhaps providing a glossary of key Portuguese terms so that students are encouraged to incorporate them). Another limitation is that our sample was small and context-specific. These students are predominantly Chinese native speakers with a reasonable command of English as well as some Portuguese they started learning at their first college year; results might differ with students who are allowed to use a first language



that the teacher does not know, for example. We must be cautious in generalizing. Nonetheless, our findings resonate with broader research in different contexts, suggesting some transferability of insights.

This single case with a small cohort (n=10) lacked a control condition and quantitative power; consequently, we refrain from causal claims. Nevertheless, thick description, an explicit audit trail, and public appendices (protocols/ instructions/ codebook) support transferability.

## 6.

### Conclusion

This case study of Chinese students in a Portuguese Studies program demonstrates the educational value of incorporating translanguaging into assessment. Three key insights emerged: first, translanguaging appeared to enable students to express complex ideas and content knowledge more effectively than a strictly monolingual format, based on their reports and the observed scripts. Second, drawing on multiple languages allowed for richer intercultural reflection and communication, aligning with real-world multilingual practices. Third, allowing students to use their full linguistic repertoire enhanced their sense of agency, reduced anxiety, and encouraged deeper engagement.

Despite occasional concerns about grammatical accuracy, students overwhelmingly preferred the flexibility offered by translanguaging, highlighting its role in promoting confidence and inclusivity. These findings suggest that assessments designed with a translanguaging approach can more authentically reflect students' learning and intercultural competencies.

For educators, this means rethinking assessment practices to align with the realities of multilingual classrooms. Strategic and guided integration of translanguaging—particularly in content-based or intercultural courses—can provide more equitable opportunities for students to demonstrate their understanding. Moreover, such assessments support language development and offer valuable insights for instructional planning.

At an institutional level, adopting translanguaging-friendly assessments signals a broader commitment to linguistic diversity and intercultural learning. Future research should further explore the long-term impact of such practices across languages, disciplines, and educational settings. Ultimately, educators can foster a more inclusive, empowering, and pedagogically sound environment that prepares students to thrive in a multilingual and multimodal world.

In the particular context of Macau, where the Portuguese language still retains a traditional and colonial identity with sparse openness to contributions from other languages and even variants of Portuguese itself, the practice of translanguaging from an intercultural perspective helps to express the vibrancy and diversity of the society we live in, as well as the linguistic systems at play. In this sense, translanguaging methods serve as an affirmation and empowerment for Chinese students and a foundation for dialogue and understanding, aiming not to exclude or discriminate based purely on linguistic criteria.

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## Appendix A — Exam Instructions

Students were briefed on these instructions prior to the exam, and the same instructions were reiterated at the start of the exam.

- Responses should be primarily in Portuguese; English and/or Chinese may be used when necessary for precision (e.g., terminology, short clarifications).
- The exam assesses intercultural competence (attitudes, knowledge, skills).
- Time limit: 3 hours
- Scoring policy: Evaluation prioritizes the quality of ideas and intercultural reasoning. Portuguese language accuracy is not graded and will not reduce your score; any comments on Portuguese are for feedback purposes only.

## Appendix B — Interview Protocol (Semi-Structured)

*Format:* In-person

*Duration:* 20–30 minutes

*Recording:* Audio, with prior informed consent

*Confidentiality:* Anonymity guaranteed

*Languages:* Interviews were led mainly in Portuguese with clarifications as needed. Participants could answer in Portuguese, English, or both; translingual responses were welcome.

*Interview questions:*

1. Can you describe how you prepared for and approached the exam, knowing you could use more than one language?
2. In which moments did you switch languages, and why? Please give concrete examples.
3. To what extent did using English and/or Chinese help you express ideas that would have been harder solely in Portuguese? Examples welcome.
4. How did this linguistic flexibility affect your stress, confidence, and time management during the exam?
5. Were there passages where you changed language to clarify cultural or academic concepts? What motivated that decision?
6. How does this experience relate to your intercultural competence (attitudes, knowledge, skills)? Please illustrate with specific situations.
7. Did you feel able to exercise choice/control (agency) over your linguistic strategies? In what ways?
8. Would you prefer future assessments to permit using multiple languages (translanguaging)? Why or why not? Are there conditions or limits you would recommend?
9. Which aspects of the exam format would you keep or improve to better support performance in multilingual contexts?
10. Is there anything else you would like to add about the exam experience or about using multiple languages?

**Appendix C — Codebook (RTA)**

Code	Operational Definition	Indicators/Examples
TLLexGap	Switching to fill lexical gap or for terminological precision	English technical term inside PT sentence; explicit meta explanation
TLAudience	Reformulating for imagined interlocutor from another culture	Alternating PT/EN to explain “saudade”
AgencyControl	Self-reported control/choice over language use	“English as a supporter”; “two kinds of language thinking”
ICCKnowledge	Cultural concepts named/linked	Naming practices, values, contrasts
ICCAttitudes	Openness/empathy	Wording about horizons “widely open”
ICCSkills	Strategy use across codes	Clarification, examples for diverse audiences

**Appendix D - Themes, definitions, and representative bilingual excerpts**

Theme	Definition (RTA)	Representative excerpt (original + EN gloss)
<i>Meaning-making via translanguaging (TLLexGap)</i>	Use of Lx to repair lexical gap / increase precision or to provide a brief metalinguistic gloss	“A vida deles foi muito difficult e eu aprendi a ser thankful porque a vida em Macau é melhor.” [ <i>Their life was very hard and I learned to be thankful because life in Macau is better.</i> ] (Exam script, S08)
<i>Intercultural perspective-taking &amp; audience design (ICCKnowledge / ICCAttitudes / TLAudience)</i>	Linking cultural concepts across codes and reformulating for an imagined interlocutor (cultural brokering)	<p>“As minhas interações com pessoas de diferentes nacionalidades foram muito importantes porque sinto que os meus horizontes foram widely open.” [<i>...I feel my horizons were widely opened.</i>] (Exam script, S04)</p> <p>“Saudade é difícil de traduzir: não é só missing someone ou homesickness; é um sentimento de connection ao que já não está, nostalgia and hope.” [<i>Saudade is hard to translate: it's not just missing someone; it's a feeling of connection to who/what is no longer present, with nostalgia and hope.</i>] (Exam script, S01)</p> <p>“Desenrascanço é tipo make-do ingenuity, resolver com o que se tem.” [<i>Desenrascanço is like make-do ingenuity, solving things with whatever you have.</i>] (Exam script, S02)</p>

<p><i>Agency &amp; strategy use</i> (AgencyControl / ICCSkills)</p>	<p>Self-reported control over language choice; strategic use of languages; reduced anxiety / increased confidence</p>	<p>“Quando a professora permite usar mais do que uma língua no exame e não é tão rígida com o meu português, sinto mais confiante; sinto que a professora também está a praticar her intercultural competencies.” [...]<i>I feel more confident; I feel the teacher is also practicing her intercultural competencies.</i>] (Exam script, S07)</p> <p>“Quando posso usar mais de uma língua, controlo melhor o significado que quero transmitir; escolho a palavra exata na língua que surge primeiro.” [<i>When I can use more than one language, I can better control the meaning I want to convey; I pick the exact word in the language that comes to mind first.</i>] (Interview, S05)</p> <p>“Também é mais rápido: muitas vezes perco tempo a pensar na melhor palavra em português e, quando ela aparece, já não lembro exatamente a ideia.” [<i>It's also faster: I often waste time searching for the best Portuguese word and, when it finally comes, I no longer remember the exact idea.</i>] (Interview, S04)</p> <p>“Com essa flexibilidade, mantenho o fluxo do pensamento e a confiança, em vez de <i>get stuck</i> no vocabulário.” [<i>With that flexibility, I keep my train of thought and confidence, instead of getting stuck on vocabulary.</i>] (Interview, S09)</p>
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Depósito legal/ C584/2000  
ISSN/ 1576-2661  
ISSN-e 2444-9121  
Deseño/ Novagarda