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A young boy in a light blue school shirt is the central focus, looking off to the side with a thoughtful expression. He is in a classroom with other students in the background, some also in light blue shirts. The lighting is warm and natural.

THE CRISIS in the Refugee Learning Environment

A translanguaging instructional lens in multilingual classrooms

By **George Andima**

*t*HE CHALLENGES OF poor literacy outcomes among learners in refugee contexts calls for teachers to be innovative and develop new instructional approaches to accommodate language diversity in their classrooms. Often, learners in refugee contexts have poor learning outcomes caused by, among other factors, having to cope with new environments away from their original homes and the fact that they must learn and attend school in new spaces. These new spaces come with many challenges, including adapting to the language of instruction in the host country.

The reflections in this article are based on a pilot study sponsored by the Canadian Organization for Development through Education (CODE) carried out in the Kakuma Refugee Camp between September 2024 to September 2025. The study sought to pilot the use of a translanguaging instructional approach in developing grade three learners' comprehension skills in a multilingual context. The translanguaging instructional approach involves learners using their home languages to make meaning of texts written in English. The approach also allows learners to draw on their full linguistic and cultural experiences in understanding texts written in a language that is different from their home languages. The language of instruction in schools in the Kakuma Refugee Camp and in host schools is English, which has repercussions on the refugee children's ability to comprehend academic content in different learning areas.

As a mitigating measure, we developed an instructional guide to support teachers in facilitating learners' interactions during reading comprehension lessons. Using this guide, learners were asked to utilize their shared home languages while trying to comprehend English language texts. They were allowed to draw on their thoughts from their past experiences and then use their shared home language to demonstrate their comprehension of the English language texts.

While reading an article in English about a fictional story, the teacher invited their class to make connections using their home languages. By sharing personal experiences that were similar to those in the story, students first reflected in their home language before working on adapting their responses in English. Learners were encouraged to code switch or use multiple languages to help them understand the storyline, characters' actions, and recurrent themes. Allowing learners to use their home languages with the teacher's support helps them to comprehend academic content and overall learning outcomes. This can enhance classroom interactions, improve learners' confidence, and create a sense of identity especially for learners experiencing displacement. In this

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approach, the teacher and learners' roles were clearly distinct.

Teacher's instructional role

- Lesson introduction and activation of learners' prior knowledge.
- Group learners according to their shared home languages.
- Guide learners to read and comprehend a text in English, either silently or out loud.
- Provide discussion questions targeting specific comprehension competencies.
- Monitor learner discussions in their shared home languages.
- Organize learners to share their responses in mixed home language groups for cross language sharing.
- Organize learners to share their responses with the whole group.
- Conclude the lesson by summarizing the responses from the group discussions.

Learners' role

- Read the story in small groups.
- Share responses in shared home language groups.
- Share responses across shared home language groups.
- Present responses to the whole group in English.

Key reflections

A translanguaging instructional approach not only offered students

the freedom to use their home languages, but also unlocked their comprehension of complex content. The comfort and familiarity this learning process provided made understanding an English text more accessible, which can be difficult when first explored in a foreign language. Teachers can facilitate a translanguaging lesson without necessarily having to master all the languages in a multilingual classroom. Student interactions in shared home languages were livelier as learners engaged in co-creating meaning of the reading comprehension text. Recognition of each language in a classroom environment does not just help in comprehension—it develops learners' social skills and improves their confidence. Use of home languages eases learners' concept of exclusion, too, which comes with displacement. This facilitates a feeling of inclusion and equity during the teaching and learning process.

Policy implication

The translanguaging instructional approach can unlock students' learning potential in multilingual classroom settings. It does, however, require deliberate policy on the language of instruction in multilingual classrooms, as is the case in many refugee contexts. This is vital for early grade education to reduce the trauma of exclusion and accommodate all learners regardless of what their home language happens to be. ■



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