Original Paper

Insider Views and Practices of Translanguaging Classrooms in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

This study, situated within the domain of language education, delves into the intricate dynamics of translanguaging practices and their profound influence on learning and teaching procedures in a linguistically and culturally enriched early childhood education environment. Focused on the context of Greece, the research aims to uncover the nuanced ways in which translanguaging shapes the language communication and interaction of four-year-old children, considering both native Greek speakers and their peers from migrant or refugee backgrounds. The study cohort consists of 50 children aged four, comprising both native Greek and migrant-background children attending early childhood education. Employing a comprehensive research approach, the study includes in-depth, semi-structured interview sessions with young children and specific observational protocols designed to capture authentic interactions and communications. These methods are employed to trace the development of intercultural awareness and sensitivity within an environment conducive to translanguaging. The findings highlight that the incorporation of translanguaging practices in early education settings not only refines communication and intercultural skills among young children but also significantly influences cultural awareness. Moreover, translanguaging fosters active engagement in learning activities and provides educators with valuable insights and support in implementing innovative language teaching techniques. This research contributes to the advancement of language education practices, particularly within linguistically and culturally diverse early childhood education contexts, emphasizing the transformative impact of translanguaging on crucial aspects of language learning and teaching.

1. Introduction

Contemporary early childhood education classrooms, not only in Greece but globally, are becoming increasingly diverse. This diversity stems not just from varying abilities but also from the continuous mobility and cultural mixing in the 21st century. In Greece, known as a cultural intersection, there has been a noticeable shift in the composition of preschool classrooms, accommodating a growing number of students from varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

The concept of "translanguaging" has recently gained attention as a communication practice among bilingual/multilingual children. This practice has evolved into a crucial pedagogical tool that bolsters young learners' literacy, communication, and creativity in linguistically diverse classrooms. Translanguaging is increasingly viewed as essential for successful inclusion in early education. According to Garcia and Seltzer (2016), translanguaging pedagogy is about developing the full linguistic repertoire of speakers while promoting social justice and equalization among students. This pedagogy creates an educational context that emphasizes communication and impacts language and cognitive development supporting different aspects of the literacies of children.

Implementing translanguaging in early childhood teaching can holistically and coherently develop young learners' languages (Cahyani et al., 2016). Translanguaging in teaching practice highlights the role of educators in using and valuing students' linguistic resources and facilitating their learning and interaction. Research shows that translanguaging improves teaching and learning processes (Creese & Blackledge, 2010), allowing students to demonstrate their knowledge and develop literacy skills (Garcia & Sylvan, 2011).

In classrooms where multiple languages are encouraged, students can express various aspects of their identity, experiences, beliefs and cognitive abilities in a coordinated and meaningful manner (Hua et al., 2015). Such a polyphonic environment fosters a willingness to understand and negotiate meaning among young learners (Flores & Rosa, 2015). While the educational benefits of translanguaging are clear, it is important to acknowledge the limitations in its implementation. Arthur & Martin (2006) argue that such approaches cannot be universally applied, as educational contexts and curricula vary in their flexibility and acceptance of such methods.

Garcia, Johnson and Seltzer (2017) identify three key elements of translanguaging pedagogy in early childhood education: teachers' attitudes, the design of teaching processes, and adaptability in lesson planning. These elements are crucial for responding to the linguistic and emotional needs of young learners. Additionally, Macaro (2006) points out five areas where home languages are often used by educators, such as fostering interpersonal relationships and offering complex instructions. Thus, the use of translanguaging pedagogy in early childhood education is a multifaceted field, meriting both research and pedagogical attention. Translanguaging offers several benefits for young learners,

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including a deeper understanding of topics, language fluency and enhanced cooperation between schools and families (Baker, 2003; Baker & Wright, 2017).

1.2 Translanguaging and Challenges in Early Childhood Education

While translanguaging offers significant benefits in early childhood education settings, it also presents unique challenges, particularly in its implementation among four-year-old learners. Translanguaging is commonly observed in social contexts, yet its application in educational settings, especially for young children, requires careful consideration.

Given the distinct characteristics, learning paces, and profiles of each preschool class, the application of translanguaging (Blommaert & Van Avermaet, 2008; García & Kleyn, 2016; Lundberg, 2019) needs to be context-sensitive. Research in this field (Celic & Seltzer, 2012; Ticheloven et al., 2019) has identified several challenges such as the Implications of Language Use as the encouragement of students' mother tongue use in classrooms can lead to unintended consequences. For instance, a child might feel isolated if their language is not shared by peers, despite a supportive classroom environment (Petitto et al., 2001; Petitto, 2009); Objectives and Recognition of Translanguaging Performance given that while translanguaging can be engaging for some children, others might not see its value, leading to varied participation levels (Ticheloven et al., 2019; Bronkhorst & Akkerman, 2016) and Language Learning Challenges as balancing the use of family languages with the acquisition of the school language is crucial as translanguaging should not hinder the development of the school language (Creese & Blackledge, 2010a, 2011; Gogolin, 2002, 2011; Hornberger, 2003).

To add to that, Emotional Challenges can be also observed as the emotional well-being of young learners is paramount and positive emotional environments aid knowledge acquisition (Krashen, 1988; Duarte & Günther-van der Meij, 2018; Dewaele, 2008; Williams et al., 2019). Within such a context, Teacher and Student Efforts are considered of paramount importance and balancing the promotion of translanguaging with school language development presents challenges for both educators and students (Ticheloven et al., 2019; García & Kleyn, 2016). Assessment Challenges are at the core as assessing students in a single language may not accurately reflect their multilingual abilities (Garcia & Wei, 2014), thus, alternative methods like portfolios might offer more comprehensive evaluations.

Ultimately, the multilingual and multicultural classroom context poses numerous challenges for both educators and young learners, necessitating thoughtful management and adaptation not only for bilingual children and educators but for the indigenous children as well who interact with each other and are experiencing these language and cultural exchanges.

2. Method

2.1 Research Rationale

With the evolving educational environment in Greece, characterized by a notable increase in young children from immigrant backgrounds, this study explores the effects of language and cultural exchanges on the communication, collaboration, and educational processes in Greek early childhood

settings. This research delves into the attitudes and perceptions of both native Greek and immigrant preschoolers regarding the practice of translanguaging and its influence on their communication, as well as its role in raising their intercultural awareness and sensitivity. This study acknowledges the existing body of literature but recognizes a gap in research concerning the relationship between translanguaging and intercultural communication, especially in early childhood classrooms that exhibit linguistic and cultural diversity.

Drawing on national and international research (Tsokalidou, 2017; Garcia, 2009a; Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010), this study emphasizes translanguaging as a beneficial tool in enhancing the interaction and communication abilities of both indigenous and immigrant/refugee learners. However, it also notes the scarcity of similar research in this domain, particularly in the context of early childhood education and not just limited to English language teaching.

2.2 Research Methodology in Early Childhood Education

In exploring the behaviours and profiles of four-year-old children in early childhood education settings, a mixed-methods study was conducted by employing the following research tools:

2.2.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interview sessions were chosen as the primary research tool due to their adaptability in investigative procedures. These sessions served as a platform to delve into the perspectives and attitudes of young children, encompassing both native Greek and those from immigrant families. The interviews facilitated a comprehensive exploration of the children's experiences, views, and challenges within an environment that embraced the use of their family languages and others, and they were based on Papadopoulos' (2020) analytical Translanguaging Literacy Framework at School. This approach empowered the young participants to articulate their feelings, difficulties, and personal responses to the intricate aspects of translanguaging and intercultural communication. It is noteworthy that the qualitative data obtained from the interviews underwent a process of quantification to enhance clarity and expedite comprehension.

2.2.2 Observation Protocols

Simultaneously, specific observation protocols were employed to meticulously document aspects of intercultural communication and receptiveness to learning about others. The researcher observed classroom sessions, with a focus on communication, collaboration, and respectful interactions between children and educators. Through these observations, valuable insights were gathered, shedding light on children's perspectives regarding interactions with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds and the pedagogical aspects of their daily educational experiences. It is also worth mentioning that the observation protocols were based on Papadopoulos' (2020) analytical Translanguaging Literacy Framework at School. Similar to the interview data, the qualitative findings derived from observations underwent quantification to facilitate a clearer and more expeditious understanding. This dual approach of qualitative observation and subsequent quantification ensures a robust and nuanced analysis of the gathered data, contributing to the richness of the study's findings.

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2.2.3 Participants of the Study

The research population in this study of early childhood education consisted of 50 four-year-old children, including both native Greek children and those with migrant backgrounds in Larissa (Central Greece). In terms of gender distribution (as represented in Figure 1), the sample consisted of 57% girls and 43% boys attending kindergartens in the city.
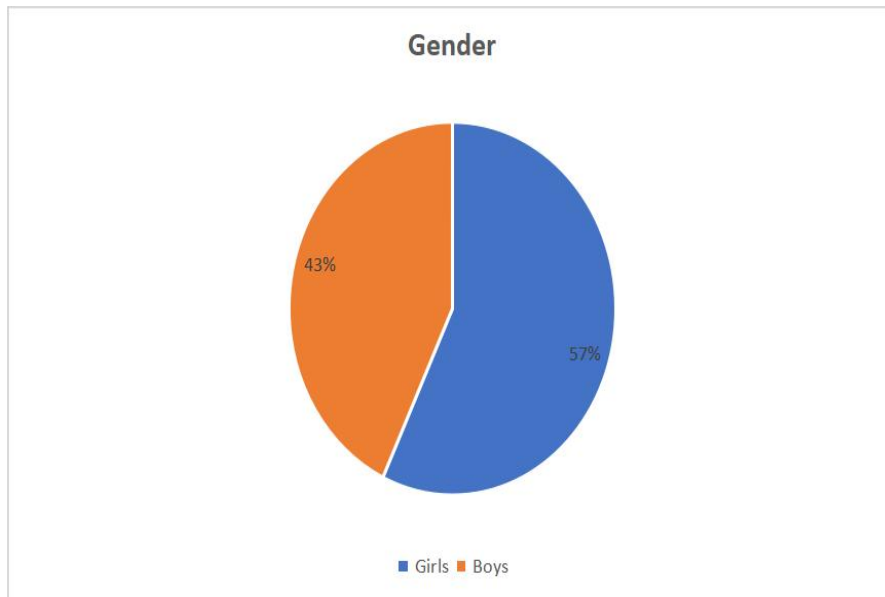
**Figure 1. Distribution of Children by Gender**

Regarding the country of origin of the children (Figure 2), 21% of the children were of Greek origin, 2% of Albanian origin, 22% of Bulgarian origin, 9% of Romanian origin, 6% of Armenian origin, 16% were from Syria while 24% of children were from Ukraine.
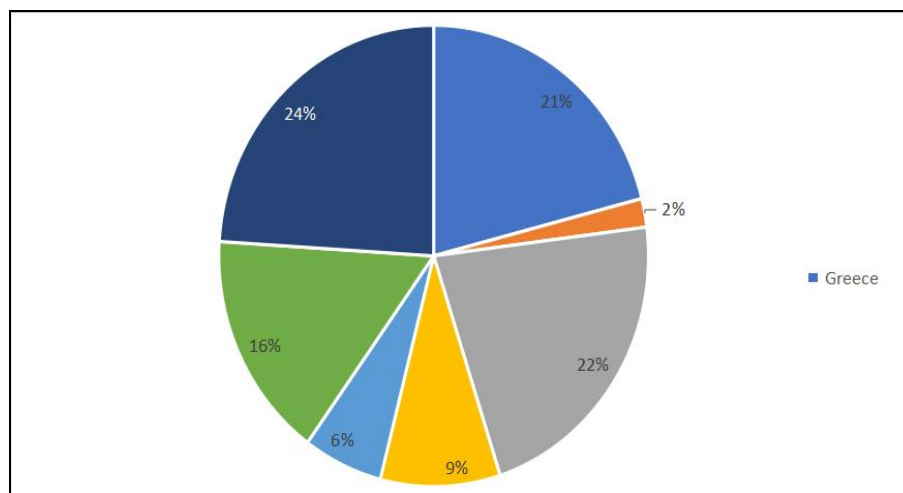
**Figure 2. Distribution of Children by Country of Origin**

In exploring the broader aspects of four-year-old children's lives, the study also sought to understand their language usage within their home and societal environments, in addition to their involvement in activities beyond the classroom.

Regarding the home language use of children from immigrant families (Figure 3), the study found diverse language practices. A majority, 73%, primarily communicated in their family language at home. Meanwhile, 22% used a mix of their native language and some Greek, reflecting a bilingual environment. The remaining 5% of the children used an alternate language, such as English, in their household settings.
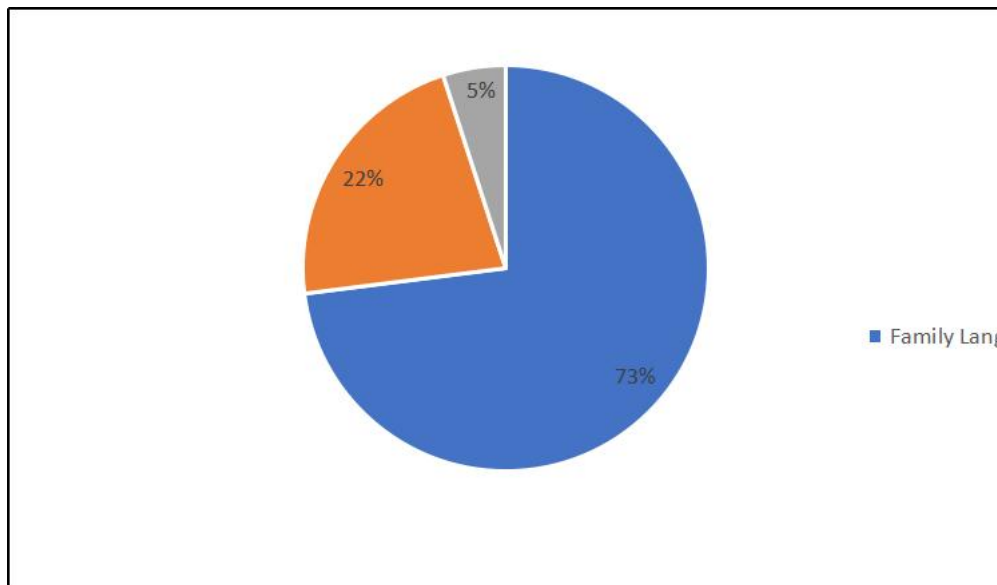
Figure 3. Use of Language in the Context of the House

In examining the language usage outside their home environment, the study observed varied linguistic patterns. The Figure 4 indicates that an equal proportion, 34%, of these young learners use either their family language exclusively or a mix of their family language with other languages in social settings. Notably, 29% of the children predominantly use a different language, like English.
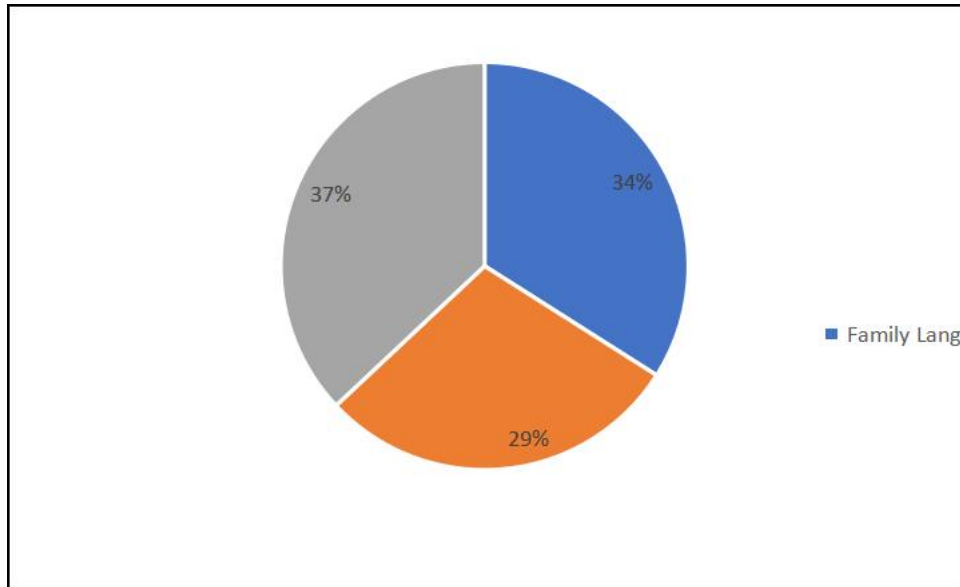
Figure 4. Use of Language Outside the Home Environment

3. Result

The analysis of data pertaining to four-year-old children unveiled significant insights into their intercultural and translanguaging experiences.

3.1 Engagement in Interlingual/Intercultural Activities

One key area explored was the children's involvement in daily bilingual/multilingual and intercultural activities. According to Figure 5, a majority of these young children (43%) are frequently exposed to information about prominent personalities from Greece, indicating a strong engagement with Greek culture. Additionally, a substantial percentage of preschoolers (37%) sometimes participate in Greek theatrical performances, and 20% occasionally attend concerts featuring Greek artists, reflecting their initial encounters with the local culture and language.
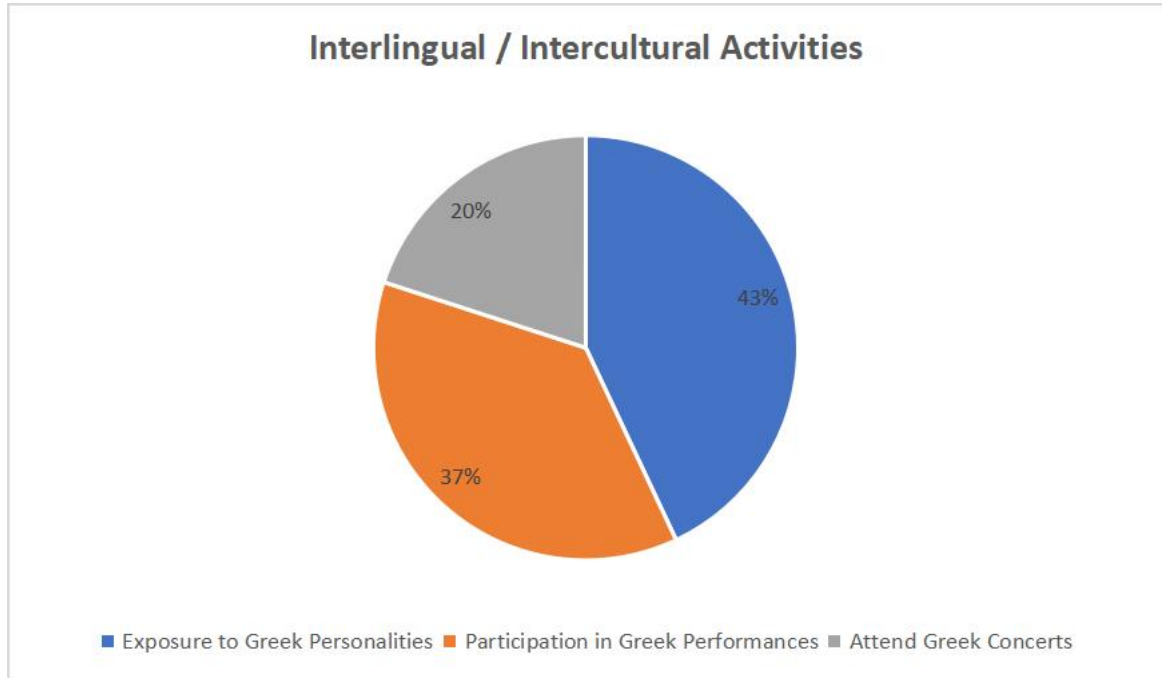
Figure 5. Engagement in Interlingual/Intercultural Activities

3.2 Performing Translanguaging: The Voices of Children

Centering on the motivations behind children's use of translanguaging (as illustrated in Figure 6), it is found that the majority (47%) engage in translanguaging primarily to seek clarifications. Similarly, situations where children need time to contemplate and articulate their ideas are also common (67%), as are instances where they use translanguaging to ask for assistance (8%).

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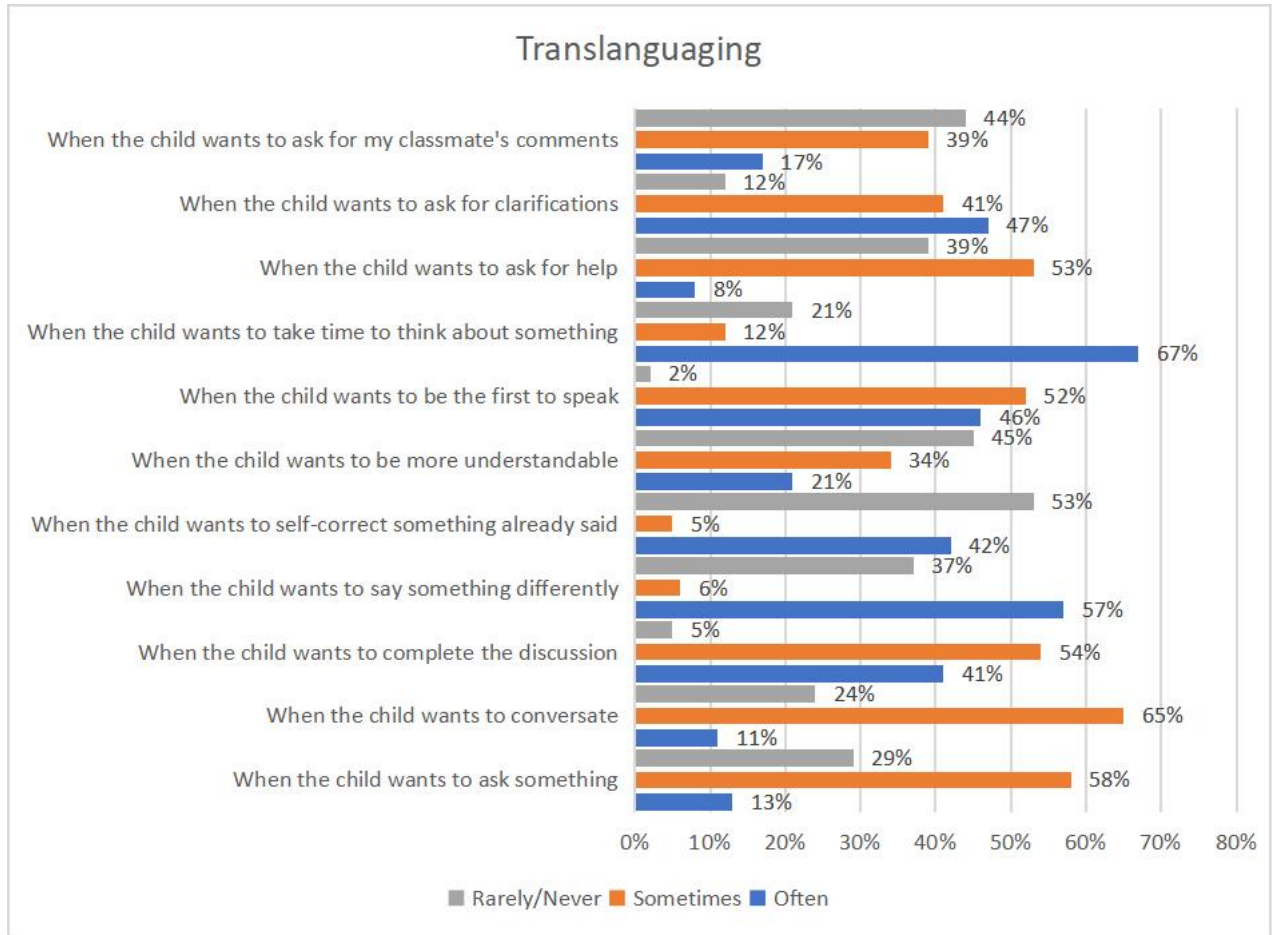
Figure 6. Performing Translanguaging

Moreover, based on the observation of the children, it was shown that a significant number of children exhibit other reasons for engaging in translanguaging, as indicated in Figure 7. Specifically, a high percentage of children utilize their full range of language skills when they feel joyous (81%), when they lack sufficient time to contemplate and respond to an idea (81%), when they prefer not to be comprehended by others (88%), and when they sense that they are not being understood (86%).
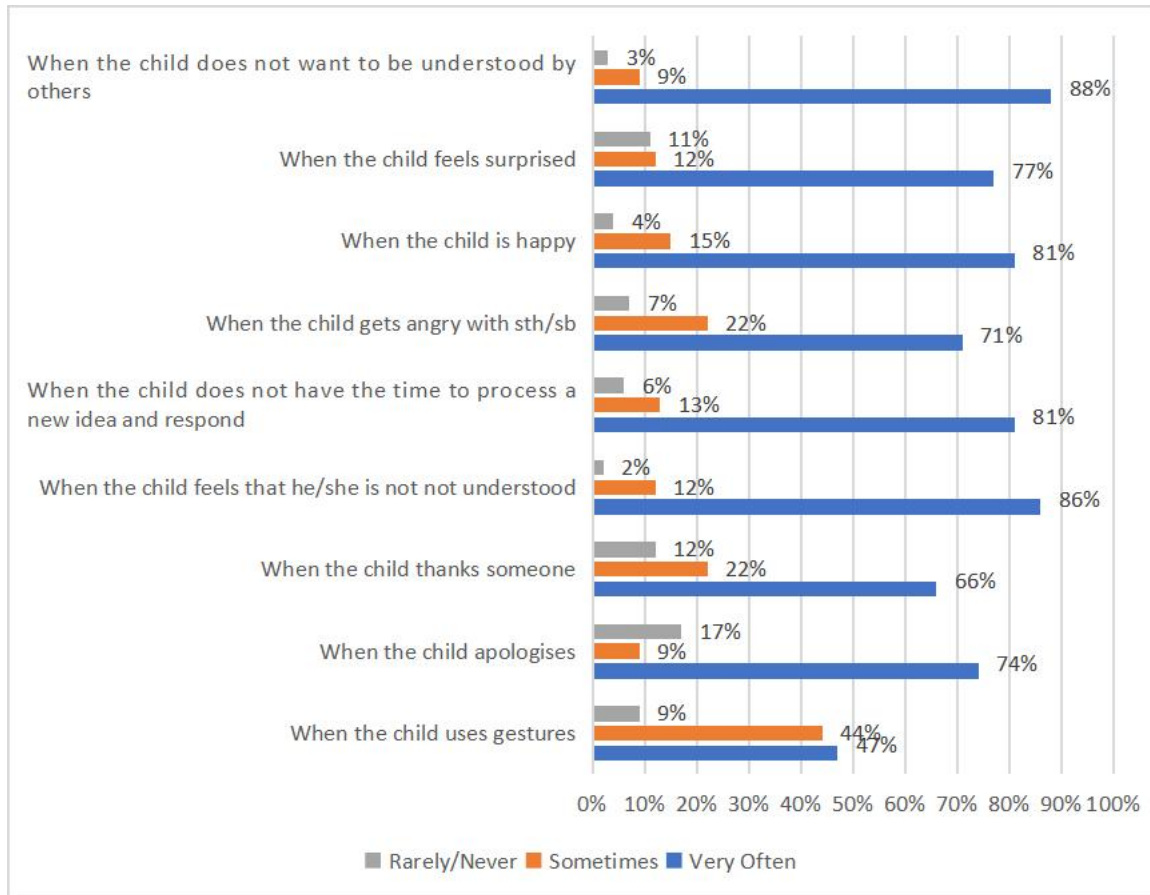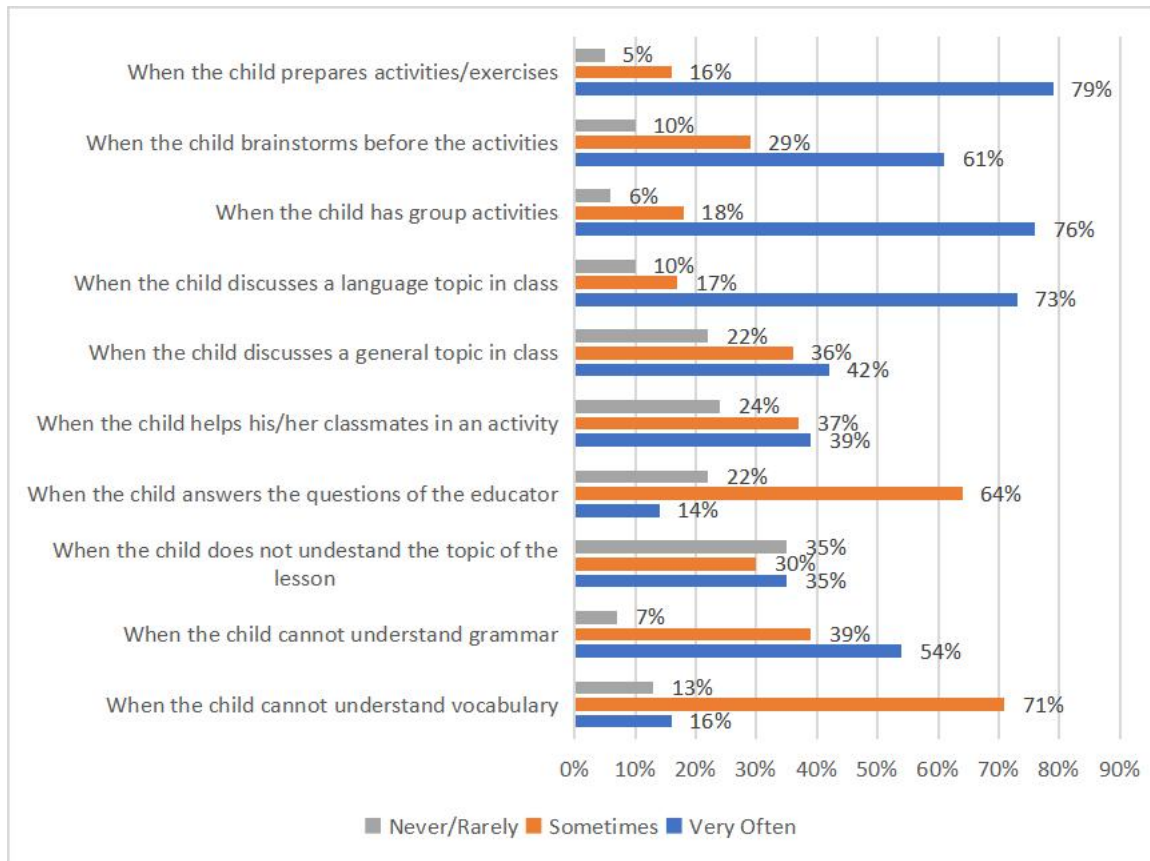
Figure 7. Performing Translanguaging

3.3 Performing Translanguaging in the Teaching/Learning Process

The study also examined the use of translanguaging within the context of learning and teaching procedures as well as in the general setting of the kindergarten.

Exploring translanguaging during teaching and learning activities (as shown in Figure 8), a notable 76% of children engage their full language repertoire in group activities. A significant 42% do so while discussing topics in class, and 79% employ translanguaging when preparing for activities or exercises. Additionally, 64% of children use translanguaging when occasionally responding to educators' questions or when they face difficulties understanding Greek words (71%).

Figure 8. Translanguaging Performance in the Classroom

3.4 Strengthening Intercultural Communication Strategies

This study has also brought to light significant insights regarding the role of translanguaging in bolstering children's intercultural communication strategies, as depicted in Figure 9. These strategies are crucial in facilitating the inclusion of immigrant children. Specifically, 77% of children feel that a translanguaging environment fosters patience in communication events and heightens their curiosity about other cultures (73%). Furthermore, 66% of children perceive that their translanguaging setting aids in developing empathy towards classmates, while 69% note it helps in demonstrating respect. Additionally, 67% believe that translanguaging assists in understanding the reasons behind the use of specific words or phrases.
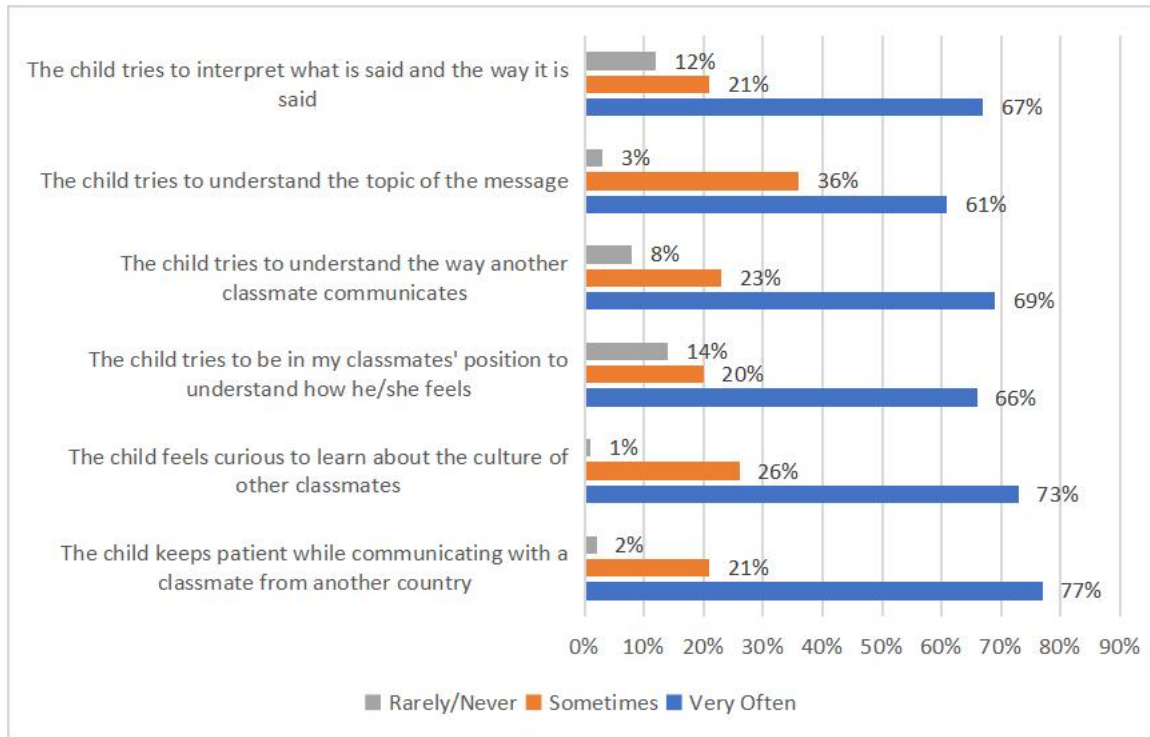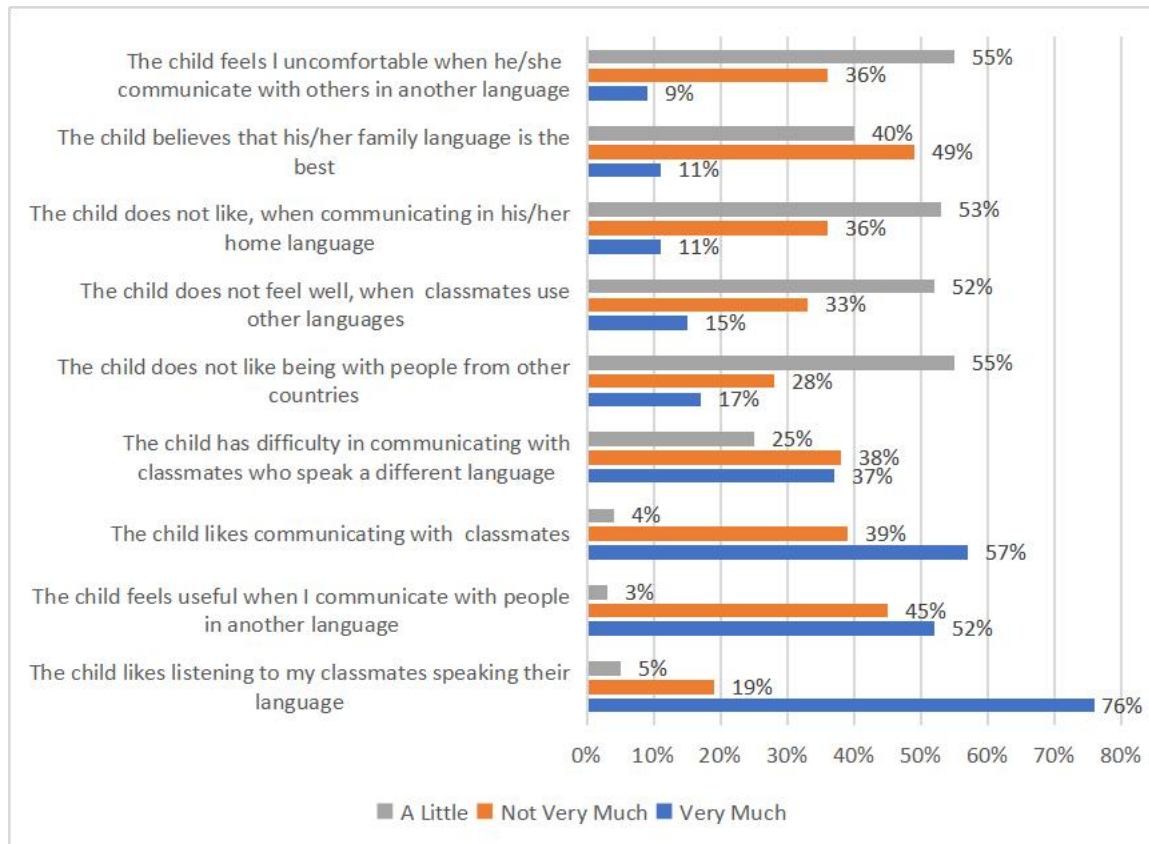
Figure 9. Translanguaging and Intercultural Communication Strategies

3.5 Emotions & Translanguaging

The final aspect of this research concerning children revealed that the utilization of diverse language codes and communication resources significantly influences their emotional profile, and vice versa, as shown in Figure 10. This is particularly evident in classrooms marked by cultural and linguistic diversity, where the need for successful inclusion is heightened.

Specifically, a majority of children (76%) hold positive views about their classmates using their family languages. A substantial portion (52%) feels useful when they communicate with classmates who are not proficient in their own language, and 57% show an interest in engaging with them. When it comes to feelings of dissatisfaction related to encountering classmates from other countries, such sentiments are relatively low (17%). Similarly, the discomfort level is minimal (15%) when classmates use languages other than their own.

Figure 10. Translanguaging and Emotions 1/2

The study also unveils findings about children's emotional responses in various communication and interaction scenarios with classmates from different linguistic backgrounds, as illustrated in Figure 11. When children do not comprehend their classmates' speech due to language differences, a majority (49%) report feelings of anxiety or fear, followed by notable instances of sadness (24%) and anger (17%).

When classmates use their own language, 37% of children feel excitement, and 31% experience happiness or contentment. Notably, 32% report feeling anxious in these situations. In scenarios where classmates show interest in their language, 37% of children feel excited and surprised, while 57% experience joy

Regarding feelings when not being understood by classmates due to language barriers, 25% of students experience sadness, and 41% feel anxious or fearful. Finally, when children use their own family language at school, they commonly express joy (25%), excitement or surprise (37%), and anxiety (34%).
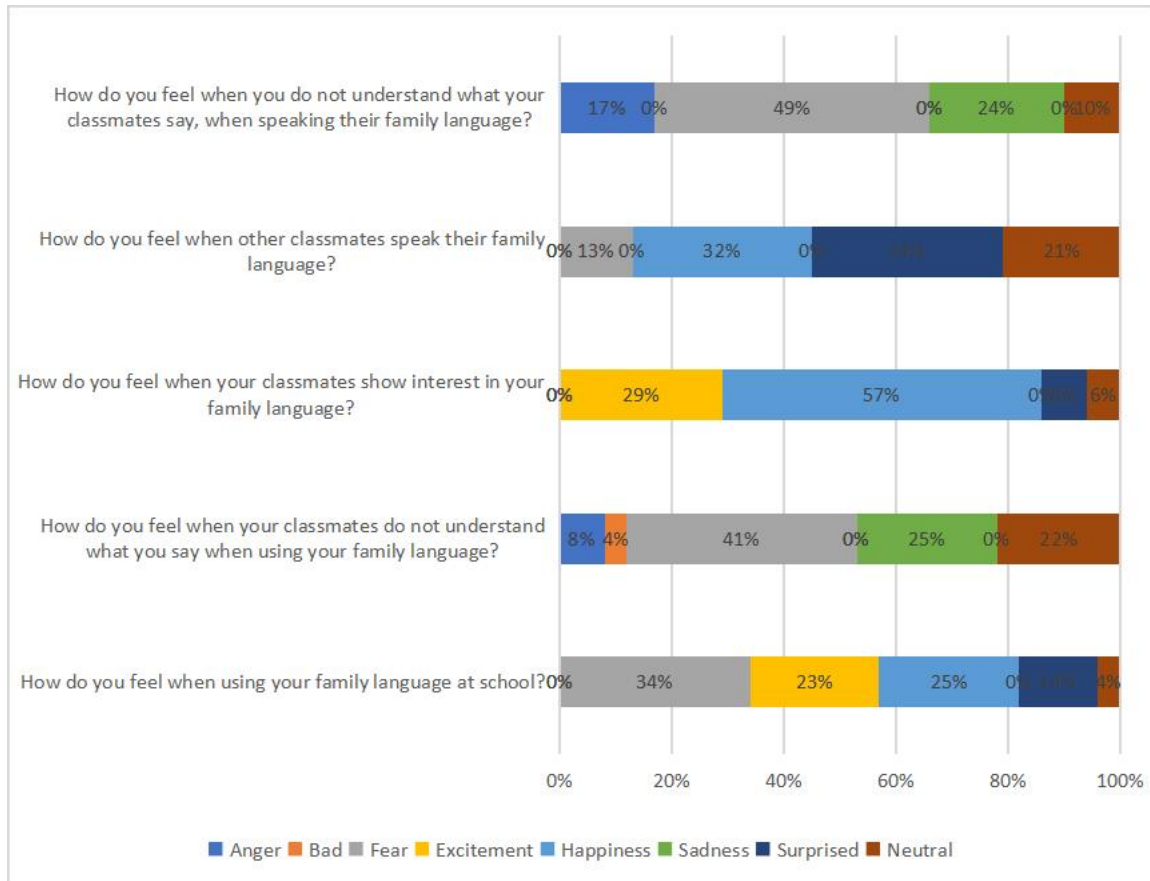
Figure 11. Translanguaging and Emotions 2/2

4. Discussion

This study delved into understanding of translanguaging use in four-year-old children's classrooms. It specifically sought to examine the link between translanguaging and the advancement of communication in early education settings characterized by linguistic and cultural diversity. Analyzing the data revealed significant insights into how translanguaging influences these young children, particularly focusing on the development of intercultural awareness and sensitivity, as well as communication strategies and skills, which are crucial for effectively integrating children from immigrant backgrounds.

Regarding translanguaging use by children, it was evident that this practice occurs both within the scope of teaching and learning activities and more broadly throughout the school life environment. Notably, a significant number of these young children resort to translanguaging primarily for seeking clarifications. Equally common are scenarios where they use translanguaging to take a moment for thoughtful expression or when in need of assistance. It is noteworthy that translanguaging often coincides with moments of strong emotional expression among the children. Additionally, exploring translanguaging across various communicative situations and contexts provided a more profound comprehension of its role and impact.

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Translanguaging is clearly recognized and used by children as a communication strategy, aligning with Canale's (1983) framework which views strategies as tools for enhancing communication effectiveness. Data analysis also indicates that translanguaging serves as a compensatory mechanism in student interactions. This is in line with Faerch and Kasper's (1983) concept of communication compensation strategies, defined as "conscious plans to solve what is presented to a person as a problem in achieving a specific communication goal" (Faerch & Kasper, 1983, p. 36). Such strategies, as supported by both national and international research, are crucial in facilitating communication among individuals from diverse linguistic backgrounds. They help bridge potential gaps in message delivery, thereby preventing misunderstandings. In classrooms with a mix of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, translanguaging emerges as a key tool for teachers striving for the successful inclusion of all children (Wei, 2023; Papadopoulos, 2022; Papadopoulos, 2020; Papadopoulos, 2021; Papadopoulos & Shin, 2021; Duarte, 2020; Van Viegen, 2020). It allows children to use their entire range of linguistic abilities to communicate effectively with peers and teachers. This practice is also beneficial for native Greek children, who can use various linguistic and paralinguistic elements to communicate with both fellow Greek children and those from other countries.

In the context of teaching and learning, it was observed that children frequently use translanguaging as a supportive educational tool. Predominantly, they engage in translanguaging during group-based activities, discussions, and while preparing exercises with classmates, highlighting its vital role in fostering cooperative and collaborative dynamics in the classroom. This aligns with global research (Hungwe, 2019; Bisai & Singh, 2018; Rajendram, 2021) that emphasizes the translanguaging role in enhancing student interactions and aiding the integration of students from diverse backgrounds. Papadopoulos' (2020) extensive study further revealed that translanguaging in group activities leads to the growth of cooperative and creative language use and positively influences overall student behavior. When such activities incorporate multilingual resources, students are not only allowed but encouraged to use translanguaging across different modalities – reading, writing, speaking, and listening. This approach is particularly beneficial for students who speak other languages, as they can engage with materials in their heritage languages, providing support to their peers. Consequently, every student's unique contribution and role are recognized and valued, promoting close and effective collaboration within the group.

Translanguaging has emerged as a significant facilitator in the learning process for children. They often utilize their full range of linguistic skills when responding to educators or grappling with understanding aspects of grammar or vocabulary in the Greek language. Global research indicates that translanguaging plays a key role in enhancing student's learning, both linguistically (as noted by Champlin, 2016; Beres, 2015) and cognitively (as discussed by Karlsson et al., 2019; Maluleke, 2019). The inclusion and encouragement of translanguaging within the educational process ensure that student's needs are met and their perspectives are acknowledged. In the Greek educational setting, there has been a shift from focusing solely on teaching Greek to indigenous/immigrant/refugee children, to a

more inclusive approach that respects and incorporates the heritage languages of all children in multilingual classrooms. This approach not only emphasizes teaching Greek but also deals with multilingualism, a critical aspect in contemporary global education. Translanguaging thus becomes a vital instrument for the successful integration of children with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds into the entire educational curriculum, ensuring that children speaking other languages are not sidelined or misunderstood, but instead are actively included and encouraged to participate and grow.

This study has also yielded significant insights regarding the role of translanguaging in enhancing intercultural communication. It has become evident that an environment encouraging translanguaging and the use of the entire linguistic range of each child significantly boosts their intercultural sensitivity and awareness of others (Ou et al., 2023; Csillik & Golubeva, 2020; Wells, 2018). The observation notes and the children's responses revealed a heightened motivation to engage with and learn about different cultures and languages. They display a keen interest in the countries of their classmates and a strong inclination towards coexistence and collaboration with peers from varied linguistic backgrounds. This aligns with findings from both international (Bradley et al., 2018) and national (Sidiropoulou, 2015; Tsokalidou, 2018) research, which underscore the value of translanguaging in fostering an interest in cultural and linguistic diversity. The children are driven to comprehend these differences and collectively advocate for a harmonious integration of languages and cultures within their educational setting.

In this context, it's important to note the positive impact of a translanguaging environment in developing children's communication skills and strategies. The study's results indicate that children exhibit empathy when interacting with classmates who speak different languages. They show respect for others' viewpoints and communication styles, often reflecting diverse cultural backgrounds. Additionally, in a translanguaging setting, children learn to exercise tolerance and patience, particularly in verbal interactions, and become more comfortable with ambiguity in written communication involving unfamiliar language codes. These observations align with the findings of other researchers (Tsokalidou, 2017; Garcia, 2009a; Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010), who have highlighted the significant role of translanguaging in enhancing intercultural communication. They advocate for the increased integration of diverse languages and cultures within classroom settings.

It is clear that encouraging and implementing translanguaging in educational settings inspires children to develop greater intercultural awareness and sensitivity. Moreover, it reinforces their intercultural communication skills. This approach is instrumental in effectively integrating children with migration backgrounds into early childhood education, ensuring they are included and supported in their learning environment.

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