

CONTROLLED TRANSLANGUAGING IN THE CLASSROOM

*A practical guide for multilingual classrooms
with a dominant shared L1*

STRATEGIC L1 WINDOW

Planned · Time-limited · Purposeful

Use the strongest language to think, connect and understand.

Build the English needed to participate, communicate and demonstrate learning.

OUR MISSION

Students' first languages are powerful tools for learning, but their use should be **planned, time-limited and purposeful**. In an English-medium school, translanguaging should help students access learning and then move them back towards increasingly independent use of English. It should not become the default language of the classroom or remove productive struggle from the learner.

IMPORTANT CONTEXT

This guide is designed for classrooms where one first language — for example Mandarin — is shared by a large proportion of students. In these settings, unrestricted L1 use can quickly become the social and academic default, reducing exposure to English and excluding students who do not share that language.

One goal. Many languages. Deliberate choices. Stronger learners.

01 WHAT WE MEAN BY CONTROLLED TRANSLANGUAGING

Controlled translanguaging means that the teacher deliberately decides **when, where, why and for how long** students may use another language to support learning.

THE PRINCIPLE

L1 IS A BRIDGE, NOT THE DESTINATION.

Students may use another language to unlock meaning, organise thinking or check understanding, but the lesson should deliberately return them to the English they need to learn, participate and demonstrate understanding.

FOUR CONTROLS

SPACE	Where?	The teacher identifies where L1 use is appropriate.	Paired discussion; vocabulary station; planning sheet; designated support table.
TIME	For how long?	L1 use has a clear beginning and end.	"You have two minutes to discuss this in Mandarin; then prepare your explanation in English."
PURPOSE	Why?	Students know why another language is being used.	Clarify a concept; activate prior knowledge; compare vocabulary; plan an answer; check instructions.
OUTPUT	What comes back in English?	There is normally an accountable return to English.	English sentence; oral explanation; labelled diagram; written response; key vocabulary; group report.

IMPORTANT CONTEXT

This guide is especially designed for classrooms where one first language is shared by a large proportion of students. Unrestricted L1 use can become the social and academic default, reducing exposure to English and excluding students who do not share that language.

02 WHY CONTROL MATTERS

When many students share the same L1, the advantages of multilingual support are real, but so are the risks. The language that is easiest can become the language used for almost everything.

1. THINKING FINISHES IN L1

Students can complete the thinking together in Mandarin and leave one stronger English speaker to produce the final answer.

2. ENGLISH TIME SHRINKS

English-speaking time can fall sharply, particularly during pair and group work.

3. OTHERS GET LEFT OUT

Students who do not speak Mandarin can be unintentionally excluded from discussion.

4. TRANSLATION REPLACES LEARNING

Students may become dependent on translation rather than developing strategies for understanding English.

5. BILINGUAL BECOMES INFORMAL

Stronger bilingual students can become informal translators instead of learners.

6. TEACHER LOSES VISIBILITY

Teachers can lose visibility of who actually understands the content.

7. PRODUCTIVE STRUGGLE DISAPPEARS

Students can avoid the productive struggle needed to develop academic English.

IMPORTANT

Reducing unnecessary Mandarin use is not a rejection of Mandarin or multilingualism. The aim is to prevent one dominant L1 from replacing the shared instructional language and to protect opportunities for every student to develop English.

DELIBERATE CONTROL. EQUAL OPPORTUNITY. STRONGER ENGLISH.

03 THE CONTROLLED TRANSLANGUAGING CYCLE

ENGLISH INPUT	Teacher presents concept with accessible English, visuals and key vocabulary.
L1 WINDOW	Short, purposeful use of L1 to clarify or process.
BRIDGE	Students identify the English words or structures needed.
ENGLISH OUTPUT	Students explain, write, discuss or complete the task in English.
CHECK	Teacher checks individual understanding rather than accepting a group answer.

EXAMPLE

Photosynthesis: teacher explains the process in English → students have 90 seconds to clarify the sequence with a Mandarin-speaking partner → students return to the English terms carbon dioxide, water, glucose, oxygen and light energy → each student writes an English explanation independently.

04 TIME LIMITS: MAKE L1 USE VISIBLE

Avoid open-ended instructions such as “You can use Mandarin if you need to.” Instead, create a **defined multilingual window**.

SITUATION	POSSIBLE L1 WINDOW	RETURN TO ENGLISH
Clarifying instructions	30–60 seconds	Partner states the task in English.
Activating prior knowledge	1–2 minutes	Share three English keywords or one English idea.
Understanding a difficult concept	2–3 minutes	Explain the concept using a sentence frame.
Planning extended writing	3–5 minutes	Plan may be bilingual; final drafting begins in English.
Vocabulary comparison	2 minutes	Record the English term, meaning and example.
Checking after teacher input	60–90 seconds	Individual English check question.

Visible time. Clear purpose. Always return to English.

05 SPACES: WHERE TRANSLANGUAGING HAPPENS

Language use can be managed spatially as well as temporally. This is particularly useful where a dominant L1 easily takes over group work.

TEACHER-DESIGNED PAIRS	Use same-L1 pairing briefly when it genuinely helps access. Change groupings when English interaction is the learning goal.
SUPPORT STATION	A designated table or part of the lesson may allow bilingual dictionaries, translated key words or brief L1 discussion.
PLANNING SPACE	Students may use a bilingual planning sheet but move to an English-only production sheet.
MIXED-LANGUAGE GROUPS	Use English as the shared language so that all students can participate.
WHOLE-CLASS DISCUSSION	Normally use the shared instructional language. Students can be given rehearsal time before contributing.

MANAGE SPACE. PROTECT EQUITY. KEEP ENGLISH CENTRAL.

06 PREVENTING STUDENTS DOING THE WORK FOR EACH OTHER

A major risk in dominant-L1 classrooms is that a stronger student explains, translates or produces the answer for another student. Support should increase access without transferring ownership of the task.

RULE OF THUMB	Peers may help another student understand the task or concept. They should not become responsible for producing the other student's answer .
USEFUL CONTROLS	
• After paired L1 discussion, require individual English responses.	
• Use "think alone → discuss → answer alone" rather than moving directly from group discussion to a shared answer.	
• Ask different students in the group to explain the reasoning independently.	
• Give each student a slightly different question, example or data set.	
• Require students to highlight the part of a response they can explain themselves.	
• Ask the supported student a short follow-up question without peer assistance.	
• Rotate the role of explainer; do not repeatedly use the strongest bilingual student as translator.	
• Do not allow one student to translate an entire text, worksheet or teacher explanation for another student.	

SUPPORT LEARNING. PROTECT OWNERSHIP. HOLD EVERY STUDENT ACCOUNTABLE.

07 MANDARIN: REDUCING DEFAULT USE WITHOUT BANNING IT

In classrooms where Mandarin is the dominant L1, a blanket ban can remove a useful learning resource. Unlimited use, however, can substantially reduce English interaction. The practical middle ground is to make Mandarin use conditional and purposeful.

INSTEAD OF	TRY
'No Mandarin.'	'English is our default. I will tell you when a Mandarin discussion window is useful.'
'Speak English!'	'You have finished the planning stage. Switch back to English and use these three terms.'
Allowing Mandarin throughout group work.	Give 90 seconds for Mandarin clarification, followed by an English group task.
A Mandarin speaker translating continuously.	Allow one clarification, then ask the learner to restate the idea in English.
Mandarin notes replacing English terminology.	Allow bilingual notes but require key subject vocabulary in English.
Students forming Mandarin-only groups by default.	Use purposeful mixed groupings when collaboration and inclusion matter.

08 TEACHER LANGUAGE: SCRIPTS THAT MAKE THE BOUNDARY CLEAR

SCRIPT	'English is the default language for this activity.'
SCRIPT	'You may use Mandarin for two minutes to make sure everyone understands the concept.'
SCRIPT	'Stop there. Now bridge back to English. Which five English words do you need?'
SCRIPT	'Your partner can explain the idea, but they cannot give you the answer.'
SCRIPT	'Discuss it together. Everyone will then answer independently.'
SCRIPT	'You can plan in both languages. Your final response needs to be in English.'
SCRIPT	'This is an English practice stage, so no translation for the next five minutes.'
SCRIPT	'Use Mandarin to solve the meaning problem, not to avoid the English problem.'

09 WHEN L1 USE SHOULD BE LIMITED OR STOPPED

Teachers should intervene when the language choice is no longer serving the learning.

1	The discussion has moved away from the task.
2	Students are continuing in Mandarin after the agreed window has ended.
3	A student is translating or answering everything for another learner.
4	Students could reasonably complete the task in English with available scaffolds.
5	Mandarin is excluding classmates from group participation.
6	The activity is specifically designed to practise English speaking, listening, reading or writing.
7	The final product is intended to demonstrate independent English production.
8	The use of translation prevents the teacher from seeing what the individual student understands.

DECISION RULE

If L1 use is no longer solving a specific learning problem, or if it is reducing participation, accountability or independent English production, redirect students back to English.

11. WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN SCIENCE

NEW CONCEPT	Teach with visuals and accessible English. Permit a 60–90 second L1 clarification. Students then label or explain the concept using English scientific vocabulary.
PRACTICAL WORK	Safety instructions and key procedures remain in English with visual support. Brief L1 checking may be allowed before students begin.
EXAM QUESTIONS	Students may clarify the underlying concept during teaching, but examination practice should increasingly reproduce the language conditions students will face independently.
EXTENDED EXPLANATION	Allow bilingual brainstorming if needed. Provide English causal connectives and key vocabulary. Final response is produced independently in English.
CALCULATIONS	Students may discuss the method briefly, but each student completes and explains their own calculation.
VOCABULARY	Home-language equivalents can support meaning, but students should repeatedly retrieve and use the English scientific term.

12. STAFF QUICK REFERENCE

GREEN: USE	AMBER: CONTROL	RED: STOP / REDIRECT
Activate prior knowledge	Set a time limit	Peer doing the task
Clarify a difficult concept	Specify the space	Continuous translation
Compare vocabulary	State the purpose	L1 excluding others
Brief peer explanation	Require an English bridge	L1 continuing after the window
Bilingual planning	Check individual understanding	Avoiding achievable English

THE THREE QUESTIONS

BEFORE ALLOWING L1 USE, ASK

1. What learning problem is this solving?
2. How long does the student need it?
3. What will the student do independently in English afterwards?

Suggested school position

CORE POSITION

English is the default shared language of instruction and participation. Students' other languages are valued and may be used strategically to support access, thinking and learning. Teachers will manage translanguaging through clear purposes, designated times or spaces, and an expected bridge back to English. Multilingual support should not replace independent thinking, allow peers to complete work for one another, exclude other students, or unnecessarily reduce opportunities to develop academic English.

*Purpose. Time. Space. Bridge. Check.
Use L1 well. Return to English.*

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CORE POSITION

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FOUR CONTROLS	THE CYCLE
SPACE — Where? TIME — For how long? PURPOSE — Why? OUTPUT — What comes back in English?	1 English input 2 L1 window 3 Bridge 4 English output 5 Check individual understanding

WHEN TO LIMIT OR STOP

- The discussion has moved away from the task.
- Students are continuing in Mandarin after the agreed window has ended.
- A student is translating or answering everything for another learner.
- Students could reasonably complete the task in English with available scaffolds.
- Mandarin is excluding classmates from group participation.
- The activity is specifically designed to practise English speaking, listening, reading or writing.

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