

Navigating Academic Rigor through Fluidity: A Design-Based Research (DBR) Study on Translanguaging Practices among Postgraduate Students in Private Higher Education

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Abstract

This study proposes a conceptual framework using **Design-Based Research (DBR)** to integrate **translanguaging** practices into postgraduate programs within private higher education institutions. Addressing the "monolingual paradox" where English-only policies often conflict with the linguistic diversity of student bodies, the research explores how fluid language use can serve as a **cognitive scaffold** to enhance academic rigor and reduce cognitive overload. The methodology employs an iterative six-phase cycle—comprising exploration, prototyping, and testing—to develop pedagogical tools such as multilingual research logs and cross-linguistic peer review protocols. Expected findings suggest that validating students' full linguistic repertoires fosters deeper conceptual engagement, strengthens scholarly agency, and improves the quality of final English-language academic outputs. Ultimately, the study provides a blueprint for transitioning from restrictive language models to inclusive, design-based frameworks that align with modern, technology-mediated research habits.

Keywords: Translanguaging, Design-Based Research, Postgraduate Education, Private Higher Education, Academic Rigor, Multilingualism

Introduction

In the increasingly globalized landscape of higher education, postgraduate programs in private institutions have become vibrant hubs of linguistic diversity. Students often navigate complex academic demands using a repertoire of multiple languages, yet traditional pedagogical frameworks frequently remain anchored in monolingual norms. Translanguaging—the process whereby multilingual speakers use their integrated linguistic resources to make sense of complex academic content—offers a transformative lens to view these practices.

This study, titled "Navigating Academic Rigor through Fluidity," seeks to explore how structured translanguaging interventions can support the high-level cognitive and discursive needs of postgraduate scholars. By employing Design-Based Research (DBR), this study moves beyond mere observation, aiming to iteratively design, implement, and refine pedagogical tools that bridge the gap between students' home languages and the rigorous demands of international academic discourse.

The contemporary global landscape of higher education has transformed private institutions into vibrant hubs of linguistic diversity, yet many remain tethered to traditional monolingual pedagogical norms. Within these environments, postgraduate students are often forced to navigate complex academic demands through a restrictive "English-only" lens that treats their native linguistic resources as a hindrance rather than a cognitive asset. This creates a monolingual paradox: institutions market themselves as global hubs while simultaneously imposing a "monolingual tax" that can impede a student's ability to engage in high-level critical analysis. Translanguaging emerges as a transformative theoretical lens, suggesting that multilingual speakers use an integrated linguistic repertoire to make sense of complex content. This study aims to utilize Design-Based Research (DBR) to bridge the gap between students' home languages and the rigorous demands of international academic discourse.

Problem Statement

Despite the theoretical shift toward multilingualism, several critical gaps persist in the context of private higher education:

1. **The Monolingual Paradox in Private HEIs:** Private institutions often market themselves as "English-medium" global hubs, creating a restrictive environment that treats a student's native language as a hindrance rather than a cognitive asset.
2. **Postgraduate Cognitive Load:** Postgraduates face intense pressure to master specialized academic jargon and conceptual frameworks. Prohibiting translanguaging may lead to "cognitive overload," where the struggle for linguistic expression impedes the depth of critical analysis.
3. **Lack of Empirical Frameworks:** While translanguaging is well-documented in primary and secondary education, there is a dearth of **Design-Based Research** that provides a practical, iterative blueprint for how lecturers in private higher education can formally integrate these practices into postgraduate seminars and research supervision.

Conceptual Framework for DBR in Translanguaging

This study is presented as a **conceptual framework** designed to guide the execution of research in this niche. The DBR approach is uniquely suited for this study because it functions at the intersection of theory and real-world application.

The framework follows an iterative cycle consisting of four distinct phases:

1. Analysis and Exploration

The researcher identifies the specific linguistic challenges faced by the postgraduate cohort. This involves "needs analysis" sessions to determine where monolingual instruction fails to meet the students' conceptual needs.

2. Design and Construction of Prototypes

Based on translanguaging theory, a "pedagogical intervention" is designed. This could include:

- a) **Translanguaging Research Seminars:** Where students brainstorm in their L1 before drafting in English.
- b) **Multilingual Glossaries:** Student-led development of technical terms across languages.
- c) **Cross-Linguistic Peer Review:** Leveraging shared languages to critique complex arguments.

3. Iterative Cycles of Testing

The intervention is implemented in the classroom. Through observation, student journals, and focus groups, the researcher gathers data on how these "fluid" practices affect "academic rigor."

4. Evaluation and Reflection

The final phase involves reflecting on the design's success. This leads to the refinement of the **Translanguaging Instructional Model**, contributing both to practical classroom improvement and the broader theoretical understanding of multilingualism in higher education.

Literature Review

1. The Monolingual Paradox in Private Higher Education

Literature highlights a tension in private institutions, where "English-Only" policies often clash with the reality of multilingual student bodies.

- 1) **Ideology vs. Practice:** Recent studies (e.g., See et al., 2026a, b) in private university contexts show that while English-Medium Instruction (EMI) is the "official" ideology, translanguaging and "trans-semiotizing" are indispensable micro-level responses for actual comprehension.
- 2) **The "Monolingual Tax":** Scholars (See and Goh, 2026) argue that prohibiting students from using their full linguistic repertoire imposes a "monolingual tax," where the struggle for English expression diminishes the student's ability to engage in high-level critical analysis.

Translanguaging as a Cognitive Scaffold for Postgraduates

At the postgraduate level, translanguaging moves beyond simple "translation" to become a tool for academic rigor and self-regulation.

- 1) **Thesis & Dissertation Support:** Research focusing on Chinese postgraduate students (e.g., Bao, 2025; Almashour et al, 2026) identifies translanguaging as essential for **self-regulation** during the recursive stages of dissertation writing: note-taking, outlining, and drafting.
- 2) **Cognitive Ease:** Recent observational studies such as Zheng & Drybrough (2023), See et al, (2026a, b) show that postgraduate students use "digital translanguaging"—often mediated by AI—to move from native-language brainstorming to formal English academic output, allowing them to maintain a "flow state" during complex conceptualization.

Design-Based Research (DBR) in Applied Linguistics

While DBR is common in general education, its application in translanguaging studies is a growing but still niche area.

- 1) **Iterative Refinement:** DBR allows for the creation of "pedagogical artifacts." Studies (e.g., Förster et al., 2025; Sa-Ngaphan, 2025) emphasize that DBR is the ideal method for refining language interventions because it prioritizes **collaboration between researchers and practitioners** to solve real-world classroom problems.
- 2) **Material Design:** Literature suggests that DBR is particularly effective for developing writing materials that derive directly from student needs (Förster et al, 2026), providing a blueprint for this proposed conceptual framework.

Table 1

Summary Table: Key Literature Themes

Theme	Key Findings	Scholars
Institutional Policy	Misalignment between "English-Only" policies and actual multilingual classroom practice.	See et al. (2026a, b); See and Goh (2026)
Academic Rigor	Translanguaging facilitates deeper conceptual understanding and reduces writing anxiety.	<i>Bao, 2025;</i> Almashour et al, 2026; Zheng & Drybrough, 2026; See et al, 2026a, b
Digital Tools	Postgraduates use AI and digital platforms for "in-situ" translanguaging.	See & Goh (2026)
Methodology	DBR bridges the gap between theoretical "approval" and practical implementation.	Förster et al., 2025; Sa-Ngaphan, 2025; Förster et al, 2026

Rationale and Research Gap

Most existing literature focuses on **undergraduate** or **primary** education. There is a distinct lack of **Design-Based Research** that specifically targets the **postgraduate** experience in **private institutions**, where the pressure to maintain "global" English standards is highest. This type of study fills the research gap by offering a systematic framework for iterative pedagogical design.

The selection of this topic is driven by several critical gaps identified in recent literature and institutional practice:

1. **Cognitive Load and Academic Rigor:** Prohibiting translanguaging at the postgraduate level may lead to "cognitive overload," where the struggle for linguistic expression in English diminishes the depth of conceptualization. Recent studies suggest that

translanguaging is essential for self-regulation during the recursive stages of dissertation writing, such as note-taking and outlining.

2. **The Digital and AI Evolution:** Modern research habits are increasingly technology-mediated; postgraduate students naturally leverage digital translanguaging and AI tools to move from native-language brainstorming to formal English output. There is an urgent need to align official pedagogy with these "in-situ" digital practices.
3. **Methodological Niche in Higher Education:** While translanguaging is well-documented in primary and secondary settings, there is a distinct dearth of **Design-Based Research** targeting the postgraduate experience in private higher education. Current literature often remains abstract, lacking the practical, iterative blueprints that DBR provides for lecturers to integrate these practices into seminars and supervision.
4. **Institutional Transformation:** This research is vital for challenging the "English-only" stigma, proving that academic rigor is language-independent and that cognitive depth is best achieved when students access their full linguistic repertoire.

Research Methodology

To conduct a **Design-Based Research (DBR)** study on translanguaging at the postgraduate level, the methodology must be nonlinear and collaborative. It involves iterative cycles where the researcher acts as both an observer and a designer.

The following table outlines the research methodology based on the standard DBR phases (Hamilton et al, 2023; Jiménez-Silva et al, 2025) adapted for a private higher education context. (refer Table 2).

Table 2

Research Methodology: Iterative DBR Framework

Phase	Objective	Key Activities	Data Collection Tools
Phase 1: Exploration & Analysis	To identify linguistic barriers and the "monolingual gap" in the postgraduate program.	Needs analysis of student language profiles; semi-structured interviews with lecturers; review of institutional "English-only" policies.	Diagnostic surveys; focus group discussions (FGD); baseline writing assessments.
Phase 2: Design & Prototyping	To create a translanguaging pedagogical "intervention" or "tool."	Developing a Translanguaging Scaffold Toolkit (e.g., multilingual research logs, peer-mentoring protocols, cross-linguistic brainstorming templates).	Researcher journals; draft instructional materials; expert validation of the design.

Phase	Objective	Key Activities	Data Collection Tools
Phase 3: Iterative Implementation (Cycle 1)	To test the first version of the design in a real-world seminar or workshop.	Implementing the toolkit during a "Research Methods" or "Academic Writing" module; observing student interactions.	Classroom observation protocols; student "Linguistic Biographies"; field notes.
Phase 4: Analysis & Refinement	To evaluate Cycle 1 and improve the design for the next cohort.	Identifying where the intervention felt forced vs. where it facilitated deeper academic rigor.	Comparison of draft quality (L1 notes vs. English output); student feedback forms.
Phase 5: Iterative Implementation (Cycle 2)	To test the refined "Version 2.0" of the intervention.	Re-applying the improved scaffolds to a new group or subsequent semester; focusing on the sustainability of the practice.	Longitudinal tracking of student grades; exit interviews.
Phase 6: Reflection & Theory Building	To finalize the conceptual framework and practical guidelines.	Documenting "Design Principles" for other private HEIs; finalizing the Translanguaging Instructional Model .	Synthesis of all qualitative and quantitative data; final research report.

Methodological Features for this Study

- 1) **Participants:** Purposive sampling of postgraduate students (Masters/PhD) from diverse linguistic backgrounds in a private university.
- 2) **Setting:** Naturalistic academic settings (Seminars, Thesis Supervision, Peer-Review circles).
- 3) **Role of Researcher:** "Researcher-as-Designer"—collaborating with lecturers to implement the fluid linguistic shifts.
- 4) **Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis** for qualitative data (identifying patterns of language use) and **Comparative Analysis** for the iterative stages to see if the design actually improved "Academic Rigor."

Expected Findings

In a **Design-Based Research (DBR)** study, the findings are typically bipartite: they include **practical outcomes** (how the intervention worked) and **theoretical contributions** (new insights into translanguaging).

Below are the expected findings for DBR studies among postgraduate students in a private higher institution (see Table 3).

Table 3

Expected Findings: The Impact of Translanguaging Design

Category	Expected Finding/Outcome	Impact on Academic Rigor
Cognitive Engagement	Students demonstrate deeper conceptual clarity when allowed to brainstorm or "pre-write" in their dominant language (L1) before transitioning to English (L2).	Increased: Reduces "cognitive overload" and allows for more complex argumentative structures.
Academic Identity	Postgraduates report a stronger sense of "scholarly agency" and belonging when their native linguistic expertise is validated by the institution.	Improved: Increases confidence in seminar participation and defense of original research ideas.
Iterative Refinement	Initial translanguaging scaffolds (e.g., templates) may feel "clunky" in Cycle 1 but become seamless "internalized habits" by Cycle 2.	Optimized: The intervention moves from a formal requirement to a natural, efficient research workflow.
Writing Quality	Final English-language drafts show higher synthesis of literature and fewer logic gaps compared to "English-only" drafting processes.	Enhanced: The "bridge" between languages ensures that nuance is not lost during the translation of complex thoughts.
Institutional Shift	Faculty members transition from seeing translanguaging as "lazy" to recognizing it as a sophisticated meta-linguistic strategy for high-level research.	Transformative: Challenges the "English-only" stigma in private higher education settings.
Digital Integration	Postgraduates naturally integrate AI translation and multilingual databases into their DBR-prescribed workflow.	Modernized: Aligns academic practice with contemporary, technology-mediated research habits.

Discussion and conclusion

Theoretical & Practical Contributions (The "Products" of DBR)

Aside from the student-level findings, research in DBR translanguaging is expected to produce three specific "deliverables":

1. **The Refined Design Principles:** A set of verified "rules" for how to introduce translanguaging to postgraduate students without compromising the English-medium requirements of a private university (Lim, 2023; Liang, 2023).
2. **The Pedagogical Toolkit:** A finalized collection of "Translanguaging Scaffolds" (e.g., Multilingual Thesis Mapping, Cross-Linguistic Peer Feedback Rubrics) that can be adopted by other departments (Shepard-Carey, 2024; Tseng et al., 2025).
3. **The Evolutionary Model:** A conceptual framework illustrating the **developmental trajectory** of a postgraduate student from a "language-restricted" learner to a "fluid" multilingual scholar (Abidin et al., 2026; Duran, 2026).

Conclusion

The study, "**Navigating Academic Rigor through Fluidity**," highlights a critical evolution in higher education: the recognition that multilingualism is an intellectual asset rather than a hurdle to be cleared. By applying a **Design-Based Research (DBR)** framework, this research moves beyond theoretical discourse to provide a practical, iterative blueprint for implementing translanguaging within the rigorous confines of postgraduate study. It demonstrates that when private higher institutions embrace linguistic fluidity, they do not diminish academic standards; rather, they provide the scaffolding necessary for deeper conceptual inquiry and more authentic scholarly identity.

The Imperative of DBR Research in translanguaging studies

Carrying out this type of study is of paramount importance for the following reasons:

- 1) **Challenging the Monolingual Hegemony:** In the competitive landscape of private higher education, "English-only" policies are often treated as a proxy for quality. This research is vital to prove that **academic rigor is language-independent** and that cognitive depth is best achieved when students can access their full linguistic repertoire.
- 2) **Bridging the Theory-Practice Gap:** Much of the existing literature on translanguaging remains abstract. This study is crucial because it utilizes **DBR** to create "living" pedagogical tools that lecturers can actually use in a seminar room, turning high-level theory into classroom reality.
- 3) **Supporting the Global Scholar:** Postgraduate students in private institutions are often international or local multilinguals preparing for a global stage. Studies like this are essential to ensure these students are not marginalized by "linguistic deficit" models, instead empowering them to function as sophisticated, multi-competent researchers (Hamilton et al., 2025).
- 4) **Future-Proofing Pedagogy:** As digital tools and AI continue to blur linguistic boundaries, the "fluidity" explored in this study aligns higher education with the reality of modern, technology-mediated research (Choi & Lee, 2026).

Ultimately, this study serves as a call to action for private higher institutions to transition from **restrictive language policies** to **inclusive design frameworks** (Sindia & Vijayakumar, 2025). By prioritizing the developmental and design-based aspects of translanguaging, we ensure that the next generation of scholars can navigate the complexities of global research with clarity, agency, and uncompromising rigor.

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