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Translanguaging for Inclusive and Sustainable English Language Education: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

English-medium and EFL/ESL classrooms are rarely monolingual in practice, yet instructional norms often treat English learning as one-language-at-a-time. Translanguaging challenges that norm, reframing multilingual learners' language use as one dynamic repertoire rather than separate codes, but its implications for English teaching remain scattered across contexts. This review synthesizes peer-reviewed articles (search window 2016-2026; included studies published 2017-2026) from Scopus and ERIC, following PRISMA 2020 and quality-appraised with the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), examining how translanguaging is theorized and enacted for inclusion and sustainability, with attention to EFL/ESL classrooms. Thematic synthesis identified five strands: cognitive scaffolding for content and language access; disability-responsive pedagogy; identity and belonging; institutional friction, including in English-medium instruction; and an emerging multimodal and AI-supported frontier. Sustainability proved neither automatic nor uncontested: left unregulated, translanguaging in an English-dominant classroom can crowd out minority languages unless deliberately designed. Effectiveness was patterned by context: teacher stance, professional development, and protective policy enabled inclusion, while monoglossic ideology, rigid assessment, and resource constraints held it back. Gaps remain in longitudinal evidence, disability-focused research, and translanguaging-responsive assessment; MMAT appraisal found at least one gap in 24 of the 44 empirical studies (55%), most often missing ethics approval. Sustainable, inclusive English language education requires treating translanguaging as a deliberately designed practice, not an unregulated freedom.

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INTRODUCTION

EFL and ESL classrooms are rarely the monolingual spaces institutional policy often imagines. Learners routinely draw on home and prior-learned languages alongside English, even where policy asks them not to (García & Wei, 2014; Jasone & Durk, 2017). Translanguaging challenges that monoglossic assumption directly. Rather than treating a multilingual speaker's languages as separate, bounded systems switched between, García and Wei (2014) theorize translanguaging as the deployment of a single, unified repertoire, drawn on strategically regardless of the boundaries a school recognizes. For English teaching, this recasts what earlier scholarship called code-switching, often treated as a deficit, as a legitimate, cognitively grounded pedagogical resource (Canagarajah, 2011).

The term covers three related but distinct things, kept apart throughout: a theory of how multilingual minds organize language, prior to classroom application (García & Wei, 2014); a pedagogy, principles for designing instruction around learners' full repertoire rather than English alone (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022); and a classroom practice, what teachers and learners actually do moment to moment, which may or may not reflect either the theory or a deliberate pedagogy. Collapsing these three levels is a common source of confusion in how translanguaging gets discussed in English-teaching contexts.

Why this matters for inclusion is direct. Requiring multilingual learners to suppress their repertoire in an English lesson is itself a barrier to participation, under the inclusive-education framework UNESCO (2009) advances, which defines inclusion as removing barriers rather than accommodating a minority of "different" learners. Applied to English teaching, translanguaging bears on access to content, participation, identity, and, for learners with disabilities, responsiveness to different needs within the same lesson.

Sustainability, the review's second organizing concept, needs a precise definition rather than a loose gesture toward the Sustainable Development Goals. Following Cenoz and Gorter (2017), sustainable language education means arrangements that actively protect learners' home and minority languages rather than treating them as transitional support that dissolves once English proficiency is reached. Here the argument turns critical: the same translanguaging that makes an English classroom more inclusive can, left unregulated, let English crowd out a learner's minority language. Sustainable translanguaging in English education is a deliberately designed practice, not simply permission to mix languages.

The literature connecting these concepts to English teaching is fragmented across educational levels, geographic contexts, and methodological traditions. A handful of recent reviews, identified during background scoping rather than a systematic sub-search, map parts of this terrain, each covering only one facet: Prilutskaya (2021) found consistent gains in participation and comprehension, while cautioning that monolingual ideologies still constrain implementation; Cenoz and Gorter (2022) argue translanguaging supports equitable pedagogy only when planned with attention to sustainability; Beltran-Palanques et al. (2025) show it increasingly built into pre-service teacher education; and Rezaee et al. (2025) found it strengthens engagement and identity, with limited evidence on assessment. Among these four, none synthesizes inclusion and sustainability as one agenda with explicit attention to EFL/ESL settings, or examines minority-language preservation, translanguaging-responsive assessment, and special educational needs within a single framework, the gap this review addresses, nor subjects the literature to formal, multi-design quality appraisal, a further gap taken up here.

This review synthesizes peer-reviewed scholarship on translanguaging in language education published between 2017 and 2026. Because the evidence base spans general multilingual education alongside EFL/ESL-specific scholarship, the corpus was not restricted to studies naming English as the target language, since doing so would have excluded much of the field's strongest theoretical work; Research Methods and Limitations state which portion of the corpus is EFL/ESL-specific and which is broader literature used comparatively. Four questions guide the synthesis:

RQ1. What translanguaging strategies are reported in the literature on inclusive language education, and which are documented in EFL/ESL or English-medium settings specifically?
RQ2. How does translanguaging contribute to sustainable language education, including sustainable English-medium instruction?
RQ3. What contextual factors shape translanguaging's effectiveness, including in English language classrooms?
RQ4. What research gaps remain, particularly for English language teaching?

Through a transparent, PRISMA-guided synthesis with formal quality appraisal, the review aims to give English language teachers, teacher educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers an evidence-based account of what translanguaging can, and cannot yet be shown to, contribute to inclusive and sustainable English language education.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research design

This review follows the PRISMA 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021) for search, screening, and reporting, and applies the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), 2018 version (Hong et al., 2018), for quality appraisal of empirical primary studies. A systematic design was chosen over a narrative or scoping review because the research questions call for a transparent, replicable account of how the literature was identified and appraised.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

As a review of published research rather than a primary study, the sample consists of the 59 peer-reviewed articles meeting the eligibility criteria below. Records were included if they were (IC1) peer-reviewed journal articles; (IC2) published between 2016 and 2026 (the search window; no included study was published in 2016, so the included studies span 2017-2026); (IC3) written in English; (IC4) treating translanguaging as a central concept, not a peripheral mention; (IC5) set in formal language education; and (IC6) addressing inclusivity, equity, multilingual learners, sustainability, or language policy. Records were excluded if books, proceedings, or dissertations; outside the window; peripheral mentions; outside formal education; editorials or bibliometric; or duplicates. Eligibility was not restricted to studies naming English as the target language, since much of the field's strongest theoretical work sits in other multilingual education contexts; coded by target language or subject, 15 of the 59 included studies (25%) are set explicitly in EFL, ESL, or English-medium instruction, and the remaining 44 (75%) are drawn from general multilingual or bilingual education, other-subject content teaching, or foundational theory. This composition is discussed further in the Limitations.

Data collection methods and instruments

Two databases were searched on 7 June 2026: Scopus and the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC). In Scopus, TITLE-ABS-KEY ("translanguaging" AND ("multilingual education" OR "bilingual education") AND ("inclusion" OR "inclusive" OR "equity")) was applied, limited to Social Sciences and Arts & Humanities, journal articles, English language, and PUBYEAR > 2015 and < 2025. In ERIC, "translanguaging" AND ("inclusive education" OR "multilingual education") AND ("sustainable" OR "language policy" OR "equity") was applied with the peer-reviewed filter enabled. Records carried publication years through 2026 despite the nominal PUBYEAR ceiling, since Scopus can assign a provisional year to in-press records later superseded once a final issue date is set; this discrepancy is disclosed rather than resolved by re-running the search.

Data collection procedures

The Scopus string returned 102 records, narrowed by subject area, document type, and language to 70; ERIC contributed a further 12, for 82 combined. Figure 1 and Table 1 report the resulting PRISMA 2020 flow. After removing four duplicates, 78 records were screened at the title-and-abstract level; four were excluded, leaving 74 assessed against the full eligibility criteria. Eight more were excluded at this stage, yielding 66 eligible records sought for full-text retrieval. Seven could not be retrieved because of publisher paywalls and lack of institutional access (Bonilla & Morales-Doyle, 2025; Carbonara, 2022; Delavan et al., 2025; Ee & Son, 2025; Hou et al., 2025; Sun, 2026; Suri & Jones, 2025); this is disclosed as a limitation (see Conclusion). The remaining 59 records (53 from Scopus, 6 from ERIC) form the corpus of this review.

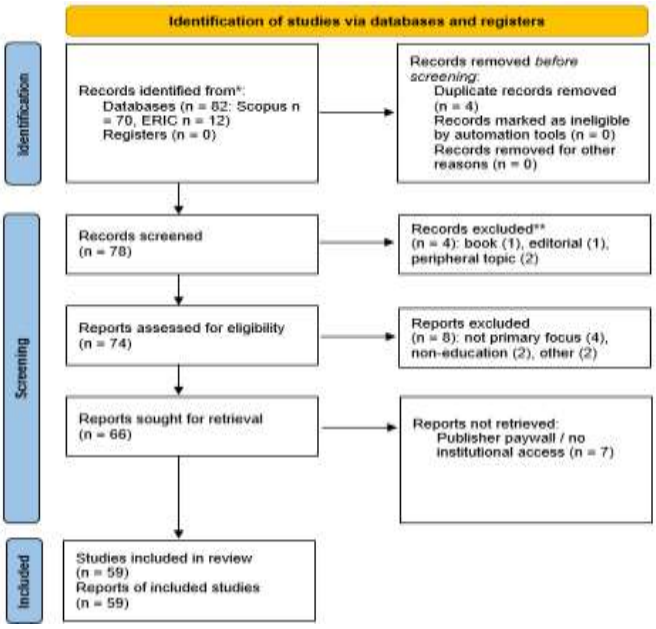


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of Study Identification and Screening

Table 1. PRISMA 2020 Screening Flow

Stage	Description	Records in	Records out/excluded
	Records identified from Scopus (n=102)		
	Records identified from ERIC (n=12)		
Identification	Scopus records narrowed by subject area, document type, and language filters	102	70
	Combined records carried forward (Scopus+ERIC)	70+12	82
Screening	Records after duplicates removed	82	78
	Records excluded at title/abstract screening	78	4 excluded
Eligibility	Records assessed for full-text eligibility	74	8 excluded
	Reports sought for retrieval	66	7 not retrieved (paywall)
Included	Studies included in the review synthesis	59	

Note. Screened sequentially through duplicate removal, title/abstract screening, and full-text eligibility. Screening exclusions (n=4): non-peer-reviewed book (1), editorial with no findings (1), peripheral topic (2). Eligibility exclusions (n=8): not primary focus (4), non-education discipline (2), bibliometric/editorial format (2).

For each included study, the review team extracted author(s), year, title, journal, DOI, country/context, target language or subject, educational level, research design, sample characteristics, methods, key findings, and stated limitations. The two authors divided the corpus by topic and retrieval batch, each screening and extracting the studies assigned to them, rather than each record being double-screened; consequently, no inter-rater reliability statistic could be calculated, a limitation returned to in the Conclusion. An earlier AI-assisted exploratory pass was found on internal audit to contain citation errors, including a finding attributed to the wrong study; every extracted field was therefore re-verified by the responsible author against the original PDF, correcting several coding errors.

Data analysis methods

The 59 included studies comprised 44 empirical primary studies and 15 conceptual, theoretical, review, or bibliometric contributions. The 44 empirical studies were appraised using the MMAT's design-specific criteria; the 15 non-empirical contributions, for which MMAT criteria do not apply, were assessed descriptively for argumentative coherence. A study was coded as showing a gap when it failed one of its design's five MMAT criteria, most often unstated ethics approval; Table 2 reports the resulting quality tiers. Consistent with MMAT developer guidance, appraisal characterized the evidence base rather than excluding studies (Hong et al., 2018). Given the heterogeneity of designs, a thematic synthesis approach (Thomas & Harden, 2008) was used rather than meta-analysis: findings from all 59 studies were coded into descriptive themes, organized into five analytic themes, and mapped against the four research questions, with coding cross-checked by both authors. The synthesis followed the three stages of that approach. First, the responsible author coded the reported findings of each study inductively, keeping codes close to the source wording. Second, both authors compared codes across studies and grouped them into descriptive themes. Third, they read the descriptive themes against RQ1-RQ4 and consolidated them into five analytic themes: cognitive scaffolding for content and language access; disability-responsive pedagogy; identity and belonging; institutional friction, including in English-medium instruction; and a multimodal and AI-supported frontier. Each research question drew on specific themes. Cognitive scaffolding, the multimodal and AI-supported frontier,

and the peer-brokering and affective codes within identity and belonging yielded the five strategy types reported for RQ1 (Table 4); these strategy types classify practices within RQ1 and do not duplicate the five analytic themes. Identity and belonging, disability-responsive pedagogy, and the policy codes within institutional friction supplied the RQ2 evidence on minority-language protection and universal design. Institutional friction supplied the enabling and constraining factors for RQ3 (Table 5). RQ4 drew on all five themes, read against the corpus profile (Table 3) and the MMAT tiers (Table 2). An AI-assisted workflow supported an initial thematic pass, followed by a verification pass checking every citation against the original PDFs; AI tools did not generate findings independently of source texts.

Table 2. MMAT Quality-Appraisal Tiers for the 44 Empirical Studies

Quality tier	n	%
High (meets all criteria)	20	45%
Moderate-high (1 gap, usually no stated ethics approval)	17	39%
Moderate (meets about half; e.g., single data source, no ethics)	6	14%
Some concerns (clear gaps)	1	2%

Note. Tiers reflect MMAT criteria met; 24 of 44 (55%) fell short of at least one. Source: author's appraisal spreadsheet.

FINDINGS

Overview of the included studies

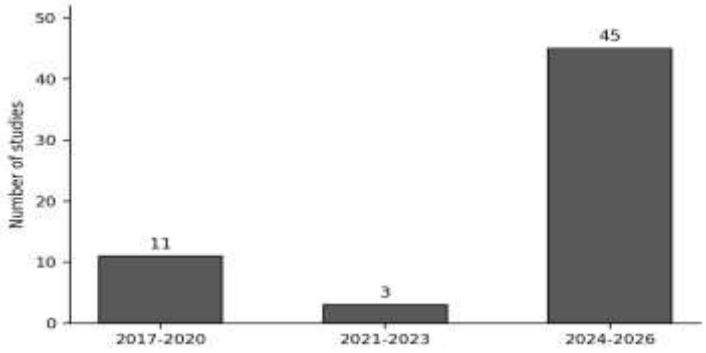
As shown in Table 3, the 59 included studies were published between 2017 and 2026, concentrated in the final three years: 10 (17%) in 2024, 19 (32%) in 2025, and 16 (27%) in 2026, together 76% of the corpus, against only 11 (19%) in 2017-2020 and 3 (5%) in 2021-2023, consistent with a rapidly expanding field.

Table 3. Characteristics of the 59 Included Studies

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Publication year	2017-2020	11	19%
	2021-2023	3	5%
	2024-2026	45	76%
Research design	Qualitative (incl. case study/DBR)	35	59%
	Conceptual/theoretical/commentary/essay	10	17%
	Mixed methods	7	12%
	Systematic review	3	5%
	Quantitative	2	3%
	Meta-synthesis	1	2%
	Bibliometric/scientometric	1	2%
Region	Global South/postcolonial contexts	30	51%
	Global North contexts	22	37%
	Multi-national/not site-specific	7	12%
Educational level	Secondary	15	25%
	Higher education/teacher education	13	22%
	Primary/elementary	7	12%
	Early childhood	6	10%
	Multiple levels/not applicable	18	31%

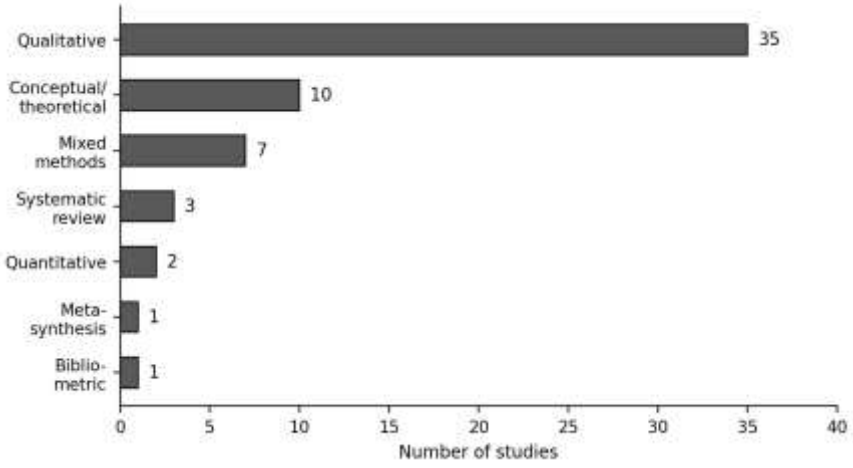
Note. Percentages are rounded and may not sum to exactly 100%.

Qualitative designs dominated (n=35, 59%), followed by conceptual contributions (n=10, 17%), mixed-methods (n=7, 12%), systematic reviews (n=3, 5%), quantitative studies (n=2, 3%), a meta-synthesis (n=1, 2%), and a bibliometric analysis (n=1, 2%), a distribution partly answering RQ4: the evidence base is overwhelmingly qualitative and small-scale. Geographically, studies spanned Global North (e.g., United States, Sweden, Luxembourg) and Global South or postcolonial contexts (e.g., South Africa, Namibia, Indonesia, Thailand, Pakistan, India, Jordan). Thirty studies (51%) were set in Global South or postcolonial contexts, 22 (37%) in Global North contexts, and 7 (12%) were multinational or not site-specific. Educational levels ranged from early childhood (6) and primary/elementary (7) through secondary (15) and higher/teacher education (13), with 18 spanning multiple levels. Table 3 and Figures 2-3 summarize these characteristics; only 15 of the 59 studies (25%) are EFL/ESL/English-medium-specific (see Research Methods).



Note. Counts drawn from Table 3.

Figure 2. Publication-Year Distribution of the 59 Included Studies



Note. Counts drawn from Table 3.

Figure 3. Research-Design Distribution of the 59 Included Studies

Translanguaging strategies in inclusive language education

Across the corpus, translanguaging strategies clustered into five recurring types, summarized in Table 4. Pedagogical scaffolding for epistemic access was the most frequently reported strategy: deliberate use of learners' full repertoire to scaffold content and vocabulary, mostly

reported outside dedicated English lessons (Abdulatief & Guzula, 2024; Moraczewska, 2026). Bao's (2025) conceptual model theorizes this as a Vygotskian, mediated cognitive practice, distinct from ordinary code-switching.

Peer-mediated and dialogic translanguaging involved learners, not teachers, brokering meaning across languages, among the strategies best evidenced in English-medium settings. Boonsuk (2025) found Thai English-medium-instruction undergraduates using first languages collaboratively before producing English output, describing translanguaging as "an intentional and adaptive strategy for achieving academic mastery". Mendoza's (2022) analysis of an English class in Honolulu found a student positioned as "language broker," though brokering did not guarantee equitable participation once the broker's authority was challenged (see Table 4).

Multimodal and trans-semiotic strategies combined language with other semiotic resources. Ponzio and Deroo (2023) found visual-metaphor tasks helped US ESL teachers expand their understanding of translanguaging, and Malgoubri (2026) showed an arts-based workshop shifting Burkinabé English teachers toward culturally sustaining instruction; Sincuba (2025) found curricular rigidity limiting use in a non-English arts setting.

Affective and organizational translanguaging used home languages for classroom management, chiefly outside English-specific instruction: Kirsch (2020, 2026) found translanguaging adults in Luxembourgish early-years settings shaped whether young children engaged others during literacy activities.

Emerging AI-supported translanguaging appeared in only one study: Kuzu (2026) found multilingual learners using ChatGPT as a "multilingual buddy," though voice-misrecognition errors once led the system off-task, underscoring that "learners cannot rely on AI output uncritically," consistent with the wider field still treating AI as a future direction (Yaqin et al., 2025).

Table 4. Translanguaging Strategies Identified Across the Corpus

Strategy	Representative studies	Typical function
Pedagogical scaffolding for epistemic access	(Abdulatief & Guzula, 2024; Bao, 2025; Moraczewska, 2026; Mufori et al., 2025)	Bridges home language and target-language content to build conceptual understanding
Peer-mediated/dialogic translanguaging	(Boonsuk, 2025; Mendoza, 2022; Miftakh et al., 2025)	Learners broker meaning collaboratively; equitable participation depends on interactional stance, not language mixing alone
Multimodal/trans-semiotic strategies	(Malgoubri, 2026; Ponzio & Deroo, 2023; Sincuba, 2025)	Combines language with gesture, visuals, technology, and the arts to deepen engagement
Affective/organizational translanguaging	(Kirsch, 2020, 2026)	Uses home language for rapport, classroom management, and emotional safety
AI-supported translanguaging (emerging)	(Kuzu, 2026)	Uses generative AI as a multilingual mediation tool; empirical base still minimal

Translanguaging and sustainable language education

Sustainable language education, as this literature operationalizes it, means arrangements that actively protect learners' home and minority languages rather than treating them as

transitional support toward a dominant one. Cenoz and Gorter's (2017) argument is the field's central reference point: translanguaging is "at the same time a threat for the survival of minority languages and an opportunity for their development", depending on implementation; their own conclusion is measured, that sustainable translanguaging "is unlikely to remedy the vulnerable situation of regional minority languages" alone.

Several further contributions extend this question. Fabre-Triana et al. (2025) propose an "additive trilingual equity model" conditioning English instruction on institutional guarantees for Indigenous-language literacy in Latin America, and Antony-Newman's (2026) meta-synthesis of 214 studies found social justice was rarely each study's central focus, even though most plurilingualism research touched on diversity or inclusion. Hamman-Ortiz (2024) showed a bilingual identity-text project shifting views of bilingualism, though falling short of the critical consciousness needed to engage broader inequities. Wong et al. (2026) applied the Translanguaging Universal Design for Learning framework for learners with disabilities, though found teachers still underusing translanguaging within general UDL practice.

Taken as a whole, translanguaging's contribution to sustainability is aspirational and contested rather than settled: it must be designed for, through protected space for minority languages, disability-inclusive frameworks, and supportive policy, rather than assumed to follow automatically from permitting language mixing.

Contextual factors influencing effectiveness

Teacher stance was the single most consistently reported enabling factor, tracking closely with whether teachers treated learners' full repertoire as an asset rather than a deficit (Kirsch, 2020; Miftakh et al., 2025; Mufori et al., 2025). Sustained professional development proved more effective than one-off training (Kirsch, 2020; Malgoubri, 2026; Ponzio & Deroo, 2023). Institutional "breathing space," explicit protection of time for minority-language use, was the second enabler, articulated theoretically by Cenoz and Gorter (2017) and reflected where flexible language-separation policy let translanguaging flourish (Boonsuk, 2025; Pawapootanon et al., 2025).

Monoglossic ideology, the assumption that competent language use means one named language at a time, was the most pervasive constraint, including in English-medium settings. Norro (2024) found Namibian teachers avoiding multilingual practice from a belief that only English belonged in class, even as translanguaging occurred freely outside instruction, and Syed et al. (2025) found a parallel contradiction among Pakistani science teachers, 86% endorsing English-only instruction while 77% practiced translanguaging. English-medium policy pushed translanguaging into what Anderson and Lightfoot (2021) term "guilty translanguaging" (India), and Almashour et al. (2026) document a related assessment paradox: Jordanian EFL undergraduates translanguaged freely in informal writing, yet self-censored in formal assessed writing. Resource constraints compounded these pressures in South Africa and Namibia.

These factors patterned somewhat differently by region. In Global South and postcolonial contexts, translanguaging often functioned as decolonial resistance to colonial-language dominance (McKinney & Tyler, 2024, South Africa). In Global North contexts, the tension instead concerned protecting a vulnerable minority language: Fuster and Bardel's (2024) review of 74 Swedish publications found spontaneous translanguaging dominating

scholarship while Cenoz and Gorter's protection-oriented translanguaging remains neglected. Table 5 summarizes selected country-level patterns.

Table 5. Selected Contextual Patterns Across Included Studies

Context	Dominant factor	Key finding
Pakistan (Syed et al., 2025)	Ambivalence between policy and practice	86% of teachers endorsed English-only instruction while 77% reported practicing translanguaging
Thailand (Boonsuk, 2025; Pawapootanon et al., 2025)	Absence of institutional recognition	Translanguaging persists as organic practice despite official English-only/English-medium policy
Namibia (Mufori et al., 2025; Norro, 2024)	Resource constraints and monoglossic ideology	Multilingual materials are scarce; some teachers avoid learners' home languages altogether
Jordan (Almashour et al., 2026)	Assessment-policy rigidity	Students translanguage freely in informal writing but self-censor in formal assessment
Sweden (Fuster & Bardel, 2024)	Under-attention to pedagogical translanguaging	Scholarship favors spontaneous translanguaging; protective, planned translanguaging remains under-theorized
United States (Hamman-Ortiz, 2024; Kilinc & Borowski, 2025)	Teacher stance and program design	Effectiveness tied to whether educators deliberately construct, rather than passively allow, translanguaging space
South Africa (Abdulatief & Guzula, 2024; McKinney & Tyler, 2024)	Decolonial repositioning of majority African languages	Languages historically marginalized in instruction are being revalued as legitimate meaning-making resources

Research gaps

Four gap categories extend the corpus's own design distribution. Methodologically, the corpus is overwhelmingly qualitative and small-scale; several studies call for longitudinal and quantitative designs (Miftakh et al., 2025; Sangeetha & Sri Dhivya, 2025; Yang et al., 2026). Contextually, a small but growing cluster addresses learners with disabilities (Kilinc & Borowski, 2025; Rahmadani, 2025; Wong et al., 2026), though this population remains a minority concern. Theoretically, translanguaging and generative AI remain almost entirely unexplored, with Kuzu (2026) the corpus's only study. Practically, the clearest gap concerns assessment, stubbornly monolingual even where pedagogy has turned multilingual (Almashour et al., 2026; Coyle & Tsui, 2025); a second concerns teacher preparation, often recommended without matching professional-development infrastructure (Kirsch, 2020; Norro, 2024; Ponzio & Deroo, 2023). EFL/ESL-specific evidence is thinner still than the general pattern, since only a minority of the corpus is set in English-medium classrooms.

DISCUSSION

Translanguaging across contexts: a comparative synthesis

Only 15 of the 59 studies (25%) are set in EFL, ESL, or English-medium classrooms, so this section marks which claims rest on that subset. Claims drawn from the other 44 describe multilingual education in general; for English classrooms they remain hypotheses to test. Read together, the studies show translanguaging's meaning and function shaped by socio-political ecology, not one context-independent technique. In Europe, Cenoz and Gorter's (2017) analysis of Basque-Spanish bilingualism frames translanguaging as a question of protection: without deliberate design, it risks accelerating a vulnerable regional language's assimilation into a dominant one. In South Africa, McKinney and Tyler (2024) analyze a

setting where marginalized languages are demographically dominant nationally but institutionally subordinated to English, so translanguaging works less as protecting a small language than as decolonial resistance. In India, Anderson and Lightfoot (2021) show translanguaging as a pervasive social reality outside class but a suppressed, "guilty" practice within English-medium classrooms. In Jordan, Almashour's two studies (Almashour, 2024; Almashour et al., 2026) show the same EFL population experiencing translanguaging as identity-affirming in one context and as assessment anxiety in another. Of these four settings, only India and Jordan provide direct evidence from English classrooms; the Basque and South African analyses concern multilingual schooling in general. Mendoza et al.'s (2024) cross-national framework warns against treating these findings as evidence that translanguaging is inherently emancipatory.

This comparative reading suggests translanguaging research, including for English teaching, would benefit from asking not whether translanguaging is beneficial in the abstract, but under what configurations of language status, policy, and assessment stakes it functions inclusively and sustainably, extending rather than simply confirming Prilutskaya's (2021) and Rezaee et al.'s (2025) broadly positive prior syntheses.

Tensions and contradictions within the literature

Three tensions recur across otherwise disparate studies. The first is the threat-versus-opportunity tension Cenoz and Gorter (2017) articulate: unregulated language mixing that empowers a speaker in the moment can hasten a vulnerable minority language's erosion if the dominant language is always available as a fallback, echoed in Fuster and Bardel's (2024) finding that Swedish scholarship concentrates on spontaneous translanguaging relative to the protective, planned form Cenoz and Gorter recommend. Both sources address minority-language protection in European schooling; in English classrooms the same erosion is a plausible extrapolation rather than a documented finding. The second is an assessment paradox: translanguaging is widely reported as pedagogically beneficial during instruction, yet just as widely absent from, or penalized within, formal assessment, recurring in contexts as different as Jordan (Almashour et al., 2026) and the broader commentary literature (Antony-Newman, 2026; Coyle & Tsui, 2025). The Jordanian study supplies the corpus's direct EFL evidence for this paradox. The third cautions against assuming permitting translanguaging automatically advances equity: Hamman-Ortiz's (2024) case study, set in a dual language bilingual program rather than an EFL/ESL class, found a bilingual identity-text project shifting participants' view of bilingualism as dynamic, without building the critical consciousness needed to engage underlying inequities.

Positioning this review's contribution

This review's contribution reduces to three claims. First, on the disability gap, this synthesis brings together, apparently for the first time, studies applying translanguaging to learners with autism spectrum disorder and learning disabilities (Kilinc & Borowski, 2025; Rahmadani, 2025; Wong et al., 2026) alongside the larger literature on ethnic and immigrant-background inclusion. Second, it quantifies the frequent call for longitudinal and quantitative research: 59% of the corpus is qualitative, against only 3% strictly quantitative. Third, it foregrounds the assessment paradox as a cross-cutting finding, and identifies AI-supported

translanguaging as an emergent but minimally evidenced frontier resting on a single empirical study (Kuzu, 2026).

A conceptual synthesis for English language education

The findings above form a conceptual synthesis, a way of reading the corpus rather than an empirically validated model. Contextual conditions, teacher stance, professional development, policy, and sociolinguistic ecology, shape whether translanguaging pedagogy is adopted at all. Where conditions are favorable, it supports access, participation, identity, and belonging, the mechanisms behind RQ1's five strategy types, accumulating into more inclusive English language education. Whether that inclusive practice also becomes sustainable is not automatic: a moderating risk runs in parallel, where unregulated translanguaging in an English-dominant classroom can displace a learner's minority language. The evidence for this risk comes from minority-language settings outside English teaching; applying it to English-dominant classrooms is this review's inference, which the EFL/ESL subset has yet to test. Treating this risk as live, not a footnote, separates pedagogy that is merely permissive from pedagogy genuinely designed for sustainability.

Implications for English language teaching

For English teachers, the evidence favors strategic rather than incidental translanguaging: using learners' full repertoire deliberately to scaffold content and structure peer brokering, while remaining attentive to which language is doing the work of instruction. Peer brokering has direct support from English-medium classrooms (Table 4), whereas content scaffolding is documented mostly in other-subject teaching and still needs testing in English lessons.

For teacher education, because teacher stance and sustained professional development were the most consistently reported enabling factors, programs should prioritize extended coaching over single workshops. Two of the three professional-development studies cited above involved English teachers, so this recommendation rests partly on English-teaching evidence.

For curriculum designers, the RQ1 strategies (multimodal resources, culturally responsive materials, flexible design) offer a starting inventory for building translanguaging space into English curricula rather than leaving it to discretion.

For assessment, the clearest gap concerns evaluation: rigid English-only assessment can undermine an inclusive pedagogy by penalizing in formal tasks what instruction encourages, so translanguaging-responsive rubrics are a practical priority, not only a research gap.

For institutions and policymakers, classroom-level tolerance is not enough; explicit policy and resourcing for multilingual materials protect both inclusion and the minority languages translanguaging is meant to sustain, and transferring a Global North framework into a Global South context warrants caution.

CONCLUSION

This review synthesized peer-reviewed studies (2017-2026) on translanguaging's role in inclusive and sustainable language education, attending to what the evidence supports for English teaching. Translanguaging has significant potential to make English classrooms more inclusive, but that potential is conditional, and its contribution to sustainability depends on

deliberate design rather than language mixing on its own. The five strategy types advance inclusion unevenly: peer-mediated approaches, for instance, depend on interactional stance, not language-mixing itself, to produce equitable participation. Sustainability is similarly conditional: translanguaging can protect minority languages and validate identity only when deliberately designed to, since left unregulated in an English-dominant classroom it can just as plausibly hasten a vulnerable language's erosion. Both outcomes hinge on context, with teacher stance, professional development, and protective policy enabling inclusion, and monoglossic ideology, rigid assessment, and resource constraints holding it back. Missing are longitudinal evidence, disability-focused research, translanguaging-responsive assessment, and empirical rather than aspirational research on AI support. This review does not establish that translanguaging causes these outcomes; the evidence is heterogeneous and largely qualitative, and the claims here are associative rather than causal.

This evidence base has real boundaries. Most centrally, only 15 of the 59 included studies (25%) are set explicitly in EFL, ESL, or English-medium instruction; the remainder is drawn from general multilingual education, used comparatively rather than as direct evidence about English classrooms; readers should treat the EFL/ESL-specific subset as the most direct evidence. Seven eligible records could not be retrieved because of publisher paywalls (Bonilla & Morales-Doyle, 2025; Carbonara, 2022; Delavan et al., 2025; Ee & Son, 2025; Hou et al., 2025; Sun, 2026; Suri & Jones, 2025), so the synthesis rests on 59 of 66 eligible studies (89%). The search was restricted to two databases and the 2016-2026 search window, with no citation-chaining. Screening and appraisal were divided between the two authors by topic and batch rather than double-screened, so no inter-rater reliability statistic could be calculated. The review was not pre-registered, and the corpus skews toward small-scale qualitative work. An AI-assisted workflow supported the thematic pass; every citation was independently checked against original texts.

Advancing this agenda means specifying, with more rigor and more EFL/ESL-specific evidence than currently exists, how, for whom, and under what conditions translanguaging supports inclusion in English classrooms. Future work should pursue longitudinal studies tracking practice change, participatory research positioning English teachers as co-investigators, and comparative work contrasting multilingual policy against English-only regimes. Sustainable, inclusive English language education requires treating translanguaging as a deliberately designed practice, not an unregulated freedom.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

This review was conducted by two authors, who divided the corpus by topic and retrieval batch for screening, extraction, and appraisal, and jointly conducted thematic synthesis. Both authors contributed to drafting and approved the final manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data-extraction matrix, PRISMA 2020 flow data, and quality-appraisal scores for all 59 included studies are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study is a systematic review of previously published literature and did not involve new data collection from human participants; formal ethical approval was therefore not required.

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