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Evaluating Pedagogic Translanguaging: Priorities in Foregrounding Context

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Abstract

As pedagogic translanguaging (PT) gains global traction for its claimed potential to advance social justice, questions arise about its effectiveness across diverse contexts. Responding to this need, this study a) takes a bird's-eye view approach to the question of which contextual factors to prioritize when evaluating PT's efficacy; and b) iteratively refines and ground-truths its proposed theoretical framework through empirical research. Specifically, drawing on interviews with teachers and analysis of education policy documents in the context of refugee education in Lebanon, where PT is used in both Arabic-and English-medium classrooms, the study finds that while PT may appear effective within individual classrooms, it can interact with systemic factors to undermine literacy development goals when not designed and implemented within an informed, curriculum-wide plan. Grounded in and illustrated by the case at its center, the study identifies five key contextual considerations to guide the use and assessment of PT: (1) literacy development targets, particularly in which language(s); (2) students' existing language and literacy skills; (3) the language(s) of instruction across school subjects; (4) prevailing language ideologies; and (5) the linguistic distance between the varieties used in PT and those targeted for literacy development. Overall, findings underscore the need for more context-sensitive research, policymaking, and pedagogical design to ensure that PT supports—rather than compromises—multilingual learners' access to quality education.

Keywords:

Pedagogic Translanguaging; Literacy Development; Multilingual Education; Refugee Education; Language of Instruction; Context-Sensitive Pedagogy; Lebanon.

Introduction

Research on translanguaging has gained significant momentum worldwide over the past decade. Theoretically, some of this research challenges the notion of separate languages, positing that bilinguals draw from a single linguistic repertoire to meet their communicative needs (García et al., 2021; Otheguy et al., 2015). Pedagogically, instructional use of translanguaging involves encouraging multilingual students to utilize their full linguistic repertoires for learning (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; Cummins, 2021; García et al., 2017; García & Wei, 2017). The rapid growth of research on pedagogic translanguaging (PT) is driven in part by

social justice commitments to support multilingual learners from marginalized groups (Chaka, 2020; Wei & García, 2022), as reflected in the call for papers for this special issue (IEJEE, 2024) and a recent review from the TESOL field, where PT's benefits are reported to include enhanced support for English (language) learning, the promotion of an inclusive learning environment, and valuing students' linguistic and cultural resources (Kim & Weng, 2022).

However, just as research instruments designed for one population can be inappropriate for use with another (Henrich et al., 2010), theories that are even revolutionary in one location risk becoming authoritative and dogmatic in another, as the father of postcolonial theory, Edward Said, argues in his work on "traveling theory" (Bilgin, 2021; Said, 1994). Therefore, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners should critically examine whether PT practices truly advance social justice and/or decolonial goals across borders, settings, and population groups. Indeed, researchers have increasingly emphasized the importance of context in evaluating PT's effectiveness for language learning, often focusing on specific contextual variables (Ballinger et al., 2017; Fortune & Tedick, 2019; Hamman-Ortiz et al., 2025; Mendoza et al., 2024). Fortune and Tedick (2019), for instance, highlight the significance of the type of program where PT is used, advising caution when recommending or applying PT in immersion programs designed to produce bilingual, biliterate graduates, such as French immersion programs in the U.S. and Canada. Ballinger et al. (2017) make a similar recommendation while centering language status as a key contextual factor to consider. More broadly, a recent review of empirical studies on translanguaging emphasizes the centrality of context in its recommendations for future research and calls for more research across a wider range of educational settings (Hamman-Ortiz et al., 2025).

Sharper attention to context can also help in determining which insights from the vast and growing body of research on PT are relevant to one's research or practice. For example, study findings on PT for learning Arabic as a heritage or second language in U.S. English-speaking contexts (e.g., Abourehab, 2024; Deiri, 2024; Oraby & Azaz, 2023), are not necessarily generalizable to settings across the Arab world, where Arabic is learned as a first language. The opposite is also true (e.g., Bin Zarrūq, 2024; 'Wbaḥ & Li'jaly, 2025), even if all these studies address how dialectal variation can be leveraged to support literacy in Standard Arabic. Likewise, research on PT for English learning by Arabic speakers may not transfer well across contexts, as different patterns in students' oral and literate proficiency in both Arabic and English mediate how PT can draw on students' existing linguistic resources.

In alignment with calls for more research on PT's efficacy for learning, I limit my discussion to social justice concerns that are related to access to quality education, specifically the impact of PT on language and literacy development. One could argue that PT brings positive psychological and social benefits to students, and that this, if true, should take precedence over any harms it may cause to learning outcomes, if such harms are found. But psychological, social, and literacy development outcomes are plausibly deeply interconnected, particularly over the long term. This is evident in the far-reaching negative effects of lacking basic literacy on the wellbeing of youth in the Boston area (Martin, 2024), and in the role that sustaining Indigenous languages in Australia plays in supporting the wellbeing of their speakers' communities (Angelo et al., 2019). Therefore, this article's focus on learning outcomes in relation to PT should not be read as privileging one set of outcomes over another, but rather as elevating for consideration an angle important in both areas, and where a gap in the field exists (Kim & Weng, 2022; Prilutskaya, 2021), as discussed later.

But what contextual factors should be prioritized when evaluating PT for language and literacy development? Language learning environments are abundant with contextual variables that interact with one another and with a child's developing cognitive, perceptual, and other skills (Rowe & Weisleder, 2020). Examining all these factors is not only impractical but also likely unhelpful, as more information does not always lead to deeper understanding (Elgin, 2017). Instead, strategically selecting a set of relevant contextual data is necessary to better understand PT's impact on learning.

I propose a framework of five factors to be considered when evaluating PT practices, grounding my investigation of the study's research question in a specific case: the efficacy of PT in fostering literacy development in both English and Arabic within the multilayered language-in-education policy context of Syrian refugee children in Lebanon. This exploratory study draws on conversations with five experienced educators—who are refugees themselves—alongside an analysis of language-in-education policies at the teacher, school, and government levels that mediate the effectiveness of PT for literacy development in the target languages.

Several qualities make this case particularly rich for answering the study's research question. First, PT is not new to the studied context and its use is generally assumed to be beneficial, allowing for deeper discussions about its usefulness compared to a setting where it has only recently been introduced. Teachers of Syrian children in Lebanon, who share their students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, engage in what can be characterized as two types of PT practices to

support learning, even if they do not explicitly identify these practices as such:

a. When teaching literacy or subject matter in Arabic, teachers alternate between Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and one or more language varieties, locally referred to as the Syrian dialect. This practice is widespread across the Arab world, where MSA is used in textbooks and traditional media; with varying "dialects" across countries and regions predominantly used for oral communication (Abu Kwaik et al., 2018; Eghbaria-Ghanamah et al., 2020). In this case, teachers view Arabic and the Syrian dialect as a single language, considering themselves and their students to be languaging within one repertoire.[1]

b. When teaching literacy or subject matter in English, teachers switch between English and Arabic (primarily the Syrian dialect), treating English and Arabic as distinct languages.

Second, most of my interviewees were teachers in Syria before their displacement as refugees. This event led to shifts in some of their PT practices due to changes in the education policy environment, while other PT practices remained unchanged despite the altered educational setting. These shifts provide teachers with a unique opportunity to reflect on the impact of their and others' pedagogic practices across different contexts; not only in relation to language-in-education policies but also concerning their community's evolving language ideologies, mediated by displacement from Syria to Lebanon.

Third, unlike most PT applications and research in the U.S. and Canada, which introduce a minoritized language into a dominant language-mediated classroom, PT in the studied context brings linguistic resources associated with a dominant language or variety into spaces where linguistic resources linked to a less dominant language or variety have traditionally prevailed and been nurtured. In this sense, the refugee education space in Lebanon parallels the language immersion and bilingual education programs discussed by Fortune and Tedick (2019), cautioning against the use of PT. The existence of this pattern beyond immersion programs highlights the need for careful evaluation of PT's implications in other, less readily recognizable educational contexts with similar dynamics. Finally, the studied case provides valuable insights for evaluating PT's efficacy in settings where multiple linguistic and dialectal resources are engaged and learning targets span several languages and dialects.

Findings of this study's empirical component suggest that while PT practices have the potential to support students in learning specific literacy-related content and skills, their use can risk undermining the achievement of learning objectives when not embedded within a curriculum-wide plan for literacy development in the languages prioritized by both the community and the government (Arabic and English). These findings align with existing cautionary advice regarding the broad recommendation of PT as an empowering pedagogic strategy (e.g., Ballinger et al., 2017; Fortune & Tedick, 2019; Jaspers, 2018; Sah & and Li, 2022), and their implications extend beyond refugee education to other contexts where PT is increasingly promoted as a means of advancing social justice for learners.

The findings ground and illustrate five factors that I argue are essential for context-sensitive assessment of PT's impact on learning outcomes: (1) literacy development targets (e.g., in which language and in relation to what content), (2) students' existing language and literacy skills, (3) the language(s) of instruction in the school setting where PT is or will be used, (4) prevailing language ideologies related to the languages involved in PT, and (5) the linguistic distance between the languages or language varieties used in PT and those targeted for literacy development. The findings also reinforce calls for PT to be implemented on a stronger evidence base, with the five proposed factors offering a heuristic for determining which existing research is most relevant to specific educational contexts.

A few notes on terminology are warranted. Building on Leonet et al. (2017), Lin (2020) distinguishes between "spontaneous" and "planned" PT: The former scaffolds students' learning in the moment, while the latter involves systemic planning informed by in-depth knowledge of students' multilingual resources.[2] Following Lin, I adopt a broad definition of PT that encompasses both spontaneous and planned practices. In this article, I use PT to refer to instructional practices through which teachers draw on students' full linguistic resources to support learning, whether or not such practices are fully intentional, explicitly articulated, or systematically designed.

Additionally, while some scholars emphasize a fundamental epistemological difference between translanguaging and code-switching in how languages are conceptualized (García & Lin, 2017), others argue that research on their classroom use is best viewed as interconnected (Bhatt & Bolonyai, 2019; MacSwan & Rolstad, 2024). At the study site, two vernacular (rather than externally introduced or imposed) orientations to translanguaging emerge: one in which diverse linguistic resources from the Syrian dialect and MSA are treated as part of a single language (Arabic), and another in which they are seen as belonging to two distinct languages (Arabic and English). In this article, I retain the socially recognized names of languages and dialects to reflect the salience of these categories in lived reality, and not to represent a particular view on whether

distinct languages exist. At the same time, the diversity of local perspectives on what constitutes a language both enriches the data and strengthens the study's relevance across scholarly debates on whether bi-/ multilinguals draw from multiple linguistic repertoires or a unified one (MacSwan, 2017).

In the following sections, I review relevant literature, then introduce the study's empirical component's setting, design, and results regarding the effectiveness of PT in the specific context of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Findings related to contextual variables that should be prioritized when analyzing PT's efficacy for learning are interwoven within this analysis and take center stage in the subsequent discussion section.

The Role of Context in Language Learning

The importance of context in studying learning has gained greater recognition over recent decades; since Bronfenbrenner (1977) urged scholars to shift research on human development from laboratories to real-world settings, conceptualizing the environment as a set of interconnected systems, including sub-systems such as the family, school, and social values. Beyond such work by psychologists, Sobe and Kowalczyk (2013) in the field of comparative education emphasize treating context as a "matter of concern" rather than a "matter of fact," a perspective further developed by Bartlett and Vavrus (2018). It has been emphasized that the environment's components are not merely a static backdrop for individual development but interact with it bidirectionally (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This means that elements of the environment, such as culture, should be studied not only as independent variables in educational settings but also as dependent, interactive variables (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Warikoo & Carter, 2009).

In educational linguistics and related fields focused on language and literacy development, similar calls for attention to the various systems and actors involved in language learning exist. This concern can be encountered in research focused on language development (e.g., Larsen-Freeman, 2011; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984; Rowe & Weisleder, 2020), as well as scholarship on language policy and planning (LPP) (e.g., Ricento & Hornberger, 1996; Spolsky, 2019). In the latter, Ricento and Hornberger (1996), for example, use the metaphor of unpeeling an onion to conceptualize LPP layers; ranging from national legislation to the interpretation and implementation of policy in institutional settings like schools and media organizations, down to the actions of individual professionals such as teachers and textbook writers.

Context in language and literacy development encompasses both external and internal processes, which continuously interact. In their review of relevant literature, Rowe and Weisleder (2020) distinguish between a child's surrounding environment and the child's developing mind, body, and skills, indicating the need for future research to examine both. A complexity theory approach to language development goes beyond this perspective by framing these elements as context for one another—sometimes referred to as external and internal contexts, contextual processes, or systems—while emphasizing their dynamic interplay (De Bot et al., 2007; Gopalakrishnan, 2021; Larsen-Freeman, 2011). This view aligns with Bronfenbrenner's revision of his "ecological" model into a "bioecological" one that more explicitly highlights the interactive relation between the developing individual and their environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Following this approach, I consider both external and internal contextual factors in this study and discuss them as context.

Contextual Variables in Studies of Pedagogic Translanguaging

Studies on PT incorporate various contextual variables based on my analysis of Prilutskaya's (2021) review of 233 empirical research articles that use translanguaging as their primary theoretical framework. These contextual variables include perceptions of translanguaging among teachers, school leaders, and/or learners; teachers' training in translanguaging theory and pedagogy; and specific characteristics of the languages used in PT, as seen in a study involving several South African languages (Carstens, 2016). Other factors include the availability of learning materials in students' home languages , plus student proficiency in their home language, which Afitska (2020) identifies as a key determinant of PT's success. The goals of the program in which PT is implemented are also discussed, such as whether the emphasis is on literacy development in a particular language or on fostering content learning in a more inclusive and 'safe' space (Adamson & Yamauchi, 2020, p. 111; cited in Prilutskaya, 2021, p. 12). Similarly, program design and organizational structure—such as decisions to facilitate student interactions based on the languages spoken by different groups (Lang, 2019)—have been examined as relevant contextual considerations.

Despite the breadth of factors considered across studies, existing literature appears to focus more on how context shapes the adoption or resistance of PT itself rather than how PT impacts language and literacy development, mediated by context (Prilutskaya, 2021). Recognizing this gap, as well as critiques of PT as universally empowering, at least three publications have placed context as an analytic category at the center of their PT-related analyses. Fortune and Tedick (2019) stress the importance of contextual considerations when assessing whether it is appropriate to use PT, with a particular focus

on education program types and their associated language learning goals. Drawing on empirical evidence, they question PT's efficacy in language immersion programs (e.g., Spanish immersion in the U.S.) and bilingual ones (e.g., two-way programs) that aim to graduate bilingual, biliterate students with high proficiency. Ballinger et al. (2017) similarly advocate for a context-sensitive approach, emphasizing the social status of the languages involved—specifically whether they are majority or minority languages—and raising concerns about PT's suitability in French immersion programs in Canada (also see Cenoz & Gorter, 2017).

Finally, Mendoza et al. (2024) propose a "contextual framework" for critically examining translanguaging. However, rather than identifying specific contextual variables to consider, this framework emphasizes three core components: viewing translanguaging as political, employing ethnographic research, and conducting research in partnership with teachers. It also highlights societal language ideologies and language-related power relations in spaces such as classrooms and schools as key areas of inquiry. Notably, the framework assumes translanguaging to be inherently critical, transformative, and empowering, rather than inviting an investigation of whether it holds these qualities across different contexts.

Overall, despite some discussion of factors that mediate the learning outcomes of PT interventions, there appears to be a critical research gap in this area—an observation that aligns with multiple calls in the field for more rigorous, longitudinal research on various PT practices to better understand their impact on language learning (Kim & Weng, 2022; Prilutskaya, 2021). Scholars have begun addressing this gap by explicitly advocating for more context-sensitive research on translanguaging. However, this line of research has thus far predominantly focused on a narrow set of contextual variables. The present study invites an expansion of such research, both theoretically and empirically.

The Need for Prioritization

While comprehensive models—such as Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework and approaches informed by complexity theory—encourage attention to more contextual factors, the challenge lies in determining which variables to prioritize when resources are limited and which must always be included to avoid distorted understanding. In fact, focusing on fewer but strategically selected variables may advance understanding more effectively than attempting a more exhaustive account of context, while also responding to practical resource constraints.

Philosopher Catherine Elgin (2017) posits that greater amounts of truth or knowledge do not necessarily yield greater understanding and may, at times, obscure it. Scientists, for example, routinely employ models, idealizations, and what she terms "felicitous falsehoods" for productive purposes. Astronomers sometimes disregard planets' actual shapes and dimensions, treating them instead as point masses—not because the complexities are unknowable, but because narrowing attention to what matters for a specific purpose improves understanding.

What is needed, then, is not merely to expand the range of contextual variables under consideration, but to strategically identify those most relevant to the question at hand. Prioritization in this sense functions as a way of reducing complexity in order to deepen understanding, without losing sight of the complexity itself. Accordingly, this article proposes a framework for establishing such priorities in the evaluation of PT practices. The proposed framework was developed with a broad perspective to minimize the risk of overlooking significant factors. The rationale behind the proposal is grounded in a specific case, with insights from that case illustrating both the importance and contours of each included priority.

Method

The Study's Setting

Between 2011 and 2021, approximately 13 million Syrians—roughly one in two people—were displaced (UNHCR, n.d.), fleeing persecution and threats to their lives by an authoritarian regime, as Syria became a site for proxy wars, arms trade, religious extremist plots, and imperial greed.[3] Of these displaced individuals, around half a million school-aged children resided in Lebanon in 2021, with only about 40% going to school (Human Rights Watch, 2021). In contrast, primary school attendance for their parents' generation stood at 97.3%, reflecting much higher literacy levels.[4]

The majority of Syrian children in Lebanon attend school in a "second shift" that is housed within public school premises and where they follow the Lebanese curriculum. Syrian refugees also attend public schools in the "first shift" alongside Lebanese peers, as well as private schools (either for a fee or on scholarships) and double-shift schools run by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or community groups, commonly referred to as "non-formal education" (NFE) (Adelman et al., 2019, pp. 7–8). While the two-shift system maximizes the use of limited school buildings, it also results in shorter school days that are 3.5 to 4 hours long (Abla & Al-Masri, 2015, p. 9; Jesri, n.d.).

This study focuses on NFE programs—estimated to collectively serve about 100,000 children (Buckner et al., 2018)—because of the flexibility these programs

have in interpreting and adapting language-in-education policies at both the classroom and school levels, including setting their own curricula and language of instruction policies—unlike Lebanese public schools, which face more constraints in these areas (Adelman et al., 2019). Additionally, NFE schools are largely staffed by Syrian refugee educators (Buckner et al., 2018) who share their students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds.[5] These schools have been considered better equipped to meet the needs of Syrian refugee students compared to formal Lebanese schools, resulting from factors such as curricular flexibility, cultural proximity, and targeted programming (Buckner et al., 2018). I interviewed five educators from two NFE schools in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley that serve elementary school-age children, with the goal of eventually transitioning them into Lebanese public schools. The schools had also recently introduced an early childhood education program.

Finally, refugees in Lebanon are situated within the broader language ecology of their host country, where Arabic is the official language and mother tongue of the majority. English and French are also taught in schools and are commonly heard in Beirut, the capital, though less so in other regions, such as the Bekaa Valley (Guillotte, 2020; Orr & Annous, 2018). Among the host population, multiple language ideologies coexist, reflecting mixed views on the value of learning Arabic relative to other languages (Al-Batal et al., 2020; Zakharia, 2009).

Data Collection and Analysis

In November and December 2020, I conducted semi-structured interviews with four teachers (all women) and one former school administrator (a man), all of whom grew up in Syria and had either completed or begun their college education before being displaced. These interviews were part of a project undertaken during my graduate training and therefore did not require IRB approval according to my institution's policies. Nevertheless, I ensured that participants provided informed, voluntary consent and were aware that their contributions might be used in future published research, even though no such plans existed at the time. Interviews were recorded and de-identified, and I obtained IRB approval to use these data for the present study. All interviews were conducted in Arabic, with my own upbringing in Syria helping to establish rapport with participants.

The interviews focused on exploring the language of instruction experienced by Syrian refugee children in Lebanon. Viewing my interlocutors as deeply knowledgeable about their world (TallBear, 2014), I sought their insights on classroom and school language use, related learning outcomes, and community perspectives on language learning, particularly regarding Arabic and English.

I began the formal analysis by transcribing interviews for main ideas (Weiss, 1995), followed by conducting a thematic analysis of the transcripts, searching for patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I revisited recordings, transcripts, and emerging themes iteratively, transcribing in more detail as needed and consulting the notes I had taken after each interview. All quoted material captures participants' authentic language use, which draws on multiple linguistic and dialectical resources. Additionally, adopting a constructivist epistemic perspective, which acknowledges that researchers and participants co-construct meaning during interviews (Mojtahed et al., 2014), I was mindful of how my questions and presence may have influenced participants' responses. During the analysis, I was cognizant of my own belief in mother-tongue education as a right and my research interests in language of instruction policies and practices, in order to ensure that these perspectives did not bias the analysis.

Three of the four teachers had substantial teaching experience before their displacement to Lebanon. Yusra[6] taught Arabic language arts to 1st and 5th graders, and history and geography to 8th graders for ten years. After completing her teacher training, Hiba taught for six years in public schools before her family left Syria. Samar taught preschool children and English as a subject in elementary and middle schools before leaving the country. The fourth teacher, Rana, moved to Lebanon as a college student, interrupting her studies. Afterward, she worked as a research assistant at a Lebanese university before teaching at several nonprofit-run schools, bringing this diverse training and experience to her work as an educator.

In addition to interview data, I analyzed six policy documents to gain a clearer understanding of the language-in-education policies shaping the environment of PT practices. Guillotte (2020) distinguishes between three layers of education policymaking for Syrian refugees in Lebanon: the outer layer, consisting of policies from international organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); the national policies aimed at refugees; and the policies enacted at the school and classroom levels. Buckner et al. (2018) supplement this list with local and municipal governments as additional policymakers, along with non-state actors such as international and humanitarian NGOs, national NGOs, community-based organizations, and unofficial schools.

This study prioritizes the investigation of formal Lebanese government policies concerning refugee education, given the significant influence the government holds within this domain. I analyzed national policies directly related to refugee education at the primary and secondary school levels (grades

1-12), published in the five years preceding the collection of interview data (2015-2020). This time range was selected due to the dynamic and evolving nature of the Syrian refugee policy landscape in Lebanon. I also leaned on secondary data sources to better understand the historical trajectory of language-in-education policy development in Lebanon concerning both refugees and Lebanese nationals.

The policy documents analyzed in this study are the "Lebanon Crisis Response Plan" (LCRP) in its 2015-2016 and 2017-2020 editions, along with three related annual policy updates; plus the 2nd edition of the "Reaching All Children with Education" (RACE) policy, covering 2017-2021. While RACE is published by the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) (2016), the LCRP is jointly published by the Government of Lebanon (LEB) and the United Nations (UN) (LEB & UN, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020). The LCRP serves as both a policy framework for regulating and setting priorities for refugee education in Lebanon and an appeal for funding to achieve the goals outlined in various iterations of this policy. Moreover, the LCRP highlights its collaborative development in partnership with numerous domestic and international entities—93 organizations listed in 2015 and 112 in 2020—underscoring not only the wide range of actors involved in refugee education in Lebanon, but also the government's intent to coordinate these actors and centralize refugee education planning within its offices.

Focusing on language-in-education content and following Cardno's (2018) framework for policy document analysis, I considered not only the content of the texts but also their authorship and intended audiences. I was also mindful of the forces and values shaping the policies' development, relevant to the study's question, as well as their evolution over time, drawing insights from both the documents themselves and related research. Given that the policy documents contained limited content related to language and language education, I captured this data in a dedicated document and considered it iteratively alongside the emerging themes from the interview analysis.

It should be noted that while interview data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, interview questions did not focus on the pandemic's impact on education, nor did the topic emerge organically during the interviews. Data from policy documents cover the period from 2015-2020 and do not reference the pandemic. However, I examined a policy update published in 2021 related specifically to the pandemic and include some relevant details from it in the analysis.

Results

In this section, I present key findings relevant to evaluating the efficacy of PT-in-context for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Rather than being predetermined, relevant contextual variables for this evaluation emerged through the investigation. These variables extend beyond straightforward questions such as "what is the language of instruction?" or "which language holds higher social status?" Instead, they reflect a complex picture that requires analysis to contextualize PT practices when assessing their role in language and literacy development. Grounded in the findings presented in this section, the discussion section to follow outlines more explicitly the set of contextual variables proposed as warranting consideration before recommending or implementing PT practices aimed at language and literacy learning.

Consensus on Multilingual Learning Priorities

During the studied period, education policies targeting Syrian refugees in Lebanon prioritized integrating them into the national education system rather than providing separate educational services. This is evident in the Lebanese government's explicit commitment to serving Syrian refugees and the design of policies that jointly target both displaced Syrians and "vulnerable Lebanese." For example, one LCRP policy sets targets for 1.5 million displaced Syrians, 1.5 million vulnerable Lebanese, and 0.3 million Palestinian refugees (including those displaced from Syria and historically residing in Lebanon) (LEB & UN, 2015). Additionally, the government sought to centralize refugee education efforts by regulating the NFE sector and legitimizing only NFE programs that aim to eventually transition students into the formal education system, emphasizing their role "as a pathway to formal education" (Buckner et al., 2018; MEHE, 2016, p. 3). Consequently, language-in-education policies designed for Lebanese citizens are intertwined with those targeting Syrian refugees.

Lebanon's constitution, promulgated in 1926 during the colonial French mandate, designates Arabic as the official national language and mentions French only as an additional language, leaving its regulation to other legal instruments. While English use in education was initially limited to missionary or foreign schools, it expanded significantly after Lebanon's civil war with the establishment of American schools and universities in the country, and with English gaining prominence as a global language of communication, business, and technology (Esseili, 2017). The 1994-1997 national education reforms, formulated after Lebanon's civil war and still in effect today, established language of instruction policies as a compromise between two opposing perspectives: one advocating for a multilingual, multicultural Lebanon and the

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other emphasizing the country's Arab language and identity (Shuayb, 2016). This compromise translated into offering multiple language-teaching options across school levels, coupled with using two languages of instruction in secondary education. In elementary school, English or French is taught as a "foreign language" subject, and schools choose among Arabic, English, and French as a language of instruction for math and sciences, with other subjects being taught in Arabic. In middle school, it becomes mandatory to teach math and sciences in either French or English, with the two languages being also taught as language subjects, and the remainder of the curriculum being taught in Arabic. In high school, the other foreign language (English or French) is introduced as an additional foreign language subject (Guillotte, 2020; Shuayb, 2016). In contrast, Syria's education system uses Arabic as the sole language of instruction, with English introduced as a subject in 1st grade. Additionally, as of 2014, students select either French or Russian as a second foreign language, starting in 7th grade (Al Hessan et al., 2016).

All study participants affirmed the importance of learning one or more languages in addition to one's mother tongue, emphasizing the necessity of English in Lebanon for education, work, communication in public spaces, and supporting children's educational attainment. Yusra, whose own children learned English and Portuguese and now reside in Brazil, viewed multilingualism as beneficial for employment. One of her sons, who missed three years of schooling due to what she called "the events in Syria," also independently studied Turkish. Other teachers shared a preference for learning English from childhood, particularly with a focus on practical usage—possibly meaning oral conversation—rather than grammar instruction, and expressed a desire to make language learning enjoyable. A consistent theme across the interviews was an instrumentalist perspective related to English and other foreign languages, seeing them as pathways to better job opportunities or as tools to assist one's children or students in their education. Notably, only Issam, the former school administrator, suggested that in the Bekaa Valley, where the two schools are located, literacy in Arabic likely offers better employment prospects. He explained that available jobs for Syrians in the area are primarily in sales and agriculture, and that English proficiency is generally more favorable to have in Beirut, where stronger language skills can enhance employment opportunities, but not necessarily in other locations.

In parallel, when explicitly asked to rank learned languages by importance, all educators placed Arabic first and emphasized that learning additional languages should not come at the expense of learning Arabic. Rana, an English language teacher, expressed this view with reasoning tied to identity and pride, pushing back against what she described as a prevailing perspective in the host country that tends to devalue Arabic. (My note: this claim cannot be generalized across the Lebanese population (Al-Batal et al., 2020; Zakharia, 2009)). Rana shared that:[7]

> *It's very important that [the child] learns their mother tongue first because it's their main language... Regardless of how society or people around him deal with Arabic, like here in Lebanon, it's an Arab country but they're embarrassed with [the] Arabic language and always think that if I speak English, then I'm 'wow!' That I've become a perfect person... I'm against the child absorbing that mentality. Why? The child could speak their mother tongue, their main language, and then it's very important of course to learn English. I'm not against that at all. On the contrary, it's very important that they learn English, but it ranks second, with any other second language.*

كتير مهم إنه هو [الطفل] يتعلم أول شي لغته الأم، لأنه هي اللغة الأساسية بالنسبة إله... بغض النظر كيف المجتمع حواليه أو كيف الشعب بيتعاملوا مع العربي. يعني هنن هون لبنان بلد عربي، بس حتى إنه هنن بيستحوا أصلا باللغة العربية وعطول بيفكروا إنه إذا حكيت English فأنا 'واو!' هيك إنه صرت شخص perfect... أنا ضد إنه يتشرب الطفل هذا التفكير. إنه ليش؟ هو يحكي الولد لغته الأم. يعني لغته الأساسية. وبعدين، بس كتير مهم، أكيد يتعلم انكليزي. أنا مالي ضد أبداً. بالعكس، هو كتير مهم يتعلم انكليزي. بس هي بتجي بالدرجة التانية. مع أي لغة تانية.

Yusra, who teaches Arabic language as a subject, alongside science and math in English, and whose children learned multiple languages and were now living in Brazil, placed the child's mother tongue first. She also advocated for the benefits of learning as many languages as possible, asserting that a child "who masters their language well will master other languages." Similarly, Samar, an English language teacher, firmly stated, "certainly Arabic language first," swiftly adding, "[but] also English," sharing in the view that children are capable of developing two or more languages simultaneously.

Regarding language-learning sentiments in the community, I recorded differing views. On one hand, Hiba, who teaches all subjects except English language to preschoolers (ages 3.5-4), shared that parents, whom she described as illiterate in English but able to support their children's education in Arabic, expressed a strong desire for the school to focus more on English. Hiba herself regretted that the adult generation in Syria had not learned English well, as it would have made it easier for her, personally, to teach and benefit from a training program she was part of at the time of our conversation. On the other hand, Samar highlighted concerns raised by families about sequencing and the school's level of difficulty for their children. For instance, some parents asked, "How can you teach [the child] to count in English when they cannot count in Arabic yet?" Issam agreed, noting that if schools teaching in Arabic were available, parents would likely favor them, as it would make it easier for parents to support their children's education—with homework support, for example.

Pedagogic Translanguaging-in-Context and Learning Outcomes

According to Issam, the anticipation of students' need to learn math and science in English starting in 7th grade, along with the potential challenges this might present for them, led the schools to gradually shift the language of instruction for one subject from Arabic to English each year. This decision was made despite concerns about teacher and parent proficiency in English. As a result, while Arabic language as a subject remained taught in Arabic, the language of instruction of subjects like math, science, and sometimes "life skills" was gradually switched to English. This practice should be understood within the context of the school operating on a double-shift system to allow more students to access education. This means dividing the day into two sessions—one in the morning and the other in the afternoon, each lasting 3.5 to 4 hours. Given the limited curricular time, if math, science, and English (as a foreign language subject) are taught in English, the remaining subjects taught in Arabic would be limited to Arabic (as a language subject) and, occasionally, life skills.

However, while English was the language of textbooks and assessments for most subjects, it was not always used in the classroom. Teachers alternated between English and Arabic when explaining concepts and assessment questions. Samar, an English language teacher for children aged five to ten, who taught in Lebanon for five years, explained:

> *It's true that I teach English, but I think that in Lebanon there is much emphasis on the English language. Students learn science in English, math in English, etc. There is very little focus on Arabic... And when teachers teach in English, they don't use... how to say? correct language. For example, I am teaching a lesson, let's assume about plants. I say roots and stem... etc. but explain in Arabic:*
>
> *'These are called roots [roots اسمهم هدول].' I feel that the child gets lost. They're not able to master Arabic language... nor are we familiarizing them with English sentences for example. We just use [English] terminology. That's all.*

أنا صحيح بدرّس باللغة الانكليزية، بس عن جد هون لقيت بلبنان التركيز أكتر صاير عاللغة الانكليزية. يعني عم ياخدوا الـscience بالانكليزي، الـmath بالانكليزي، كذا. اللغة العربية كتير قليل التركيز عليها... حتى وقت الأساتذة عم يعطوهم هدول المواد بالانكليزي ما عم يستخدموا... كيف بدي قلك؟ مو اللغة الصحيحة يعني. مثلاً، أنا عم أعطيهم درس، لنفترض عن النباتات، فقلتلهم roots و stem وكذا، بس عم اشرحهم بالعربي: 'هدول اسمهم roots.' فعم حس الولد تشتت. يعني ما عم يقدر يتقن اللغة العربية... ولا أنا عم استخدم اللغة الانكليزية وأعطيهم مثلاً جمل تكون أليفة عليهم. يعني مجرد إني عم استخدم المصطللحات. بس.

Based on this description, usage of both languages also likely took place in the math classroom, with teachers resorting to PT to facilitate students' understanding of the material and their engagement in class. In these cases, PT may also have been employed by the teachers because it makes it easier for them to teach and communicate with students. Samar felt that there is an emphasis on teaching English at the expense of Arabic, but noted that even for English-medium subjects, while assessments and textbooks are in English, teachers mix English and Arabic in the classroom. They intersperse idioms, numbers, and other linguistic content from both languages, with a focus on teaching children specific English vocabulary related to their lessons. This, she noted, is not good for students' learning.

Yusra shared a complementary observation:

> *As a language, Arabic is very difficult for them. If we want to speak to them in Standard Arabic, they're not able to understand all the vocabulary or words we're saying. So they're leaning toward English more because they're finding it easier to memorize, and they're able to memorize it faster because of repetition... they're encountering it in math, science, and English [subjects], meaning that they're learning it in three places, whereas they're learning Arabic only once. And like I said, they're finding English easier, so I feel that they're liking the English class more than the Arabic one. It is possible that they will forget Arabic if things remain like this. That they don't master Standard Arabic.*

كلغة، العربي كتير صعب عليهم. حتى إذا بدنا نحكي معهم بالفصحى، ما كل المصطلحات أو الكلمات اللي منقولها بيقدروا يفهموها. فصايرين عم بيميلوا للانكليزي أكتر. لأنه عم يلاقوها أسهل للحفظ وعم تنحفظ معهم أسرع كونه تكرار... عم تتكرر معهم مثلاً، بالرياضيات وبالعلوم والانكليزي، يعني عم ياخدوها بتلات مطارح. العربي عم ياخدوه مرة وحدة. وعم يكون عم قلك أسهل عليهم الانكليزي، فعم حسهم ميالين لدرس الانكليزي أكتر من درس العربي. ممكن فيما بعد ينسوا اللغة العربية إذا بيضل هيك. اللغة العربية الفصحى ما يقدروا يتمكنوا منها.

Yusra's comments provide valuable insight into the broader picture of students' learning in relation to both English and Arabic. She explained that children learn to read and write in Arabic only in the Arabic (language subject) classroom, where they focus on learning MSA, the linguistic variety of Arabic used for reading and writing. When considering the role of translanguaging in the English-medium classroom and whether it supports Arabic literacy development, it's important to note that the oral variety of Arabic used to explain things to children in these classes would be the Syrian dialect, and not MSA, exacerbating students' low exposure to MSA across the school day.

Yusra also shared her experience of teaching in Syria where, as an Arabic language teacher, she was required as the teacher to use MSA orally in her classroom, in contrast to other teachers of other subjects, who taught using textbooks written in MSA but could translanguage between the Syrian dialect and MSA when teaching. This use of MSA orally resembles how students might encounter Arabic while watching news anchors or some cartoons on television. Students' exposure to MSA is increased this way, even if they are not required to exclusively use it in class. In Lebanon, where oral use of MSA was not required, Yusra primarily used the Syrian dialect for

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oral communication with her students. However, she noted that this approach contributed to students' limited exposure to MSA, which in turn caused difficulties in understanding their teachers when MSA was interspersed with the spoken dialect.

Yusra's observation that children found English easier to learn due to their frequent exposure to it at school is the flip side of the limited exposure to MSA across the curriculum. She noted that this repeated exposure facilitated their learning of English and led them to favor it. However, it is also possible that favoring English over Arabic in school is also a result of lower learning targets for and through English compared to what these may have been had the target language for learning and medium of instruction been Arabic, given that the student population collectively speaks Arabic as a mother tongue and is learning of and in English as a second language. It is reasonable that schools would adjust learning expectations to avoid overwhelming or discouraging students because learning abstract concepts and specialized vocabulary through a second language can be burdensome and frustrating for some students, diminishing their motivation to read (Benson, 2008). Additionally, the use of PT practices in the English-medium classroom to make content more accessible to students—as illustrated in Samar's example about science instruction—may seem like a reasonable strategy to support comprehension and engagement at the classroom level. However, such practices may also reflect or contribute to reduced learning expectations for students. Advocating PT as a universal solution without considering this risk could reinforce lower expectations, and, in turn, reduce students' achievement relative to what might have been possible through alternative approaches that support more ambitions learning goals.

Another teacher, Rana, spoke directly to students' learning outcomes, noting that their achievement in reading and writing is low. She emphasized that this is the case regardless of the challenging circumstances they face as refugees:

> *When we were in Syria, I used to feel that the outcomes of education... [like] reading and writing were more visible among children. It was possible to encounter a child in 1st grade [emphasized] who writes poetry, or a reflection... To be honest, here I never once saw or heard about someone being creative that way. You feel that students are no longer capable of expressing what's inside them, of writing anything—not even a reflection, let alone poetry.*

لما كنا بسورية كنت حس إنه نتائج التعليم... [مثل] القراءة والكتابة. تظهر أكتر ع الطفل. كان الطفل ممكن يكتب شعر من وهو صف أول.. أو يكتب خاطرة.... فالصراحة أنا هون ولا مرة شفت أو سمعت حدا عم يبدع بهذا المجال... ما عاد بتحسي إنه حدا عاد يحسن يطلّع اللي جواته. إنه يكتب شي. يكتب حتى خاطرة. مو ضروري شعر.

For Rana, this learning loss concerned students' ability to express themselves generally, and through writing in particular. She saw this loss as not merely academic, but also related to creativity and talent, contrasting it to an image of what students would have developed had they grown up in pre-2010 Syria.

Samar agreed, broadening the scope to learning loss across both Arabic and English language proficiency. She shared that:

> *[the child] would lose having a linguistic repository... Meaning that they don't have a linguistic repository in English language nor a linguistic repository in Arabic language. Then if they have ideas, they might not be able to express them.*

[الطفل] بيكون خسر يصير عنده مخزون لغوي... يعني لا عنده مخزون لغوي للغة الانكليزية ولا عنده مخزون لغوي للغة العربية. يعني ف طلع عنده أفكار بس يمكن ما يقدر يعبر عنها.

For Samar, there was minimal emphasis on literacy development in either language: in English, the focus was primarily on oral expression; while in Arabic, areas like composition and grammar were largely deemphasized.

Finally, as my conversation with Issam, the former school administrator, continued, it became clearer to him that I was interested in learning about education in both English and Arabic, rather than focusing primarily on English, echoing what he might have encountered in the context of language policy for Syrian refugee children in Lebanon, as the findings show in the next section. He noted that if students learned more Arabic at school, it would not only enable parents to better support their children's education but also increase the students' confidence, adding that learning in Arabic would boost students' understanding of the curriculum, grades, and motivation to put more effort into learning, implying that all of these aspects are connected.

Assumed Language Learning Needs and Assets

The analyzed government policy documents—various editions and updates of the "Lebanon Crisis Response Plan" (LCRP) (LEB & UN, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020) and the second edition of "Reaching All Children with Education" (RACE) (MEHE, 2016)—were published in response to the influx of 1.5 million Syrian refugees into Lebanon. These documents stress the country's limited resources and challenges faced in hosting such a high number of refugees, while also highlighting its generous efforts to address the refugee influx. They underscore a commitment to aligning with human rights standards in these efforts and ensuring quality educational opportunities for both non-Lebanese and Lebanese children, and emphasize regulating non-formal education (NFE) as a key policy target for integrating refugee children into the formal education system.

"Foreign language" education emerges as a

significant theme within these policies, particularly in relation to school enrollment and attendance barriers, as well as laid-out support strategies for both students and teachers. Regarding enrollment challenges, the RACE II (2017-2021) policy identifies poverty, along with its other faces of child labor and early marriage, as major barriers to accessing education. Foreign language requirements within the Lebanese education system are given comparable emphasis to these barriers to student access to education, with the policy presenting the claim that refugees lack proficiency in the target languages. For example, the policy outlines that "Refugee communities' lack of functional literacy, numeracy, and comprehension in French or English weighs significantly against them," adding that "French-language schools have been reported especially problematic because parents do not speak, understand, or use the language in their communities and therefore cannot offer their children support" (MEHE, 2016, p. 7) .

Similarly, the LCRP (2017-2020) identifies the use of English and French as languages of instruction as a major barrier to Syrian children's access to education, among challenges like missed schooling years, child labor, and early marriage (LEB & UN, 2017, p. 48). The 2021 update of the policy addresses language-in-education in the context of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting concerns about students' access to education and teachers' preparedness. The policy update attributes these concerns to parents' limited literacy, foreign language skills, and ability to support their children's education in foreign languages, though without providing supporting evidence for these claim (LEB & UN, 2021, pp. 72, 75). To complement these emphases, foreign language education is presented as a key strategy to reduce school attrition (LEB & UN, 2015, p. 64, 2020, p. 65), and facilitating foreign language instruction is identified as a primary focus for teacher training (LEB & UN, 2015, p. 64).

The government's emphasis on foreign language skill limitations and related interventions is mirrored in the language-in-education policies of the two schools where the educators I interviewed worked. Although the requirement to teach math and science in English (or French) officially starts in 7th grade only, these schools began using English as the medium of instruction of these subjects much earlier and in a way that arguably made it the de facto medium of instruction across the curriculum. This practice aligns with what has been called a "washback effect," where the language of anticipated key academic tests influences the language of instruction in earlier educational stages (Benson, 2013).

Overall, the policies emphasize foreign language proficiency as a barrier to educational access without substantiating claims about refugees' actual proficiency levels in English or French, nor differentiating offered reasoning per education level (primary or secondary), even though Lebanon's education policies mandate the use of these languages for certain subjects only starting in grade 7, making it a less relevant concern for younger children. Furthermore, the policies frame literacy in foreign languages as the main access barrier, and neglect children's Arabic literacy levels, despite noting that a large percentage of out-of-school children "have never accessed any form of certified education" (MEHE, 2016, p. 7), which means that they likely have functional literacy in neither of Arabic, English, or French.

In parallel, while interviewed teachers firmly agreed that English should be taught alongside Arabic rather than replacing it, few expressed concern about children's literacy in Arabic. When asked about the perceived threat to the Arabic language within the population of Syrian refugees, Hiba responded:

> *No no, it's the opposite, because the child doesn't speak in English language at home. They use Arabic language with their parents, siblings, and [social] environment—but the good and nice thing is that they're getting a good foundation in English.*

لأ لأ. بالعكس. ما هو بالبيت الطفل ما بيحكي باللغة الانكليزية. يعني هلق بالبيت عم يستخدم اللغة العربية مع أهله مع إخواته مع المحيط الحواليه— بس الشي المنيح والحلو إنه عم يتأسس منيح بالانكليزي.

Issam also explained that many parents assume that the earlier a child learns English the better, believing that children will naturally acquire Arabic:

> *No [there is no threat to Arabic], because the parents consider it[s learning] by default. That it is certain that the child will learn Arabic. Especially because there is an Arabic subject at school.*

لأ [لا يوجد خطر على العربية]، لأنه بياخدوها [الأهالي] by default. إنه أكيد رح يتعلم عربي. خصوصاً إنه في subject عم تكون عربي بالمدرسة.

Both responses suggest a sense of security regarding Arabic, with the belief that its presence in the home and role as a subject in school will ensure that children will learn it. This assumption positions home orality as sufficient for developing proficiency in Arabic, without addressing the need for systematic study. Furthermore, neither the quantity nor quality of Arabic instruction in schools was brought into question.

Surprisingly, Samar expressed no concern about children's ability to speak and communicate in Arabic, despite her earlier criticism of PT in the English-medium classroom and expressed concerns about children lacking a "linguistic repository" in both Arabic and English. She justified this by emphasizing that children naturally learn to communicate in Arabic through interactions with their family and friends. However, her focus on oral communication suggests she was likely referring to the spoken Arabic dialect rather than

the development of MSA and of Arabic literacy skills necessary for continued learning, including through the Arabic-medium subjects in middle and high school in Lebanon.

Yusra was the only educator among the five interviewees who, without prompting, expressed concern that students might forget Arabic if the current situation persisted. Overall, the analysis of interviews and policy documents suggests that both community and government perspectives recognize the importance of children learning multiple languages. However, Arabic language and literacy development appears to be largely taken for granted, with English learning being perceived as a key area for intervention.

Discussion

Before advancing and when evaluating PT practices, I propose that five contextual questions be considered at a minimum. These questions were shaped by key patterns in the data and are grounded in existing theory and research emphasizing that language and literacy development occur in context (Larsen-Freeman, 2011; Rowe & Weisleder, 2020). They are:

1. What are the immediate and long-term literacy development targets (e.g. in which language(s), in connection to which skills or content areas, and at what levels)?
2. What are students' existing language and literacy skills in relation to these targets?
3. What is/are the language(s) of instruction across school subjects?
4. What language ideologies prevail in relation to the languages involved in PT?
5. What are the linguistic distances between the languages or language varieties used in PT and those targeted for literacy development?

Each of these considerations is explored and illustrated below and is proposed for use across PT implementation contexts, including the one examined in this article, where the collected data are neither intended nor suitable for generalizing findings across the refugee education sector in Lebanon—or to refugee education more broadly. These questions can also help identify which existing studies on PT are most relevant to a given research or implementation context.

Literacy Development Targets

Both Fortune and Tedick (2019) and Ballinger et al. (2017) caution against promoting the use of PT in language immersion programs—such as French immersion programs in the U.S. and Canada—where the explicit goal is for students to become strongly bilingual and biliterate. In parallel, recent literature reviews of empirical studies on PT highlight the need for further research into its impact on language and literacy development outcomes (Kim & Weng, 2022; Prilutskaya, 2021). Identifying the target languages for literacy development is a crucial step before evaluating PT's usefulness or efficacy. For instance, assessing PT's impact on literacy outcomes in English while disregarding German in a program intended to graduate students literate in both is not only incomplete, but also potentially harmful—since PT practices may inadvertently hinder literacy development in the language not included in the assessment. Moreover, the identification of literacy targets should not be limited to individual classrooms or short-term goals, but should rather reflect broader and longer-term literacy development aims for students. A narrow focus on immediate and micro-level considerations risks overlooking more consequential educational needs. Finally, identifying literacy development goals should go beyond naming the target language(s) to include consideration of the literacy skills to be attained.

Findings from the present study suggest that the development of literacy in both Arabic and English is likely a shared goal among the Syrian refugee community in Lebanon and the Lebanese government, and that both languages should be taken into account when evaluating the effectiveness of PT practices. In the studied context, teachers appear to use PT in an ad hoc manner—either intentionally, to support students' understanding of instructional content, or more intuitively, without prior deliberation. However, when given the opportunity to reflect on language learning beyond the classroom walls and on long-term literacy development in both Arabic and English, some teachers expressed concerns about the appropriateness and limitations of PT in children's schooling. These concerns included noting that students were not building a solid linguistic foundation in either English or Arabic to support self-expression, and that learning both languages was compromised due to switching between them in class. Such concerns can be further linked to language of instruction decisions, particularly teaching curricula in a language that children do not speak at home, and are compounded by the limited availability of resources, manifest in having a shorter school day.

Students' Current Language and Literacy Skills

In addition to literacy development targets, students themselves must be taken into account as developing individuals shaped by and actively shaping their environments (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Larsen-Freeman, 2011). Afitska (2020, p. 176) observes that translanguaging practices in the U.K. and similar contexts are more commonly implemented in

secondary rather than primary schools, as teachers recognize that "for translanguaging to thrive, learners need to have... good, or at least adequate, literacy skills in their home language(s)." However, not all proponents or researchers of PT begin by assessing or acknowledging what students know and do not know. Critically, when proficiency in the home language—especially in minoritized languages—is assumed rather than evaluated, this can lead to inaccurate understandings of students' learning needs and the adoption of pedagogic approaches that may be ill-suited or ineffective.

The Lebanese refugee education policies consistently emphasized a weakness of refugee students and communities in "foreign languages" as a barrier to accessing education and as an area requiring intervention. However, children who are just beginning school in Lebanon may also have limited proficiency in their mother tongue—a condition that is developmentally appropriate given their age and stage of schooling. It is as if these policies operate with an assumed Syrian refugee student: for example, a 12-year-old displaced into Lebanon after receiving some schooling in Syria and who is already literate in Arabic—rather than accounting for a broader and more representative range of learners, including a typical 6-year-old who has not yet learned to read in any language but is developmentally ready to do so. In reality, given the protracted displacement of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, the majority of students in the classrooms of the teachers I interviewed were born in Lebanon and lacked access to literacy instruction outside that which they received at school—including literacy in Arabic. A more accurate and nuanced understanding of students' current language and literacy skills should therefore be considered, alongside short- and long-term literacy development goals, to better identify and respond to students' learning needs.

Language of Instruction

Literacy development is a cross-curricular matter. The notion of Matthew effects in reading (Stanovich, 2009) captures how stronger readers are better able to comprehend texts, expand their vocabulary, and read more complex material, which in turn boosts their reading skills, allowing them to read more, and so on. Conversely, weaker readers face challenges in making similar progress. This notion emphasizes that both the quality and quantity of text engagement are vital for literacy growth. Additionally, in contexts in which students' reading and literacy development primarily take place during school time and via reading textbooks and other classroom materials—such as in the case of the present study—the responsibility falls more clearly on the school to build what Rana referred to as a student's "linguistic repository."

Cross-curricular literacy development is particularly important to consider when multiple languages are targeted for literacy development, as seen in the studied case. Yusra's observation that students find English easier to learn than Arabic "because of repetition" highlights this point. She explained that students are exposed to English in math, science, and English language classes, learning it "in three places," while Arabic is taught only in one. Research on language of instruction policies and practices supports this perspective, showing that fostering literacy in students' home language across various subject areas not only strengthens their proficiency in the home language but also facilitates the development of literacy in a second language (Mohohlwane et al., 2023; Nakamura et al., 2023; Steele et al., 2017).

In the studied case, despite the shared goal among the community and government authorities of building proficiency in both English and Arabic, literacy development in Arabic does not receive sufficient curricular time. This imbalance is further exacerbated by the use of the two-shift system, which shortens the school day; making English the de facto language of instruction. The use of PT also compounds the issue by limiting students' exposure to MSA, the variety of Arabic used for literacy. The paradox is that, while teachers may aim to help students access content at the classroom level through the use of PT practices, such use may inadvertently undermine students' long-term biliteracy development when not adjusted to take the school's language of instruction into consideration.

Prevailing Language Ideologies

Language ideologies refer to attitudes, beliefs, and/or feelings about language—whether about language in general or specific languages—with regard to elements such as language use, structure, and nature (Cavanaugh, 2020; Woolard, 2020). Ballinger et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of considering the social status of the languages involved in PT—particularly whether they are majority or minority languages—before recommending PT's use in the classroom. Discussing the case of French immersion programs in Canada, they caution against the PT-mediated promotion of English, the majority language there, during instructional time designated for teaching French. This caution is grounded in empirical evidence, which the researchers review in relation to three established rationales that inform the design of immersion programs aimed at graduating strongly bilingual and biliterate students in both French and English.

This study's findings support and extend those of Ballinger et al. (2017), for language status in the examined context does not align with the number of people who speak it. Specifically, English is a minority language in both Lebanon and Syria. Nevertheless,

interviewees emphasized its perceived necessity for education and employment. Only one of the five interviewees noted that most job opportunities available to Syrian refugees in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley are in agriculture or sales; and while English may improve employment prospects in Beirut, it is not essential there.

Additionally, language ideologies can also encompass beliefs about language learning and bilingual development, including what have been referred to as common "myths" in these areas (Espinosa, 2013; McCabe et al., 2013). In the studied context, the myth that 'earlier exposure to a second language leads to better proficiency in it' appears to likely mediate school and government policies, as well as parent and teacher attitudes, in ways that supported, or at least failed to challenge, the early and expansive incorporation of English across the curriculum. In contrast, I did not encounter beliefs aligned with the growing body of evidence showing that building literacy in the mother tongue supports overall literacy development, including literacy in a second language (Alkateb-Chami, 2024; Mohohlwane et al., 2023; Nakamura et al., 2023; Steele et al., 2017). Moreover, an assumption that children will naturally acquire language and literacy skills in their mother tongue seems to be present at both community and governmental levels. This was reflected in several interview responses, and in the absence of any discussion of challenges related to students' Arabic literacy development across all examined policy documents.

As such, if the goal is to graduate students who are biliterate, then schools and teachers should consider prevailing language ideologies in their communities—both those related to the languages involved in PT and to language learning more broadly—when planning and implementing language-in-education policies and shaping classroom instruction, including decisions about the potential use of PT.

Linguistic Distances

This study highlights the importance of taking into account the distances between the languages or language varieties used in PT and those targeted for literacy development when recommending or implementing PT. While findings are grounded in the specific case of PT involving Arabic—where notable variation exists between spoken varieties and the standardized form used in writing—they raise similar questions about other contexts where linguistic distances exist, regardless of their degree.

In the studied context, two types of PT occur: one in the Arabic-medium class, where MSA is used alongside one or more spoken varieties from Syria (generalized here as "the Syrian dialect"); and one in the English-medium class, where English is used alongside Arabic—predominantly the Syrian dialect—to make the English-medium curriculum more accessible to students. When considering the development of literacy in Arabic as the educational target, findings suggest that the curricular space dedicated to teaching Arabic is limited compared to that for English and, concerningly, that this already constrained space is further reduced due to PT. Specifically, PT reduces the space dedicated to advancing students' knowledge of MSA in the Arabic-medium classroom. It also fails to support the advancement of this knowledge in the English-medium classroom, where PT naturally draws predominantly on the local spoken dialect rather than MSA. This arrangement stands in contrast to the possibly more effective approach of purposefully using MSA to communicate in the Arabic-medium classroom, which one teacher noted was the pedagogic standard she was expected to follow in Syria but not after her displacement to Lebanon; and of using MSA as the language of instruction across the curriculum, while teaching English as a language subject and utilizing PT (involving the Syrian dialect) to facilitate learning in both settings.

The distance between language varieties used for literacy and those used in everyday oral communication is not unique to Arabic, and can also be observed in languages such as Greek and German. More broadly, this distance arguably applies to all languages, as some degree of difference nearly always exists between the language spoken at home and the one used in print-mediated texts and formal education (see van Pinxteren's (2022, pp. 40–48) distinction between discerned and designed languages). Whether described as languages, dialects, or language varieties, attending to the distance between those employed in PT and those tied to literacy development targets is essential when considering whether and how PT may support language and literacy outcomes.

As an extension of this point, if we refer to the distance between language varieties within the same language as intra-linguistic, another avenue for research would be to consider the mediating role of inter-linguistic distance—that is, the similarities and differences between varieties considered to be distinct languages—in learning outcomes tied to PT interventions. For example, when PT involves linguistic resources from closer languages, such as Spanish and French, or those from more distant languages, such as German and Hindi.

I have refrained from using the term "diglossic" to describe Arabic and other languages with multiple language varieties, as the concept presupposes a hierarchy between the involved varieties (Ferguson, 1959); whereas such hierarchies are not always clear-cut in the case of Arabic. The contextual question in

focus here centers on the linguistic distance between the language varieties and/or languages involved in PT and those targeted for literacy development, regardless of the social status associated with each—a matter addressed by the preceding contextual question on language ideologies. However, the answers to these questions, and to the others I have proposed, may not only overlap but also influence one another and interact in shaping language and literacy development when PT is used. For example, in the studied case, the following contextual factors come together to form a mutually reinforcing environment that is not conducive to Arabic language and literacy development, and which must be taken into account when considering or implementing PT: the distance between spoken and standardized Arabic varieties; prevailing language ideologies that take children's Arabic language development for granted while promoting early and expansive English instruction; and language-in-education policies that encourage English-medium instruction.

Finally, that teachers and students in the studied site are linguistically homogenous is a possible limitation of this study, as it did not invite observation of contextual factors that might require particular attention had these linguistic backgrounds differed. However, since PT can involve teachers facilitating translanguaging among students even when the teachers do not know all the languages or varieties in use—and given the importance of examining PT practices in specific interventions in any case—such contextual factors may be more appropriately explored within detailed investigations of PT, as relevant, and not necessarily advanced as a strategic priority across the board.

Conclusions

This article argues that attention to context is essential for understanding the effects of PT practices on language and literacy development. However, it also emphasizes that the goal is not to account for more contextual variables per se, but for those most relevant to the question at hand—an approach that supports both deeper understanding and practical resource constraints. To this end, I proposed a framework of five key contextual considerations to prioritize in the evaluation and recommendation of PT, and which can be used to judge the relevance of prior research as well: (1) the language and literacy development targets in the educational setting in question, while specifying the target language(s) for development; (2) students' existing language and literacy skills; (3) the language(s) of instruction in the program where PT is or will be used; (4) salient language ideologies pertaining to the language varieties involved in PT; and (5) the distances between these varieties and those targeted for literacy development.

These priorities are informed by a unique case of using PT to support literacy development in both English and Arabic for Syrian refugee students in Lebanon, with the nuances of this case providing a productive context for the article's empirically engaged theoretical investigation. The framework is relevant for researchers, policymakers, and teachers alike, with the following sets of implications tailored to the perspectives and responsibilities of each group.

Implications for Researchers

Future research on PT should prioritize the systematic consideration of contextual variables when evaluating PT practices, and before making claims about PT's efficacy or recommending its adoption. At a minimum, studies should investigate and account for the five proposed sets of variables, which should be considered holistically and in relation to one another, rather than treated as separate checklist items. These variables should also be viewed as dynamic, evolving in response to schooling and the influence of educators, policymakers, researchers, and students.

In reviewing prior literature, attention should be given to research that is comparable to the context being studied along these five factors, with explicit recognition of contextual differences to avoid misguided generalization. This is not to suggest that comparative research is not helpful, but to rather invite engagement in such research with rigor. Additionally, organizing literature reviews around these factors can provide the field with a clearer mapping of existing empirical evidence, facilitating meaningful cross-study comparisons, helping identify gaps, and sharpening analyses of PT's relationship to social justice by limiting over-generalization of theoretical advances across contexts.

Implications for Policymakers

There is not necessarily a need to regulate classroom language use, nor to enforce such regulation. However, for policymakers who choose to do so, it is essential to explicitly examine the five contextual factors outlined above before advancing or adopting PT in language-in-education policies. Policymakers should rely on research stemming from similar contexts to their own across the proposed dimensions, and should exercise caution regarding the generalizability of findings across contexts. Additionally, they should integrate feedback from teachers, and, where possible, support locally grounded longitudinal research to inform policy decisions.

Implications for Teachers

When considering the use of PT or evaluating its implementation, educators are encouraged to consider the five key contextual factors noted

above. Comprehensive consideration of each of these variables is not the target here, but rather a focused approach with the purpose of gauging PT's suitability and informing thoughtful planning for its (potential) use. Several teachers interviewed in this study expressed that certain aspects of language-in-education were not working well in their schools. Teachers should trust their expertise and feel encouraged to voice concerns about language-in-education policies and practices, including PT, when needed. However, responsibility should not rest solely with teachers, who are often positioned as recipients of training rather than recognized as experts when many of them indeed are. This mindset is also evident in some research on PT, where the focus is changing teachers' perceptions of PT (Prilutskaya, 2021), rather than listening to teachers and considering PT's impact on social justice—including in relation to learning outcomes—as an open question.

In conclusion, while PT may appear beneficial for achieving language learning goals when implemented in isolated classrooms, it can undermine language learning targets if not integrated into a deliberate, curriculum-wide effort for literacy development in one or more languages. Understanding the context in which PT is recommended or employed is therefore essential. This is particularly important because all learning, including language and literacy development, takes place in context, and such learning contexts are highly diverse, inviting caution when generalizing across them. These considerations are especially urgent in refugee and immigrant education settings, which vary widely and cannot be assumed to be similar. Ultimately, without purposeful planning for literacy development across languages and careful attention to the language(s) of instruction, PT practices implemented in individual classrooms risk contributing to "subtractive schooling" (Valenzuela, 1999), depleting rather than enriching students' linguistic and cultural resources—challenging the notion that PT is inherently empowering or decolonial.

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Footnotes

[1]Recent scholarship on PT for learning Arabic has introduced the term transdialecting to refer to "[translanguaging] within Arabic dialects in the classroom" (Deiri, 2024, p. 94). Deiri (2024) differentiates between interlanguage translanguaging practices and intra-language (transdialecting) practices, whereas Abourehab (2024) and Oraby & Azaz (2023) treat transdialecting and translanguaging as interchangeable. Similarly, the purposeful use of the Cypriot Greek dialect in the classroom to facilitate the learning of Standard Modern Greek has been examined as translanguaging (Stavrou, 2020).

[2]Lin (2020) uses the terms "spontaneous translanguaging pedagogies" and "planned translanguaging pedagogies." However, she employs the terms "translanguaging pedagogies" in the same sense in which PT is used in this article. I therefore relabeled her distinction as spontaneous and planned PT for consistency. Both fall under "translanguaging design" (García et al., 2017, pp. xii–xiii), as opposed to a "translanguaging stance," which refers to underlying beliefs only.

[3]I have intentionally avoided using terms like "conflict," "war," and "civil war" in my descriptions. For a discussion on how the language we use impacts justice, see (Ghaddar, 2016).

[4]This estimate is based on the average primary school completion rates from 1994 to 2007 in Syria (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2021), selected to reflect the period when the parents of children aged 5-18 would have completed primary school, and assuming parents in this population group are, on average, 22 years older than their children.

[5]This generalization is informed by language-mapping research related to Syrian refugees (Ahmadzadeh et al., 2014) and input from my interviewees, indicating that Syrian refugees in Lebanon are Arabic speakers and suggesting that Syria's linguistic minorities, when displaced, generally sought refuge in countries with aligned linguistic environments, such as Syrian Kurds moving to the Kurdistan region of Iraq and Syrian Armenians to Armenia. Additionally, it is important to note that this study's data do not cover the use of sign language in the Syrian refugee education context in Lebanon.

[6]All names are pseudonyms.

[7]Interviews were conducted over the phone in Arabic (Syrian dialect and some MSA). My transcription retains the original exchange rather than formalizing it into MSA, allowing Arabic language readers to observe the within-language translanguaging. A few words or phrases were shared by interviewees in English, which are presented as originally spoken in the non-translated transcripts and italicized in the translated versions. Additionally, since the masculine

form in Arabic is commonly used to generalize across genders, I used "they/their" instead of "he/his" in my translations to preserve the intended meaning.

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