

INTERVIEW

Language, Land, and Translanguaging: A Conversation with Ofelia García on Transformative Bilingual Education

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Abstract

This conversation with Dr. Ofelia García, conducted by Dr. Susana Ibarra Johnson, delves into the origins, evolution, and transformative potential of translanguaging within bilingual education. Drawing inspiration from García's groundbreaking work in New York public schools, her theoretical and personal journey, and her intergenerational reflections, the dialogue weaves together critical moments of scholarly emergence, lived experience, and human connection. The discussion spans the genesis of translanguaging from its Welsh and Cuban roots, its implementation through state-level education initiatives, and its theoretical reimagining toward sustainability and agency. Themes such as the mountain metaphor, flexibility in language use ("it is better to bend than to break"), teacher and student agency, the power of family translanguaging practices, and the future of AI in bilingual education illustrate García's enduring belief in language as an ecological and relational practice. Concluding with her reflections on Braiding Sweetgrass by Robin Wall Kimmerer, the dialogue highlights translanguaging as both a philosophy and practice of living in balance with others and the world.

Keywords

bilingual education; language ecology; Ofelia García; teacher and student agency; translanguaging

INTERVIEW

Susana: Ofelia, it's such a joy to be in conversation with you again. I first encountered your work in *Bilingual Education in the 21st Century* (García, 2009), when I was writing my dissertation. At that time, I was observing teachers in dual language classrooms but couldn't name what I saw—until I found your work on translanguaging. I remember thinking, *oh my goodness, that's it!* The way these teachers were allowing students to draw from their entire linguistic repertoires suddenly made sense. And of course, your work with the CUNY-NYS Initiative has been profoundly influential nationally and internationally.

Ofelia: Gracias, Susana. I always say that I discovered you, but in truth, you discovered yourself. The work you have done to continue developing a generation of scholars working on translanguaging has been so important. I am grateful for our friendship and for the way we have shaped this field together—from *The Translanguaging Classroom* (García et al., 2017)

to your ongoing research in New Mexico. It's beautiful to see how the work continues to grow.

Susana: And I think it continues to resonate because it gives us language for what we were living. For many of us who grew up bilingual, we felt that tension being told to separate what was whole. Translanguaging gave us the vocabulary to name that wholeness.

Ofelia: Yes! It offered us a way to legitimize our experiences and those of our students. Translanguaging doesn't just describe what bilinguals do; it affirms who they are. It reminds us that linguistic flexibility is not confusion; it is creativity and survival.

Susana: Let's go back to those beginnings. How did translanguaging first emerge in your thinking, and what personal moments influenced it?

Ofelia: It really started from noticing how the world didn't fit into the theories I was reading. I was trained in sociolinguistics, but the frameworks felt unproductive. They didn't reflect the linguistic dance I saw in families, in children, or in my own home. I began asking myself: where is the humanity in these descriptions of language?

Susana: That sounds like a turning point... A kind of intellectual rebellion!

Ofelia: And it took courage. Joshua Fishman, my mentor, taught me rigor, but he also taught me to respect people's lived realities. Still, I had to unlearn some things to make space for new ideas. Reading Siffree Makoni and Alastair Pennycook's *Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages* (2007) was a revelation. It opened a door for me to reimagine language as a social invention; something we can also reinvent. Translanguaging became my way of reinventing bilingualism. I owed a lot to Joshua Fishman, my mentor... I didn't know about the world, about language too much. I had not traveled. I didn't understand certain things, and he taught me patiently... it took me a very long time to really liberate myself from that.

I was fortunate enough to discuss translanguaging with him when he was already an old man, but certainly all there, and he was always very generous and encouraging me to think for myself. My work has always been in classrooms, and I was always thinking of how this theorization affects the life of others and especially teachers. So, I was very concerned about how this affects the practice? But I also had to think theoretically differently. And really, you know, I always say there were watershed moments in your life when you are allowed the space to say something different... For me it was created by an invitation... Siffree Makoni and Alistair Pennycook... putting out a book called *Disinventing and Reconstituting*

Language. And when I read that book, I thought, ‘This makes me question everything that I have thought about language, and it gives me a space to say something different.’

Susana: I love that. It’s as if you turned the question from *what language is* to *what language does*.

Ofelia: Precisely! Language is action, movement, and relation. Later, my visit to Wales connected me with Colin Baker and Cen Williams, who used the term *trawsieithu* to describe bilingual classroom practices. But I saw it differently. In New York City, the languages were always overlapping Spanish, English, Bengali, Mandarin, constantly in movement. Translanguaging, for me, was not just one language for input and one for output; it was the in-between space of living bilingually.

Susana: And your connection to Fernando Ortiz’s (1940) work in Cuba?

Ofelia: That came when I started reading Cuban thinkers to understand my own identity. Ortiz’s *transculturation* described how cultures merge and created something entirely new. That spoke to me as a bilingual Cuban scholar in the United States. Translanguaging is the linguistic equivalent of transculturation. It resists purity and celebrates emergence.

Susana: How did that original work start, you know, because I know it’s with New York State Board of Education... that work has influenced nationally, internationally... How did you even get started?

Ofelia: It all starts always from our own experiences... I live in New York City, you in Texas and then New Mexico. But you know, I think that we have both felt that our lives, and sometimes the ways in which people saw our language did not fit us, did not fit our families, did not fit the ways in which we were acting. And so... I think that’s how it all starts. It all starts from starting to question your own life with the scholarship that you’re reading, and how you’re making sense of it. It’s almost like what we do with children when we teach them how to read: What are the text-to-life connections? And that was what was important to me. What was the text that I was reading in sociolinguistics, and how did that relate to my life?

As minority scholars, as Latina scholars, and in my case, as an older Latina scholar when there weren’t that many of us... it felt lonely, and it felt threatening to go against the grain... So, I think it took me a very long time to actually liberate myself from my mentor. You learn from your mentors, but you also learn from your present experience, and you actually learn from your future mentors, who are your students constantly, right?

Susana: Your work with the New York State Department of Education moved bilingual education from a subtractive to a transformative approach. What were those early days like?

Ofelia: Chaotic and beautiful! (laughs) We had no roadmap. When Nelson Flores and I began, the state gave us a mandate to improve test scores. But we had another mission: to reimagine learning. Translanguaging became our compass. We built teams that included faculty, doctoral students, and classroom teachers. We learned as we went, sometimes failing, sometimes succeeding. The key was humility in listening to teachers and students and adapting to each school's realities.

Susana: And how did schools respond?

Ofelia: Some with enthusiasm, others with skepticism. ESL teachers were often the most open; they were desperate for new ideas. But bilingual teachers were more resistant. They had been trained to believe that separation equals success. I always told them, *if we fail with bilingual teachers, we fail the movement*. They are the ones who must model integration for their students.

Susana: That resonates with what we see today, how translanguaging challenges long-standing power structures even in bilingual spaces.

Ofelia: Exactly. Translanguaging unsettles hierarchies between languages, teachers, and even between students and knowledge itself.

Susana: In your collaborations with teachers, you often emphasize that translanguaging is less a strategy and more a stance. What does that stance look like in teacher preparation?

Ofelia: A translanguaging stance means teachers learn to see themselves as designers of equitable spaces. They reflect on their own linguistic histories and biases. In our professional development work, I often tell teachers, 'We are not teaching languages, we are teaching people who language.' That simple shift changes everything.

Susana: That's such a powerful reframing. I've seen bilingual teacher candidates here at NMSU struggle to reconcile the theories with what administrators expect in the classroom.

Ofelia: Yes, and it's the same everywhere. Many teachers fear that embracing translanguaging will be seen as 'breaking the rules.' But rules are often colonial remnants. What we need are educators who can see rules as negotiable when they limit justice.

Susana: Could you share an example from your teacher education work that illustrates that negotiation?

Ofelia: One teacher in the Bronx realized that her ‘English-only’ writing block excluded half of her students’ thinking. She redesigned her assignments so students could brainstorm in any language and later translate parts collaboratively. The quality of writing and confidence skyrocketed. That’s translinguaging praxis; it’s an ethical, human-centered redesign.

Susana: So, reflection and risk-taking seem essential to the stance.

Ofelia: Yes, and community too. Translinguaging thrives when teachers form learning circles where they share questions, not answers. They realize they are part of a movement, not just implementing a framework. New York State supported us for nine years. We had money every year to work in the schools. We did good work... except, they never ever linked our website to theirs. They didn’t want to acknowledge translinguaging as something they were supporting. They wanted the schools doing better, not to make that connection.

It’s taken all these years... but next year, a whole cohort of teachers is being trained through translinguaging. The work is slow, Susana. They were never completely aligned with us; except I think they trusted that we were doing something. They didn’t understand what we were doing, but something... How do you sustain the work? The only way is to get teacher educators to think differently... to put together teams: faculty and doctoral students... because the faculty members have the experience, but they’re not as close to the classroom as the doctoral students who know what’s happening. Collaboration is critical.

Susana: There’s still anxiety about mixing languages, people fear losing heritage languages, or seeing English dominate.

Ofelia: Yes, and I understand that fear. But separation doesn’t guarantee preservation. Languages live through use, not isolation. It’s like trying to keep a river pure by stopping its flow you end up with stagnation. Translinguaging is a *corriente*.

Susana: That’s such a powerful image. I often hear teachers say they want to preserve language like a museum piece, but students need to live in it.

Ofelia: We should think of language as part of an ecosystem. Sustainability, not preservation. Language grows, bends, and transforms through context and identity. It’s an ecological process, not static, but alive. Translinguaging is not in opposition to bilingual education or bilingualism... It opens up bilingual education, opens our sense of bilingualism without annihilating it. What you’re describing about math, or science... Other young scholars now... this is it, because again, translinguaging opens space for conceptualizing and thinking differently.

Susana: I use a mountain metaphor to describe how languages evolve while remaining grounded. What do you think of that analogy?

Ofelia: It's beautiful. Mountains shift; they erode and reform. Language is like that formed by pressure, time, and interaction. Each generation reshapes the landscape. My grandchildren are part of that geological formation of their translanguaging. They are reshaping linguistic earth. That is translanguaging in motion.

Susana: And it speaks to sustainability, not loss.

Ofelia: We must move from a discourse of loss to one of becoming. The mountain keeps rising. And we rise with it. One of my mentors, Einar Haugen, once told me: *It is better to bend than to break*. I think about that daily. In raising bilingual children and grandchildren, I've learned that rigidity kills joy. My grandchildren know who speaks Spanish and who doesn't. They call us *the Spanish ones* (laughs). When I speak to them, I move fluidly between languages. That's our natural discourse. If I enforced purity, I'd risk breaking their connection to the language. Instead, I bend, and they flourish.

Susana: That image of bending feels deeply pedagogical like allowing language to breathe in the classroom.

Ofelia: Yes, and in families too. Translanguaging is about creating relational breathing spaces places where children can bring all of themselves. That's preservation through love.

Susana: You've often said translanguaging begins at home. What does that look like in your family?

Ofelia: My family lives translanguaging daily. My daughters married English speakers, and our gatherings are symphonies of languages. We speak bilingually, we translate, we laugh at misunderstandings, but most importantly, we connect. When my grandson says, "I take the tunnel to see the Spanish ones," he is acknowledging belonging. That kind of linguistic consciousness is priceless. Translanguaging in families is about nurturing belonging, about showing children that all their voices matter.

Susana: That's such an important point for educators too that translanguaging isn't just pedagogy, it's identity work.

Ofelia: Yes, and love work. When we translanguage with children, we are saying: *I see all of you*. For young people growing up in bilingual homes or contexts... If every time they speak you tell them 'No, you can't speak; you have to say it in Spanish,' eventually they're going to

shut it down. So... it's better to bend than to break. For my own grandchildren, I speak to them mostly in Spanish, but with a lot of translanguaging our usual discourse. That way, they become more conscious of Spanish than if I didn't. Translanguaging is a way of preserving language, an ecological model. You manipulate not the language itself, but the context: the cultural practices, stories, dreams, songs, music, food. That's what I would say about language preservation with families and children.

Susana: Let's talk about agency. You've helped redefine what it means for teachers and students to have linguistic agency.

Ofelia: Agency is the freedom to language without apology. Teachers who adopt translanguaging stances become mediators of justice. They validate the ways students already communicate. Students, in turn, gain confidence to use their full repertoires. I've seen students transform when teachers stop correcting and start listening. Their writing changes, their participation grows. Agency starts with the opportunity to be whole.

Susana: And I think about how teacher education programs can model that stance.

Ofelia: Yes. We must prepare teachers who are not language police but language gardeners. They cultivate growth, diversity, and curiosity. Policy often lags, but teachers can lead by example creating classrooms that mirror the world we wish to build. Minoritized, racialized bilinguals are led to believe their practices are inferior compared to monolinguals in English or Spanish. You have to ensure they understand their practices are valuable; they have a richer and more complex repertoire. That's a very different viewpoint from the one that says your acquisition is incomplete. Families have great responsibility at home not to continuously say those things that make kids not want to speak Spanish or try it. Families must make sure kids are proud of who they are and their home language practices are rich and dynamic and fit their communicative intent.

Susana: Looking back, were there crossroads where you might have chosen differently?

Ofelia: Many. There were moments when I wondered whether bilingual education could bear the weight of transformation. I remember a conference where every panel focused on testing and accountability. I stood up and said, *Bilingual education isn't just a strategy—it's a movement for humanity*. The room fell silent. Later, young scholars approached me, saying that moment changed how they saw the field. That's when I knew that the crossroads between conformity and courage always leads back to voice. Translanguaging gave me that voice.

Susana: That's powerful, and it mirrors the very crossroads our teachers face.

Ofelia: Each teacher stands at that intersection between control and creativity, between policy and pedagogy. Choosing translanguaging is choosing humanity. I was so happy to be at City College in Harlem, the public university, when I first started... I learned more during those years at City College than anywhere else, because my students taught me... it was the community, grounded in reality. I became the dean of a school of education... a large minority student body was not passing teacher certification exams. The President heard me speak, and against all this move of getting rid of minority teachers... He came after me. I said, 'I don't like to manage things,' but he said, 'Come and do a few years.' We did a lot of good work, changed the curriculum, hired good people.

After six years... I looked back and said, 'Okay, it's done. I miss teaching. I have always been in public institutions, so when Teachers College, Columbia, had a position, I moved, but soon understood I did not belong there... I was interested in working on 120th Street, in New York. So, when the public university had an opening in urban education, I left... My legacy is all those doctoral students trained as bilingual educators. I wouldn't do anything differently. I have been in New York City where there are different institutions, but I was always sure I was not going anywhere else. I had been uprooted once; New York became my home, and I was not going anywhere else.

Susana: As technology expands, how do you see AI intersecting with bilingual education?

Ofelia: These are such difficult times that you really have to make space for dreaming, imagination, and a future that holds promise... Frightening and exciting at the same time is the development of AI. For example, at a conference in Switzerland, everyone spoke their own languages, and there was a QR code that translated simultaneously to eight languages... that was amazing. The possibilities that technology offers, if used properly, are great: the possibility of better assessments, classroom-based and adaptive... It's also frightening if it becomes only more automation.

But the resistance of young scholars is exciting to me; I'm very encouraged and grateful for the courage they've shown and continue to show—the critical voice exercised all the time. AI can amplify or erase voices. At a recent conference, I watched teachers demonstrate AI projects where students recorded family stories in multiple languages with Spanish, English, and Indigenous languages. That was translanguaging through technology. But I also

saw AI tools “correcting” children’s speech into standardized English erasing identity in the process.

Susana: So, the danger is that AI could replicate monolingual ideologies.

Ofelia: We need translanguaging-informed AI tools that listen across repertoires. Imagine an AI that celebrates linguistic fluidity, that offers feedback recognizing multiple grammars. Technology should expand human expression, not constrain it. If AI is designed with ethical multilingualism, it can democratize access and representation.

Susana: That’s a hopeful vision.

Ofelia: Hope is necessary. Otherwise, we leave technology to those who see language as error rather than artistry.

Susana: To close, what are you reading now?

Ofelia: *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer. It speaks to my spirit. Kimmerer (2013) shows how knowledge, gratitude, and language intertwine. Her writing reminds us that language is breath shared between humans and the earth. Translanguaging is like that braiding, a weaving of elements that sustain life. We don’t separate the strands; we honor how they hold together.


Susana: A perfect metaphor for your life’s work.


Ofelia: Thank you, Susana. We both know translanguaging isn’t just academic. It’s a way of living with integrity and joy.

CONCLUSION

In this expansive dialogue, Dr. Ofelia García reminds us that translanguaging is more than a pedagogical method; it is an ethical and ecological worldview. Through stories of family, scholarship, and imagination, she redefines bilingual education as an act of love, courage, and possibility. Her call to educators, families, and technologists is clear: to nurture linguistic life as we would the earth, with care, curiosity, and commitment. García’s hope lies in children: “The promise is the children because my work has been in classrooms, in the development of children. José Martí’s saying was, ‘Los niños son la esperanza del mundo’ (children are the hope of the world). I look at children’s actions, innocence, and potential, and that’s where I find the spaces for a different future. That’s it.”

THE AUTHORS

Ofelia García  is Professor Emerita in Urban Education and Latin American, Iberian, and Latino Cultures. She is internationally known for her work on bilingual education and the education of racialized students, language policy, multilingualism, and the sociology of language. Her concepts of dynamic bilingualism and translanguaging have had a significant impact on understandings of the complex language practices of bi/multilingual students and have been the topic of her numerous publications. García came to the Graduate Center from Columbia University's Teachers College and was previously dean of the School of Education at the Brooklyn campus of Long Island University. The American Educational Research Association has awarded her two Lifetime Research Achievement Awards Distinguished Contributions to Social Contexts in Education (2019) and Bilingual Education (2017), as well as Second Language Acquisition Leadership through Research Award (2019).

Susana Ibarra Johnson  is Assistant Professor of Bilingual Education/TESOL at New Mexico State University. Her commitment to improving the education of bilingual students is evident in her diverse and extensive experience. She has served in various roles, including as a professional development specialist, associate researcher for WIDA, director of bilingual multicultural education programs at Bernalillo Public Schools, district biliteracy specialist for Albuquerque Public Schools, and a bilingual education teacher in California, Texas, and New Mexico public schools. However, it is her research that truly stands out. Her work focuses on how translanguaging reshapes traditional conceptualizations of biliteracy with the implementation of translanguaging pedagogy in bilingual education and English language development contexts.

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