

Negotiating Linguistic and Epistemic Agency: A Systematic Review of Translingual Practices among Indigenous Tertiary Students in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Translanguaging has received extensive scholarly attention, yet few syntheses have focused on Indigenous students in Philippine higher education. This systematic review examined how Indigenous tertiary students employ translingual practices, how these practices support linguistic and epistemic agency, and what institutional or affective conditions enable or constrain them. Guided by the SPIDER framework, the review synthesized 12 qualitative or qualitative-dominant peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2025. Data were organized through a structured extraction matrix and analyzed thematically. The findings indicated that students strategically mobilized their mother tongues, regional languages, English, and other semiotic resources to scaffold comprehension, participate in classroom discourse, and connect academic content with Indigenous knowledge. These practices extended beyond code-switching because they enabled identity assertion and the legitimization of community-based ways of knowing. However, agency was constrained by monolingual ideologies, policy-practice gaps, limited teacher preparation and resources, restrictive assessment norms, and language-related shame or insecurity. Supportive teacher beliefs and multilingual pedagogies strengthened students' confidence and participation. The review underscores the need for culturally responsive tertiary pedagogy, community-based multilingual materials, and institutional policies that recognize Indigenous languages as legitimate resources for academic meaning-making.

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Epistemic agency;
Indigenous students;
Linguistic agency;
Translanguaging;
Translingual practices

Article History:

Received: 30 June 2026

Revised: 20 July 2026

Accepted: 23 July 2026

Published: 30 July 2026

How to Cite in APA Style:

Montero, G. C. (2026). Negotiating Linguistic and Epistemic Agency: A Systematic Review of Translingual Practices among Indigenous Tertiary Students in the Philippines. *Lexeme: Journal of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics*, 8(2), 439–446.
<https://doi.org/10.32493/ljal.v8i2.61684>

INTRODUCTION

Scholarly interest in multilingualism and linguistic diversity has expanded substantially in the twenty-first century as global mobility, digital communication, and migration have challenged conventional boundaries between national and “standard” languages. Unlike traditional models of bilingualism or multilingualism that treat languages as separate and bounded codes, translingual perspectives conceptualize communication as fluid, context-sensitive meaning-making through an integrated repertoire of linguistic, multimodal, and semiotic resources (Canagarajah, 2013; García & Li, 2014; Tai, 2022). Access to these resources is closely connected to agency because language users make strategic choices to construct identities, negotiate meaning, and establish authority

within unequal educational contexts (Nursanti, 2021).

Within applied linguistics and critical education, linguistic agency refers to the capacity to make purposeful language choices, resist dominant communicative norms, and articulate identities. Epistemic agency extends this concern to knowledge production: it concerns the authority to access, construct, evaluate, and legitimize knowledge (Shay, 2005, 2008). These forms of agency are especially significant in postcolonial settings, where language hierarchies shape access to participation, recognition, and academic legitimacy (Fairclough, 1989).

The Philippines is a postcolonial, multilingual, and multicultural archipelago in which more than 150 languages are spoken (Reid, 2005). The 1987 Constitution recognizes Filipino and English as official languages and provides for the development and use of regional languages in education and public life (Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines, 1987, art. XIV, §§ 6–9). Nevertheless, colonial language ideologies continue to position English as a source of prestige, correctness, and academic authority, while Indigenous languages are frequently restricted to informal or local domains. In tertiary education, this hierarchy may render Indigenous languages and knowledge systems less visible or legitimate.

Despite the expansion of multilingual education research, Indigenous students' voices and lived experiences remain underrepresented in higher-education scholarship and policy. Much of the Philippine literature has focused on mother-tongue instruction, language maintenance, or basic education, leaving the complex linguistic identities negotiated by Indigenous university students insufficiently theorized (Osborne, 2020; Reid, 2005). Existing work also provides limited synthesis of how these students use translingual practices to address linguistic marginalization and claim academic agency (Renganathan & Kral, 2018).

Institutional and affective conditions require particular attention. Language anxiety, internalized shame, teacher prejudice, and monolingual assessment norms can restrict students' willingness to draw on their full repertoires (Estrada & Schecter, 2018). Conversely, culturally and linguistically affirming pedagogy can restore voice, strengthen identity, and challenge deficit perspectives (de los Ríos & Portillo, 2021; Guerra et al., 2020). Although translanguaging has been widely studied internationally, scholarship focused specifically on Indigenous students in Philippine tertiary education remains fragmented. A systematic synthesis is therefore needed to clarify existing evidence, identify recurring patterns, and establish priorities for future research.

This review maps and synthesizes empirical and theoretical scholarship on Indigenous tertiary students' translingual practices. It contributes to applied linguistics and Indigenous education by connecting classroom language use with linguistic agency, epistemic justice, institutional power, and affect. The review also offers practical value for universities seeking to create learning environments in which Indigenous multilingualism is recognized as an academic resource rather than treated as a deficit or a temporary accommodation.

A decolonial perspective extends the discussion beyond the provision of multilingual support toward the recognition of Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and communicating. From this perspective, accommodating translingual practices is not merely an instructional innovation; it is an equity-oriented effort to broaden whose language and knowledge are recognized in higher education. This study aimed to systematically review and synthesize literature on the translingual practices of Indigenous tertiary students in the Philippines, with particular attention to their relationship with linguistic and epistemic agency and to the conditions that shape their use in academic contexts. The review addressed the following questions:

1. How do Indigenous tertiary students employ translingual practices in classroom contexts?
2. In what ways do these practices contribute to their linguistic and epistemic agency?
3. What institutional and affective factors enable or constrain these translingual practices?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Translingual Theory

This review is grounded in translingual theory, which treats language as fluid, dynamic, and

agentive rather than as a set of discrete named systems (Canagarajah, 2013; García & Li, 2014). Multilingual speakers, particularly members of Indigenous and marginalized communities, are therefore understood not simply as users who alternate between codes but as meaning-makers who draw strategically on integrated linguistic and semiotic repertoires. In this review, translingual practices is used as an umbrella term for such flexible meaning-making, while translanguaging refers more specifically to the deployment of these resources in interaction and pedagogy. This framework enables an examination of how Indigenous tertiary students navigate and resist monolingual expectations in academic spaces.

Linguistic and Epistemic Agency

The concepts of linguistic and epistemic agency provide the analytical lens for the second research question (Gee, 2005; Miller, 2014; Nasir & Hand, 2006). Linguistic agency concerns speakers’ intentional use of language to participate, position themselves, and challenge linguistic marginalization. Epistemic agency concerns their authority to access, construct, communicate, and legitimize knowledge. Together, these concepts illuminate how translingual practices can create spaces in which Indigenous students speak, resist, and contribute intellectually within institutions historically shaped by colonial language hierarchies.

Language Ideology and Critical Affect

Language ideology theory and critical affect perspectives address the sociopolitical and emotional dimensions of language practice (Irvine & Gal, 2000; Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994; Zembylas, 2007). Institutional policies, pedagogical norms, and beliefs about “appropriate” academic language shape the forms of communication students perceive as legitimate. At the same time, emotions such as shame, pride, anxiety, and confidence mediate whether students exercise or withhold agency. These perspectives therefore connect language practice with identity, institutional power, and the emotional conditions of participation.

SPIDER Framework

The review was guided by the SPIDER framework—Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, and Research type—which was developed to support qualitative and mixed-method evidence synthesis (Cooke et al., 2012). SPIDER was used to formulate the research questions, generate search terms, and establish the eligibility criteria.

Methodology

A systematic review design was employed to identify, screen, and synthesize research on the translingual practices of Indigenous tertiary students in the Philippines. The review process involved defining the scope, developing search terms and eligibility criteria, screening records, extracting data, conducting thematic synthesis, and reporting the findings. The final corpus comprised 12 peer-reviewed qualitative or qualitative-dominant studies published between 2020 and 2025. The inclusion and exclusion criteria are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria		
Criterion	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Sample (S)	Studies involving Indigenous tertiary students in the Philippines	Studies focused on non-Indigenous groups, primary or secondary education, or contexts outside the Philippines
Phenomenon of Interest (PI)	Translingual practices, multilingual negotiation, and academic meaning-making in classroom or related tertiary contexts	Studies focused only on code-switching without a translingual orientation or outside academic contexts
Design (D)	Empirical qualitative studies or qualitative-dominant mixed-method studies	Purely quantitative studies or theoretical papers without an empirical basis

Criterion	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Evaluation (E)	Findings related to linguistic or epistemic agency, affective experiences, language ideologies, or institutional conditions	Studies without analysis relevant to agency or institutional/affective dynamics
Research Type (R)	Qualitative or qualitative-dominant research with separable qualitative findings	Mixed-method studies whose qualitative findings could not be analyzed separately
Language	Published in English	Non-English publications without an English translation
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Theses, dissertations, opinion articles, editorials, blog posts, policy briefs, and other non-peer-reviewed sources
Publication Year	Published from 2020 through 2025	Published before 2020 or after 2025
Access	Full text available through an academic database, institutional access, or open access	Full text unavailable for eligibility assessment and data extraction

The search was conducted in Google Scholar, ERIC, ProQuest, and JSTOR using Boolean combinations of terms derived from the SPIDER framework. Core terms included “translingual practices,” “translanguaging,” “Indigenous students,” “higher education,” “tertiary education,” “Philippines,” “linguistic agency,” “epistemic agency,” “language ideology,” and “affective factors.” Records were screened by title and abstract, followed by full-text assessment against the eligibility criteria. Grey literature was consulted for contextual understanding but was excluded from the final synthesis because the corpus was restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles.

A structured extraction matrix was used to record each study’s author, publication year, setting, participants, design, data sources, principal findings, and relevance to the research questions. The extracted findings were coded inductively and compared across studies. Related codes were grouped into descriptive categories and then consolidated into three analytical themes: classroom uses of translingual practices, contributions to linguistic and epistemic agency, and institutional or affective enablers and constraints. The synthesis retained contextual differences among studies while identifying recurring patterns across the corpus.

Because the study analyzed publicly available scholarly literature and did not collect primary data from human participants, formal ethical clearance was not required. Nevertheless, the review was conducted with attention to accurate attribution, cultural sensitivity, and respectful representation of Indigenous identities, languages, and knowledge systems.

Findings and Discussion

The final synthesis included 12 studies: Barruga (2024), Became et al. (2023), Camral and Sumayo (2025), Canilao (2023), Duterte and Llorente (2025), Evangelista-Garcia et al. (2023), Gatil (2021), Herrera (2023), Magadan et al. (2023), Miranda and Gervacio (2023), Suarez (2021), and Velasco (2025). The thematic analysis generated three interrelated themes corresponding to the research questions.

Translingual Practices in Classroom Contexts

Across the reviewed literature, Indigenous tertiary students used translingual practices to negotiate institutional expectations while drawing on the linguistic repertoires available to them. These practices included the use of mother tongues, regional languages, Filipino, and English in oral participation, written work, peer collaboration, explanation, and disciplinary learning. Rather than representing random alternation between languages, the practices were typically purposeful and responsive to the task, audience, and classroom environment.

Magadan et al. (2023), for example, described Matigsalog students who began explanations in Cebuano or another familiar language before moving toward English during classroom

discussion. This movement enabled students to unpack abstract concepts and co-construct understanding with peers. Similarly, Gatil (2021) reported that multilingual tertiary students used their first languages to scaffold group work and clarify content in English-dominant classrooms. These findings indicate that translingual interaction supported both comprehension and collaborative knowledge construction.

Students also used their mother tongues strategically when academic terminology, culturally specific meanings, or affective expression could not be communicated adequately in English (Canilao, 2023). Duterte and Llorente (2025) found that science students connected unfamiliar academic language with Indigenous ecological knowledge, thereby making disciplinary concepts more accessible. Camral and Sumayo (2025) likewise showed that students' use of home languages constituted a subtle negotiation of their right to participate and to resist monolingual expectations. Collectively, these studies portray Indigenous students as active language decision-makers rather than passive recipients of institutional policy.

Contributions to Linguistic and Epistemic Agency

The reviewed studies consistently positioned translanguageing as more than a functional strategy for comprehension. By deciding when and how to mobilize their repertoires, students exercised linguistic agency, affirmed their identities, and resisted hierarchies that treated English as the only legitimate language of academic participation. Agency was visible in students' willingness to initiate discussion, explain ideas to peers, negotiate terminology, and represent culturally grounded meanings.

Canilao (2023) demonstrated how translanguageing allowed students to bring cultural narratives, oral histories, and community-based knowledge into formal academic discussion. Such practices supported epistemic agency because students were not merely accessing established knowledge; they were contributing knowledge from Indigenous epistemologies. This interpretation is consistent with García and Li's (2014) view of translanguageing as meaning-making across integrated semiotic resources rather than simple code alternation.

Duterte and Llorente (2025) further illustrated how students interpreted scientific phenomena through Indigenous ecological frameworks, producing hybrid understandings that connected disciplinary and community knowledge. Translanguageing therefore functioned as a means of epistemic legitimation and critical consciousness. Teacher positioning was also consequential. Miranda and Gervacio (2023) found that when teachers treated multilingualism as purposeful and legitimate, students were more willing to express their identities, make cultural affiliations visible, and participate in academic discourse without experiencing their home languages as sources of alienation.

Institutional and Affective Enablers and Constraints

Despite its pedagogical potential, translanguageing was constrained by institutional and affective conditions. The most frequently reported institutional barrier was a gap between multilingual policy discourse and classroom practice. Barruga (2024) and Velasco (2025) highlighted persistent ideological resistance to Indigenous languages in formal education, where English continued to function as the principal marker of academic legitimacy. Although mother-tongue-based multilingual education policy primarily addresses basic education, the ideologies surrounding its implementation also shape expectations about language value across the wider educational system.

Limited teacher preparation, curricular resources, and administrative support constituted additional barriers. Became et al. (2023) and Herrera (2023) reported that educators often lacked pedagogical knowledge and locally relevant materials for sustained translingual practice. Even supportive teachers could therefore implement multilingual pedagogy only inconsistently. Evangelista-Garcia et al. (2023) similarly observed that curricular materials frequently failed to represent diverse Indigenous linguistic realities, encouraging reliance on generic content that

disconnected academic tasks from students' culturally embedded experiences. This pattern reflects the broader problem that multilingual students' linguistic capital is often present but institutionally unrecognized (Safford & Kelly, 2010).

Affective conditions influenced whether students used or withheld their linguistic resources. Camral and Sumayo (2025) found that mother-tongue use provided cognitive ease, cultural pride, and emotional safety, all of which supported participation and academic risk-taking. In contrast, when students anticipated that their first language would be stigmatized, they experienced insecurity, silence, or disengagement (Suarez, 2021). These findings reinforce critical affect perspectives by showing that agency is not merely an individual capacity; it is enabled or constrained by the emotional climate of the institution.

Digital learning creates an additional layer of opportunity and constraint. Lu and Gu (2024) noted that digital translanguaging can support multimodal participation, but its benefits depend on the availability of technologically and linguistically responsive platforms. For Indigenous learners, limited digital support for local languages may narrow opportunities for translingual meaning-making in online and hybrid environments. Nevertheless, studies by Herrera (2023) and Miranda and Gervacio (2023) indicate that teacher education and explicit institutional endorsement can strengthen students' linguistic confidence and academic participation.

Conclusion

This systematic review examined how Indigenous tertiary students in the Philippines employ translingual practices, how these practices contribute to linguistic and epistemic agency, and what conditions enable or constrain them. The findings indicate that students strategically draw on mother tongues, regional languages, Filipino, English, and other semiotic resources to clarify academic content, collaborate with peers, participate in discussion, and connect disciplinary learning with Indigenous knowledge. These practices challenge monolingual assumptions and position students as active meaning-makers and knowledge producers.

Translanguaging also supported identity affirmation, academic confidence, and the legitimization of Indigenous epistemologies. Its benefits, however, were uneven because students' agency was shaped by institutional language hierarchies, policy-practice gaps, limited teacher preparation and resources, assessment expectations, and affective experiences of pride, safety, shame, or insecurity. Universities should therefore move beyond symbolic inclusion by embedding culturally responsive multilingual pedagogy in teacher development, curricular design, assessment, and institutional language policy.

The review has several limitations. Its scope was restricted to English-language, full-text, peer-reviewed publications from 2020 to 2025, which may have excluded locally disseminated or community-based research. The small and contextually diverse corpus also limits broad generalization. In addition, the available studies varied in their definitions of translanguaging and in the depth with which they examined epistemic agency.

Future research should include longitudinal and classroom-based studies across Philippine regions and Indigenous communities, develop instruments and analytic procedures that capture both linguistic and epistemic agency, and examine students' perspectives alongside those of teachers and administrators. Research should also evaluate community-developed multilingual materials and digitally supported translingual pedagogies. Sustained structural and ideological change is required if higher education is to recognize linguistic plurality and Indigenous ways of knowing as central components of academic participation and justice.

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