

Translanguaging Practices in VSTEP Preparation Courses: Pedagogical Implications for Vietnamese EFL Contexts

Pham Minh Toan

Van Hien University, Vietnam

Email: toanpm@vhu.edu.vn

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study investigated teacher-reported translanguaging practices in Northern Vietnamese VSTEP preparation courses. Building on previous Vietnamese research documenting strategic L1 use in EFL contexts, this study extended investigation to assessment-oriented environments. Data were collected from 164 VSTEP preparation teachers through questionnaires and interviews with 12 participants. Teachers reported employing translanguaging selectively, with highest frequency for assessment-focused functions—explaining task instructions and clarifying evaluation criteria. Significant variations emerged across skill areas: writing preparation showed highest reported frequency ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.76$), speaking the lowest ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 0.89$). Principal component analysis identified three dimensions based on theoretical expectations that teachers employ translanguaging for distinct functions: assessment-focused (32.1% of variance), content-focused, and affective-focused. Teaching experience significantly influenced reported frequency, with less experienced teachers employing more frequent translanguaging. Teachers also reported observing strategic student translanguaging patterns for metacognitive purposes such as analyzing mistakes and discussing test-taking strategies. The research extends translanguaging theory to assessment-oriented contexts while challenging monolingual ideologies underpinning standardized testing. For Northern Vietnamese EFL education, findings provide teacher perception data for understanding policy-practice tensions, though implications remain tentative given the absence of learning outcome measurements.

Keywords: translanguaging, VSTEP preparation, pedagogical implications, Vietnam

Standardized English proficiency testing in multilingual contexts creates a fundamental theoretical tension between assessment validity and pedagogical authenticity. Tests like the Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency (VSTEP) enforce monolingual performance standards that may contradict the integrated linguistic competencies they purport to measure (Jenkins & Leung,

2019). This contradiction raises theoretical questions about how bilingual resources function within assessment-constrained environments and whether current translanguaging theory adequately accounts for contexts where language separation is institutionally mandated.

VSTEP operates as Vietnam's primary English proficiency gatekeeper, requiring C1 levels for university instructors and specified competencies for student graduation (MOET, 2014). The assessment's monolingual framework assumes that English proficiency can be validly measured through enforced language separation. However, this assumption conflicts with translanguaging theory's core premise that bilinguals operate through integrated rather than compartmentalized linguistic systems (García & Li, 2014; Li, 2018). The theoretical challenge lies in understanding how teachers navigate this contradiction in practice and what their navigation reveals about the limits of current translanguaging conceptualizations.

Empirical evidence from Vietnamese EFL contexts suggests teachers systematically employ bilingual resources despite monolingual institutional expectations. Ha and Murray (2020) documented strategic L1 use for corrective feedback across proficiency levels. Tran et al. (2021) found that 78% of teachers report beneficial outcomes from Vietnamese integration in grammar instruction and classroom management. Pham and Nguyen (2024) revealed that teachers perceive translanguaging as pedagogically effective but lack theoretical frameworks for implementation in assessment contexts. These findings suggest that existing translanguaging theory may inadequately address contexts where institutional constraints limit bilingual expression.

The theoretical gap becomes acute in test preparation environments where washback effects create unique pedagogical pressures. Washback research demonstrates that high-stakes assessment requirements frequently override research-informed pedagogical practices (Fitriyah et al., 2022; Gallagher & Scrivner, 2024). When preparation must simulate monolingual test conditions, translanguaging theory provides insufficient guidance for understanding how teachers reconcile pedagogical effectiveness with assessment authenticity. This creates what may be termed “assessment-mediated translanguaging”—bilingual practices specifically adapted to navigate institutional testing constraints.

Current translanguaging scholarship has not theorized how bilingual practices function under systematic monolingual constraints. Studies focus predominantly on contexts where language choice remains relatively unrestricted (Goodman & Tastanbek, 2020; Prilutskaya, 2021). The few assessment-related investigations examine classroom evaluation rather than standardized testing environments where external validity requirements limit pedagogical flexibility (Huang & Chalmers, 2023). This theoretical limitation prevents understanding of whether translanguaging maintains its reported benefits when constrained by monolingual simulation requirements.

This study addresses the theoretical gap by investigating how reported translanguaging practices function within VSTEP preparation contexts in Northern Vietnam. The research employs mixed-methods design to establish practice patterns and explore underlying theoretical mechanisms through two research questions:

(1) How do teachers report implementing translanguaging practices within VSTEP preparation constraints?

(2) What do these reported practices reveal about translanguaging theory's applicability in assessment-constrained environments?

The investigation extends translanguaging theory by examining its operation under systematic institutional constraints, providing empirical evidence for theoretical refinement. The findings contribute to assessment theory by documenting how pedagogical practices adapt to validity requirements. For Vietnamese EFL contexts, the research offers theoretical grounding for policy discussions about balancing pedagogical effectiveness with assessment authenticity.

Literature Review

Translanguaging

Translanguaging theory challenges traditional assumptions about bilingual language processing by proposing that multilinguals operate through integrated rather than compartmentalized linguistic systems (García & Li, 2014; Li, 2018). This theoretical position creates fundamental tensions with monolingual assessment paradigms that measure language proficiency through enforced code separation. The theory's core claim—that language boundaries are sociopolitical rather than cognitive constructs—raises questions about the construct validity of standardized tests that rely on monolingual performance to infer bilingual competence. However, this theoretical challenge faces empirical complications when applied to assessment contexts where institutional constraints require language separation for practical evaluation purposes.

Language assessment theory provides frameworks for understanding these contradictions through construct validity principles, though the resolution remains contested. Bachman and Adrian (2022) defined construct validity as the extent to which test scores reflect intended language ability rather than extraneous factors. Standardized assessments like VSTEP operationalize monolingual frameworks by requiring isolated skill demonstration without cross-linguistic support, enforcing what Jenkins and Leung (2019) term “artificial language separation” in evaluative contexts. Cook (2016) demonstrated that bilingual competence involves integrated processing across language systems, suggesting that monolingual testing constraints may introduce construct-irrelevant variance by preventing natural linguistic processing.

Yet assessment researchers might argue that monolingual testing remains valid for measuring specific language competencies, reflecting ongoing theoretical debates about whether integrated processing enhances or complicates accurate proficiency measurement.

These theoretical tensions create documented practical challenges in educational contexts where assessment requirements override pedagogical research. Washback studies demonstrate how high-stakes testing pressures force institutional compliance over effective instruction. Hughes (2003) distinguished between positive washback that promotes learning and negative washback that constrains pedagogical options, while Menken (2006) provided empirical evidence of teachers abandoning research-informed bilingual practices to meet testing demands. Current research has not examined how these theoretical contradictions resolve in practice, with translanguaging studies focusing predominantly on unrestricted contexts while assessment research rarely considers bilingual cognitive processing (Goodman & Tastanbek, 2020). This gap prevents understanding of whether translanguaging benefits persist under institutional constraints that require monolingual performance simulation.

Translanguaging in Language Education

Translanguaging pedagogy presents conflicting evidence regarding its effectiveness in language instruction. While García and Li (2014) claimed cognitive benefits and Włosowicz (2020) reported reduced anxiety, these studies employed small samples and lacked control groups, limiting generalizability. Cummins (2021) argued that translanguaging may undermine standard language acquisition necessary for academic success, particularly in assessment contexts where monolingual competence determines outcomes. The methodological limitations of existing research—predominantly qualitative case studies with limited sample sizes—prevent definitive conclusions about translanguaging effectiveness.

Asian EFL contexts reveal additional implementation constraints that challenge translanguaging claims. Wang and Li (2022) documented improved writing among Chinese students receiving translanguaging feedback, but their intervention lasted only four weeks with 24 participants. Turnbull (2019) found enhanced essay quality among Japanese learners, though the study examined planning processes rather than final performance outcomes. Hu (2002) identified institutional resistance in Confucian educational contexts where examination performance takes precedence over pedagogical innovation, creating structural barriers to translanguaging implementation.

Vietnamese research presents a more complex picture that questions simple translanguaging advocacy. Ha and Murray (2020) found strategic L1

use for corrective feedback, while Tran et al. (2021) documented extensive Vietnamese integration in grammar instruction, with 78% of teachers reporting positive outcomes. However, Pham and Nguyen (2024) revealed that teachers employ translanguaging spontaneously without theoretical frameworks, often mischaracterizing it as Grammar-Translation methodology. This pattern suggests that Vietnamese teachers adapt bilingual practices to local contexts rather than implementing translanguaging as theorized, raising questions about the applicability of translanguaging theory to assessment-oriented environments where institutional constraints limit pedagogical flexibility.

Language Assessment and Test Preparation

Standardized language testing in multilingual contexts operates on theoretical assumptions that contradict contemporary understanding of bilingual competence. Language assessments like TOEFL, IELTS, and VSTEP enforce monolingual performance standards based on the premise that proficiency can be validly measured through enforced language separation (Bachman & Adrian, 2022). However, this assessment paradigm conflicts with research suggesting that bilingual competence involves integrated rather than compartmentalized linguistic processing (Cook, 2016). The theoretical tension raises fundamental construct validity questions: whether monolingual tests accurately measure the multilingual competencies they claim to assess.

Washback effects from high-stakes testing create additional complexity for understanding assessment-pedagogy relationships. Alderson and Wall (1993) established that tests influence teaching methods, often overriding research-informed pedagogical practices when institutional stakes are high. More recent research confirms that negative washback frequently predominates, with teachers adopting test-focused instruction that constrains authentic language competence development (Dang et al., 2025; Liang et al., 2025). However, washback research has not examined how these effects interact with translanguaging practices, particularly where bilingual pedagogy conflicts with monolingual assessment requirements.

Test preparation contexts present specific cases where assessment constraints directly challenge translanguaging implementation. When preparation requires monolingual simulation to develop test-taking automaticity (Jeon & Yamashita, 2020), teachers face pedagogical dilemmas about whether to maintain translanguaging practices that research suggests benefit learning or adopt assessment-aligned instruction that constrains natural bilingual processing (Cenoz et al., 2022). This tension becomes acute in high-stakes contexts where test performance determines educational and professional opportunities.

Vietnamese assessment contexts through VSTEP exemplify these theoretical tensions. VSTEP operates as a high-stakes gatekeeping mechanism

requiring monolingual performance despite widespread bilingual instruction in Vietnamese EFL contexts (Nguyen, 2017). Research documents extensive washback effects, with teachers reporting pressure to adopt English-only instruction regardless of pedagogical beliefs (Gallagher & Scrivner, 2024). However, no studies have examined how teachers navigate between documented benefits of strategic L1 use and institutional requirements for monolingual test preparation, leaving the assessment-translanguaging intersection empirically unresolved.

VSTEP and Vietnamese EFL Context

The VSTEP exemplifies theoretical tensions between assessment validity and pedagogical authenticity in multilingual contexts. Introduced through the National Foreign Language Project 2020, VSTEP establishes C1 proficiency requirements for university instructors and specified competencies for student graduation (MOET, 2014). The assessment's alignment with CEFR through CEFR-VN represents advancement in testing quality, yet its monolingual framework conflicts with documented bilingual practices in Vietnamese EFL instruction. This contradiction creates what Nguyen (2017) termed "policy-practice dissonance," where institutional assessment requirements diverge from effective pedagogical approaches.

Research documents extensive strategic L1 use in Vietnamese EFL contexts despite official English-only policies. Ha and Murray (2020) found that Vietnamese teachers employ L1 strategically for corrective feedback across proficiency levels, with 89% reporting improved student comprehension. Tran et al. (2021) documented widespread Vietnamese integration in grammar instruction and classroom management, with teachers justifying L1 use through pedagogical effectiveness rather than linguistic deficiency. However, Pham and Nguyen (2024) revealed that teachers lack theoretical frameworks for translanguaging implementation, often characterizing bilingual practices as necessary compromises rather than principled pedagogical choices. This pattern suggests that Vietnamese teachers develop adaptive bilingual strategies independently of translanguaging theory.

VSTEP's washback effects intensify these policy-practice tensions by creating institutional pressure for monolingual instruction. Doan and Piamsai (2025) documented negative washback from VSTEP implementation, with teachers reporting pressure to abandon L1 use regardless of pedagogical beliefs. Nguyen and Nguyen (2020) found that VSTEP requirements override research-informed practices, particularly in contexts where test performance determines institutional funding. However, no research has examined how teachers navigate between documented benefits of strategic L1 use and VSTEP preparation requirements that enforce monolingual simulation. This gap prevents

understanding of whether translanguaging maintains pedagogical effectiveness under assessment constraints.

Vietnamese educational contexts provide theoretically significant cases for examining assessment-translanguaging intersections because they combine documented translanguaging benefits with systematic institutional constraints. The contradiction between strategic L1 use documented in research and monolingual requirements imposed by VSTEP creates natural experimental conditions for understanding how bilingual practices adapt to assessment pressures. However, existing research treats translanguaging and assessment as separate domains (Darzhinova & Singleton, 2025; Wang & East, 2023), preventing theoretical understanding of their interaction in high-stakes contexts where pedagogical choices directly affect student outcomes.

Research Methods

Research Design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to investigate translanguaging practices in VSTEP preparation courses. The rationale for this methodological choice stems from the complex nature of translanguaging practices, which necessitated both quantitative measurement of practice patterns and qualitative exploration of pedagogical reasoning (Creswell & Clark, 2018). The sequential approach allowed quantitative results to inform the qualitative phase, creating what Fetters et al. (2013) term “building” integration where initial findings shaped subsequent data collection. The design facilitated purposeful participant selection based on quantitative results, enhancing explanatory power through strategic sampling (Ivankova et al., 2006). The socio-political complexity of language education in Vietnam requires methodological approaches that capture both reported practices and underlying rationales, particularly within assessment-oriented environments where tensions exist between policy directives and classroom instruction (Tran & Nguyen, 2018).

Participants and Sampling

The study involved 164 VSTEP preparation teachers from 14 universities in Northern Vietnam, selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation of various institutional contexts. For the qualitative phase, 12 participants were purposefully selected based on quantitative findings, representing diverse translanguaging practices across different VSTEP skill areas. Selection criteria included years of experience teaching VSTEP preparation courses, primary skill areas taught, and reported frequency of translanguaging practices. This sampling approach aligned with Dörnyei’s (2014) recommendation for selecting participants who can provide rich information

about the phenomenon under investigation in sequential mixed-methods designs, particularly in contexts where language practices intersect with educational policies. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of VSTEP Preparation Teachers (N = 164)

Characteristic	Category	<i>n</i>	%
Institution type	Public	118	72.0
	Private	46	28.0
Teaching experience	1-5 years	42	25.6
	6-10 years	59	36.0
	11-15 years	38	23.2
	16-20 years	16	9.8
	Over 20 years	9	5.5
	Less than 1 year	19	11.6
VSTEP teaching experience	1-3 years	78	47.6
	4-6 years	52	31.7
	7-10 years	15	9.1
Educational qualification	Bachelor's degree	38	23.2
	Master's degree	106	64.6
	Doctoral degree	20	12.2
VSTEP skills taught	Reading	126	76.8
	Writing	119	72.6
	Listening	132	80.5
	Speaking	121	73.8
	All skills	89	54.3

Instruments

For the quantitative phase, a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire was adapted from Chicherina and Strelkova's (2023) instrument examining translanguaging practices in English language teaching. The adapted questionnaire contained 17 items organized into four sections: (A) demographic information, (B) general attitudes toward translanguaging, (C) teacher practices of translanguaging, and (D) student use of translanguaging. Sections C and D featured detailed matrices examining frequency of usage and perceived importance across various pedagogical functions, including explaining complex VSTEP task instructions, clarifying assessment criteria, and reducing test anxiety. Additional sections addressed translanguaging practices by skill area (reading, writing, listening, speaking) and perceived challenges and benefits. The instrument demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency reliability with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.78 for the teacher practices scale and 0.81 for the perceived importance scale (Dörnyei, 2014), indicating appropriate construct validity for examining translanguaging in assessment-oriented contexts.

The qualitative phase employed semi-structured interviews developed from quantitative findings to explore pedagogical rationales underlying translanguaging practices. The interview protocol consisted of 12 open-ended questions addressing three dimensions: (1) contextual factors influencing language choices in VSTEP preparation, (2) strategic decision-making processes regarding when and how to implement translanguaging, and (3) perceived effectiveness of translanguaging for different VSTEP skill areas. Following Talmy's (2010) approach to research interviews as social practice rather than research instrument, the protocol incorporated elicitation techniques such as stimulated recall using classroom scenarios and targeted follow-up prompts to uncover implicit reasoning behind translanguaging practices. Interview questions were piloted with three VSTEP teachers outside the study sample and refined based on their feedback to enhance clarity and relevance to the Vietnamese EFL context.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection followed the sequential mixed-methods design, with quantitative data gathered from January to February 2025, followed by qualitative data in March 2025. The questionnaire was administered to 164 VSTEP preparation teachers from 14 universities through a combination of online distribution via institutionally approved channels and face-to-face administration during professional development sessions, yielding a response rate of 87.3%. Participants received detailed information about the research purpose and confidentiality protocols, with consent obtained prior to participation. To minimize social desirability bias, respondents were assured that results would be reported anonymously and would have no impact on professional evaluation. Based on preliminary quantitative analysis, 12 participants were purposefully selected for semi-structured interviews, which were conducted in Vietnamese or English according to participant preference. Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes, was audio-recorded with permission, and took place in a quiet location at the participant's institution or via secure video conferencing platform when in-person meetings were not feasible. Interviews were transcribed verbatim within 48 hours, with participants invited to review transcripts for accuracy—a process that enhanced data trustworthiness through member checking. All data collection procedures adhered to ethical guidelines for educational research (APA, 2017), with particular attention to ensuring informed consent and maintaining participant confidentiality throughout the research process.

Data Analysis

The sequential mixed-methods design employed integrated analytical approaches aligned with translanguaging theory and research questions. Quantitative analysis addressed RQ1 by establishing patterns of teacher-reported translanguaging practices, while qualitative analysis addressed RQ2 by exploring pedagogical reasoning. This integration was theoretically motivated because translanguaging theory suggests bilingual practices serve distinct pedagogical functions (García & Li, 2014), requiring both statistical pattern identification and interpretive understanding.

Questionnaire data underwent statistical analysis using SPSS (Version 28.0) to identify frequency patterns and dimensional structures. One-way ANOVA tests compared translanguaging frequency across categorical variables given normality assumptions and group comparison requirements, with eta-squared effect sizes and Tukey HSD post-hoc tests controlling family-wise error rates. Principal component analysis with varimax rotation identified underlying dimensions based on theoretical expectations that teachers employ translanguaging for distinct purposes (Lin, 2020). Factor loadings above .40 were retained following established criteria, with Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin and Bartlett's tests verifying sampling adequacy assumptions.

Interview transcripts underwent thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2021) approach, with independent coding by two researchers achieving inter-coder reliability (Cohen's kappa = .87). Analysis employed both deductive codes from quantitative findings and inductive codes from data, identifying explanatory patterns and unanticipated insights. Integration through joint display matrices aligned statistical results with illustrative quotes (Creswell & Clark, 2018), providing prevalence data and explanatory mechanisms while acknowledging that self-report methodology may not capture unconscious language choices or full classroom implementation complexity.

Results

Patterns of Translanguaging Practices in VSTEP Preparation

Analysis of questionnaire responses and interview data revealed patterns in teacher-reported translanguaging practices among VSTEP preparation instructors. Survey respondents (78.7%, $n = 129$) indicated that Vietnamese (L1) use was beneficial for VSTEP preparation. Table 2 presents the frequency and perceived importance of translanguaging practices across different pedagogical functions.

Table 2

Frequency and Perceived Importance of Translanguaging Practices in VSTEP Preparation (N=164)

Pedagogical Function	Frequency		Perceived Importance	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Explaining complex VSTEP task instructions	3.82	0.74	2.64	0.52
Clarifying assessment criteria	3.76	0.69	2.71	0.48
Explaining difficult vocabulary in VSTEP materials	3.65	0.72	2.58	0.55
Contrasting English-Vietnamese grammar structures	3.42	0.81	2.47	0.60
Providing feedback on practice tests	3.38	0.77	2.52	0.58
Explaining test-taking strategies	3.29	0.84	2.49	0.57
Explaining scoring methods	3.17	0.88	2.62	0.51
Explaining cultural references in test materials	3.04	0.85	2.21	0.64
Explaining differences in text organization	2.91	0.83	2.32	0.62
Reducing test anxiety	2.76	0.90	2.18	0.68
Building rapport with students	2.58	0.92	2.04	0.71
Managing classroom activities	2.43	0.88	1.92	0.69

Note. Frequency scale: 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Very Often; Importance scale: 1 = Not Important, 2 = Somewhat Important, 3 = Very Important

Teachers reported highest translanguaging frequency for assessment-oriented functions, particularly explaining task instructions ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.74$) and clarifying evaluation criteria ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.69$). Content-focused functions such as explaining vocabulary ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.72$) and contrasting grammar structures ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.81$) received moderate frequency ratings. Affective functions including reducing anxiety ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 0.90$) and building rapport ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 0.92$) showed lowest reported frequency.

Principal component analysis with varimax rotation identified three dimensions of reported practices that accounted for 67.3% of total variance. Assessment-focused translanguaging emerged as the predominant dimension (32.1% of variance), followed by content-focused (20.4% of variance) and affective-focused (14.8% of variance) dimensions. Interview data provided illustrative examples of these reported practices: “When I explain VSTEP scoring criteria, Vietnamese isn’t merely a convenience—it’s essential for ensuring students grasp the meta-language of assessment” (Teacher 5).

Teaching experience significantly influenced reported translanguaging frequency ($F(3,160) = 4.73$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2 = .082$). Post-hoc comparisons revealed that instructors with 1-3 years of experience ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.68$)

reported significantly higher frequency than those with 4-6 years ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 0.71$, $p = .006$) and 7-10 years ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 0.65$, $p = .003$). One experienced teacher explained this pattern: “Early in my career, Vietnamese explanations were my primary scaffold. Now they’re just one tool among many” (Teacher 10).

Skill-specific analyses revealed significant variation in reported translanguaging frequency across VSTEP components ($F(3,652) = 38.42$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .15$). Post-hoc tests confirmed significant differences between all skill areas: writing ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.76$), reading ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.81$), listening ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 0.92$), and speaking ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 0.89$). When asked which skill benefited most from translanguaging, 42.1% selected writing, 30.5% reading, 18.3% listening, and 9.1% speaking. Interview data revealed different pedagogical rationales across skills, with writing instructors noting: “Vietnamese helps explain rhetorical differences between Vietnamese and English argumentation” (Teacher 7), while speaking instructors stated: “I use Vietnamese for explaining criteria but maintain English for practice to create authentic testing conditions” (Teacher 11).

Institutional context influenced reported attitudes toward translanguaging, with 78.7% of teachers believing it beneficial despite official English-only policies. Interview data revealed perceived policy-practice tensions: “Our institution officially promotes English-only instruction, but administrators tacitly acknowledge that some Vietnamese is necessary for VSTEP preparation” (Teacher 6). These findings indicate that teachers report varying translanguaging practices based on pedagogical function, experience level, skill area, and institutional context.

Student Engagement with Translanguaging in VSTEP Preparation

Analysis of teachers' observations regarding student translanguaging practices revealed distinct patterns across learning activities, though these data represent teacher perceptions rather than direct classroom observations. Table 3 presents frequency distributions and perceived importance ratings for student translanguaging practices as reported by teachers. Teachers reported observing highest frequency during metacognitive activities, particularly analyzing mistakes on practice tests ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 0.71$) and discussing test-taking strategies ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.76$). Collaborative activities such as discussing test content in small groups ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.79$) received moderate ratings, while preparatory activities for productive skills, especially speaking preparation ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 0.94$), showed lowest frequency.

Table 3

Teachers' Observations of Student Translanguaging Practices in VSTEP Preparation (N=164)

Student Translanguaging Practice	Frequency		Perceived Importance	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Analyzing mistakes on practice tests	3.74	0.71	2.67	0.49
Discussing test-taking strategies	3.61	0.76	2.59	0.53
Translating difficult vocabulary or instructions	3.58	0.69	2.54	0.55
Asking clarifying questions about test requirements	3.47	0.74	2.61	0.50
Discussing test content in small groups	3.42	0.79	2.43	0.58
Brainstorming ideas for writing tasks	3.33	0.82	2.37	0.62
Comparing answers with peers	3.26	0.80	2.28	0.64
Assisting peers with lower English proficiency	3.18	0.85	2.42	0.59
Expressing anxiety or concerns about the test	3.09	0.88	2.31	0.63
Preparing for speaking tasks	2.58	0.94	1.95	0.72

Note. Frequency scale: 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Very Often; Importance scale: 1 = Not Important, 2 = Somewhat Important, 3 = Very Important

Factor analysis with varimax rotation identified two primary dimensions underlying teacher observations: metacognitive processing (41.3% of variance) and peer collaboration (27.8% of variance), explaining 69.1% of total variance. These dimensions were supported by interview data, with teachers providing examples of each type. For metacognitive processing, one teacher noted: “I explicitly encourage Vietnamese use during error analysis because students need to articulate complex metacognitive processes” (Teacher 4). For peer collaboration, teachers described students “assisting peers with lower English proficiency” and “comparing answers with peers” using Vietnamese to negotiate meaning. However, correlation analysis revealed a strong relationship between teachers’ importance ratings and encouragement practices ($r = .83, p < .001$), which may reflect social desirability bias alongside genuine pedagogical beliefs.

Skill-specific and contextual factors significantly influenced reported student translanguaging patterns. Analysis across VSTEP components revealed significant differences ($F(3,652) = 42.16, p < .001, \eta^2 = .16$), with highest reported frequency in writing preparation ($M = 3.33, SD = 0.82$) and lowest in speaking preparation ($M = 2.58, SD = 0.94$). Teachers explained these differences through assessment simulation concerns: “I discourage Vietnamese during speaking practice because it creates habits that can’t be sustained during the actual test” (Teacher 12). Student proficiency level significantly

predicted teachers' encouragement of translanguaging ($\beta = -.38, p < .001, R^2 = .14$), with lower-proficiency groups receiving more reported L1 scaffolding. Institutional context also influenced practices, with teachers at private universities reporting more positive attitudes ($M = 3.64, SD = 0.67$) than those at public universities ($M = 3.21, SD = 0.74, F(2,161) = 7.38, p = .001, \eta^2 = .084$).

Activity structure emerged as a significant predictor of reported student translanguaging frequency, with collaborative problem-solving generating highest rates ($M = 3.82, SD = 0.68$) and individual speaking practice the lowest ($M = 2.31, SD = 0.91$). Despite 76.2% of teachers believing student L1 use was beneficial for test preparation, 64.0% reported concerns about institutional disapproval. This discrepancy indicates tensions between pedagogical beliefs and institutional expectations, with teachers navigating between perceived student needs and policy compliance in their reported practices.

Discussion

Translanguaging as Strategic Pedagogical Practice in VSTEP Preparation

This study reveals that teachers report selective rather than comprehensive translanguaging implementation in VSTEP preparation contexts, with assessment-focused functions predominating over content or affective applications. This selectivity challenges García and Li's (2014) conceptualization of translanguaging as natural, unrestricted deployment of integrated linguistic repertoires. Instead, the findings suggest that institutional assessment constraints fundamentally alter how teachers perceive bilingual practices, creating pedagogical adaptations that prioritize test preparation effectiveness over theoretical alignment with translanguaging principles.

The emergence of three distinct functional dimensions indicates that teachers conceptualize translanguaging instrumentally within test preparation environments. This finding extends Lin's (2020) distinction between spontaneous and planned translanguaging by revealing strategic practices that operate according to external validity requirements rather than purely pedagogical needs. However, this raises theoretical questions about whether such constrained bilingual practices constitute translanguaging as theoretically defined or represent a different pedagogical phenomenon requiring separate conceptualization.

The inverse relationship between teaching experience and reported translanguaging frequency offers insights into pedagogical expertise development within assessment-constrained contexts. Interview data indicate that veteran teachers develop diverse instructional strategies while maintaining strategic

translanguaging for specific assessment functions, suggesting that effective test preparation involves learning to balance competing demands rather than simply increasing or decreasing bilingual practices. However, the absence of outcome data prevents determination of whether reported adaptations actually improve student performance or reflect teacher assumptions about effective preparation.

Skill-specific variations reveal teacher perceptions about differential VSTEP component requirements, with concentrated translanguaging in writing preparation ($M = 3.68$) compared to speaking preparation ($M = 2.63$). This aligns with Swain's (2006) output hypothesis regarding different cognitive processing demands for productive versus receptive skills. Yet these patterns reflect teacher beliefs rather than empirically validated approaches, raising questions about whether perceived skill differences justify differential implementation or inadvertently limit beneficial bilingual scaffolding.

The institutional tensions revealed—with teachers reporting beneficial outcomes while acknowledging policy disapproval—illustrate contradictions between research-informed pedagogy and assessment-driven mandates. This reflects what Menken (2006) terms “language policy arbitrariness,” though the findings also reveal teacher agency within constraints. While this suggests that effective assessment policy may require recognition of strategic bilingual practices, such implications extend beyond what teacher self-reports alone can definitively support.

Pedagogical Implications for Vietnamese EFL Test Preparation

The reported functional differentiation of translanguaging practices challenges García and Li's (2014) conceptualization of fluid language integration by revealing how assessment constraints shape pedagogical choices. Teachers concentrate bilingual resources on assessment literacy functions while restricting L1 use during skill simulation, creating what contradicts translanguaging theory's emphasis on unrestricted deployment. This bifurcation reflects teachers' attempts to reconcile competing demands of pedagogical effectiveness and assessment validity within VSTEP preparation contexts.

The inverse relationship between experience and reported translanguaging frequency reveals how professional expertise develops under assessment constraints rather than following deficit reduction models. Veteran teachers develop strategic selectivity that aligns with Vietnamese research documenting adaptive bilingual strategies (Pham & Nguyen, 2024), yet this adaptation occurs within washback pressures that override research-informed practices

(Hughes, 2003). This pattern suggests that experienced teachers learn to calibrate bilingual instruction to specific assessment demands rather than abandoning translanguaging entirely.

Skill-specific variations demonstrate how teachers navigate the construct validity tensions identified in the assessment literature. The concentration of Vietnamese use in writing preparation compared to speaking preparation reflects teacher beliefs about transferable versus performance-specific competencies, yet contradicts research showing bilingual discussion benefits for oral production (Swain & Lapkin, 2013). These patterns indicate that teachers may be limiting beneficial scaffolding based on assessment format assumptions rather than cognitive or linguistic evidence.

For Vietnamese EFL education, the institutional tensions revealed—with teachers perceiving benefits while facing policy disapproval—confirm Nguyen’s (2017) documentation of policy-practice dissonance while extending understanding of teacher agency. The variations between public and private institutions suggest that implementation environments significantly affect pedagogical choices, potentially creating equity issues in access to different instructional approaches. These findings indicate that effective assessment preparation requires acknowledging rather than ignoring the bilingual realities of Vietnamese classrooms.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The strategic deployment of translanguaging in VSTEP preparation contexts challenges fundamental theoretical assumptions about language boundaries in assessment frameworks. The finding that both teachers and students utilize translanguaging primarily for metacognitive functions rather than as compensatory scaffolding extends translanguaging theory beyond its current applications in general language pedagogy into assessment-specific domains. This extension necessitates what MacSwan (2017) terms “theoretical recalibration”—moving beyond simple debates about language separation toward nuanced understanding of how integrated linguistic repertoires function within assessment constraints. The documented tension between monolingual assessment frameworks and bilingual pedagogical practices in Vietnamese EFL contexts reveals what Jenkins and Leung (2019) identify as a fundamental ideological contradiction in language testing—the privileging of artificial language separation in evaluative frameworks despite evidence that strategic translanguaging enhances rather than impedes assessment literacy development. This contradiction requires theoretical reconceptualization of

assessment authenticity that accommodates rather than excludes the legitimate role of integrated linguistic repertoires in developing language proficiency measurable through standardized assessment.

These theoretical insights generate significant practical implications for VSTEP preparation pedagogy in Vietnamese EFL contexts. The identification of assessment-focused translanguaging as the predominant dimension suggests that teacher education programs should develop what Wang and Li (2022) term “strategic bilingual competence”—the ability to make principled decisions about when and how to implement translanguaging based on specific pedagogical objectives. VSTEP preparation requires a differentiated approach where translanguaging is strategically employed for explaining assessment criteria, facilitating error analysis, and developing metacognitive awareness, while monolingual practice is maintained for skill simulation and automaticity development. The documented institutional variations in translanguaging acceptance necessitate policy revisions based on empirical evidence rather than ideological assumptions about language separation. Institutions must develop what Tajeddin et al. (2022) describe as “assessment-informed language policies” that acknowledge the legitimate pedagogical functions of translanguaging in test preparation while establishing appropriate boundaries that ensure students develop the monolingual performance capabilities required by standardized assessment frameworks like VSTEP.

Conclusion

This investigation of teacher-reported translanguaging practices in Northern Vietnamese VSTEP preparation contexts reveals how institutional assessment constraints shape bilingual pedagogical approaches. The findings demonstrate that teachers report selective rather than unrestricted translanguaging implementation, with assessment-focused functions predominating over content or affective applications. This selectivity challenges existing translanguaging theory by showing how external validity requirements fundamentally alter bilingual practices from their theoretically envisioned forms.

The study extends translanguaging scholarship by documenting how reported practices adapt to institutional constraints rather than operating according to theoretical ideals of fluid language integration. The three-dimensional structure identified extends understanding beyond existing spontaneous versus planned distinctions to include strategic practices shaped by assessment demands. For Northern Vietnamese EFL contexts, the research provides insights into how teachers navigate tensions between pedagogical beliefs

and institutional mandates, suggesting that effective assessment preparation may require acknowledgment of bilingual classroom realities rather than enforcement of monolingual ideologies.

However, several limitations constrain interpretation of these findings. The geographic restriction to Northern Vietnam limits generalizability to other regions, while reliance on teacher self-reports may not capture actual implementation complexity or unconscious language choices. The absence of student perspective data and learning outcome measurements prevents determination of translanguaging effectiveness from learner viewpoints or its relationship to actual test performance. These limitations underscore the preliminary nature of findings and highlight needs for classroom observation studies, controlled interventions examining specific translanguaging approaches, and longitudinal research tracking both pedagogical implementation and assessment outcomes.

The research establishes a foundation for understanding how bilingual resources function within assessment-constrained environments while revealing the complexity of teacher decision-making under competing pedagogical and institutional demands. Future investigations examining relationships between reported practices and actual learning outcomes will determine whether the strategic translanguaging adaptations documented here represent effective pedagogical innovation or institutional compliance that may inadvertently limit beneficial bilingual scaffolding.

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