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**Beyond Code-Switching:
Delineating the Conceptual Boundaries of
Translanguaging in EMI Classes**

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ABSTRACT

The global expansion of English-Medium Instruction (EMI) has brought renewed urgency to questions about how multilingual learners and teachers draw upon their full linguistic repertoires in academic settings. Two concepts, code-switching and translanguaging, have become central to these discussions, yet they are frequently conflated in both scholarship and practice, producing theoretical confusion and pedagogical inconsistency. This article undertakes a systematic delineation of the conceptual boundaries between code-switching, understood as a structurally governed alternation between named language systems, and translanguaging, conceived as a holistic, identity-affirming deployment of a unified multilingual repertoire. Drawing on a critical review of the applied linguistics literature spanning four decades (1980–2024), the article traces the historical and theoretical trajectories of each concept, examines how each has been operationalised in EMI contexts, and presents an original comparative framework distinguishing the two paradigms across ontological, functional, agentive, and pedagogical dimensions. The article concludes by arguing that conceptual clarity is not merely an academic exercise but a prerequisite for evidence-based language education policy and practice in increasingly multilingual universities.

Keywords: translanguaging, code-switching, English-medium instruction, multilingualism, language repertoire, pedagogical translanguaging, higher education

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INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century has witnessed an unprecedented proliferation of English-Medium Instruction (EMI) programmes across higher education institutions worldwide. Driven by forces of academic globalisation, internationalisation agendas, and the commodification of English as a global lingua franca, universities in East Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, Continental Europe, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa have increasingly adopted English as the primary often sole medium of instruction for content courses (Dearden, 2014; Macaro et al., 2018). The scale of this shift is remarkable: by the early 2020s, EMI programmes had been documented in more than 130 countries, making it one of the fastest-growing trends in higher education (Rose et al., 2021). Yet the expansion is driven as much by geopolitical and economic logic as by evidence of educational benefit, a fact that has attracted sustained critical scrutiny from applied linguists (Sahan & Rose, 2021).

This shift carries ideological assumptions about language, learning, and identity. EMI expansion has frequently been predicated on what Cummins (2007) terms the "two-solitudes assumption": the belief that the learner's languages are, and ought to remain, hermetically sealed systems that should be kept strictly separate during instruction. This monolingual norm manifests in "English-only" rules, the penalisation of L1 use, and curricula that treat students' prior linguistic resources as interference rather than asset. Yet decades of sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic research have consistently demonstrated that multilingual speakers do not experience their languages as separate, autonomous systems but as an integrated, dynamic repertoire deployed fluidly according to communicative context and purpose (Grosjean, 1985; Garcia & Wei, 2014; Cummins, 2021).

The urgency of this contradiction has generated two competing or, as some argue, complementary conceptual frameworks: code-switching and translanguaging. Both seek to describe and theorise the multilingual practices observable in EMI classrooms, yet they do so from quite different epistemological vantage points and with different pedagogical entailments. Clarifying the relationship between these frameworks is therefore not an idle theoretical exercise but a prerequisite for coherent, evidence-based language education policy (Macaro, 2018; Paulsrud et al., 2021).

The terminology in current circulation is marked by considerable ambiguity. The term "translanguaging" is used variously to describe: a classroom pedagogical strategy in which the teacher deliberately plans for language alternation; a theoretical framework that challenges the very notion of bounded named languages; and a descriptor of naturally occurring multilingual practices previously labelled code-switching (Vogel & Garcia, 2017; Cenoz, 2013). Similarly, "code-switching" has been applied to phenomena as diverse as deliberate strategic alternation between registers, unconscious intrasentential borrowing, and ideologically motivated displays of bilingual identity (Poplack, 1980; Gumperz, 1982). When

the same surface behaviour; a student using Arabic to clarify a concept in an English-medium chemistry lecture, can be analysed simultaneously as code-switching and as translanguaging, the conceptual overlap risks undermining the explanatory value of both frameworks.

The stakes of this ambiguity extend beyond theoretical tidiness. Teachers who conflate the two concepts may design classrooms that permit unreflective code-switching without leveraging the full transformative potential of pedagogical translanguaging. Policymakers may adopt EMI language policies that, in the absence of conceptual clarity, either overregulate multilingual practice in the name of "protecting" English immersion, or underregulate it in the name of "empowering" students, without a principled basis for either decision (Sahan & Rose, 2021; Tian & Shepard-Carey, 2020). What is needed is a rigorous delineation of the conceptual boundaries between these two frameworks.

This article pursues that delineation through a critical review of the relevant applied linguistics and sociolinguistics literature published between 1980 and 2024. Section two traces the historical and theoretical roots of the code-switching paradigm and examines how it has been applied in EMI contexts. Section three charts the emergence and consolidation of the translanguaging framework and delineates its core conceptual boundaries relative to code-switching. Section four presents an original comparative framework in tabular form. Section five addresses the pedagogical implications of the delineation, examining teacher agency, task design, learning outcomes, and institutional challenges. Section six synthesises the argument and identifies directions for future research.

2. CODE-SWITCHING: A LINGUISTIC-STRUCTURAL PERSPECTIVE

2.1 Historical and Theoretical Roots

The systematic scholarly study of code-switching emerged in the 1970s as sociolinguistics began to take seriously the linguistic behaviour of multilingual communities previously dismissed as evidence of incomplete acquisition or cognitive confusion. Early foundational work by Gumperz (1982) established that bilingual speakers deployed their two language systems in principled, rule-governed ways that served identifiable communicative functions. Gumperz distinguished between "situational"; switching language changes accompanying changes in social situation or interlocutor and "metaphorical" switching; momentary shifts within a single interaction carrying connotative and affective meaning. This functional taxonomy provided the first systematic account of why proficient bilinguals switch, rather than simply documenting that they do.

Simultaneously, theoretical attention turned to how bilinguals switch, producing a rich tradition of formal linguistic analysis. Poplack's (1980) landmark study of Puerto Rican bilinguals in New York City proposed the influential "equivalence constraint" and "free morpheme constraint," arguing that switches occur at points where the syntactic structures of both languages are compatible. Myers-Scotton's (1993) Matrix Language Frame model formalised the asymmetrical relationship between a "matrix language," which provides the

grammatical frame for mixed utterances, and one or more "embedded languages" contributing lexical items within that frame. These structural approaches collectively positioned code-switching as a phenomenon operating within and between bounded, autonomous language systems; a characterisation that remains influential, if contested (Otheguy et al., 2019).

The theoretical undergirding of this tradition is unmistakably structuralist. Languages are conceived as discrete, bounded codes and code-switching is the rule-governed alternation between them. This assumption of boundedness is, as we shall see, precisely the point at which translanguaging theory departs most decisively. Yet the structuralist assumption reflected observable empirical reality: multilingual speakers often do alternate in ways that track the boundaries of socially named languages (Poplack, 1980). The code-switching paradigm is not simply wrong; it is limited in its explanatory scope.

2.2 Defining Features

Several defining features of code-switching can be identified. First, code-switching presupposes the existence of two or more identifiably distinct linguistic codes. It is defined relative to named languages; English, Arabic, French. When a speaker produces an utterance alternating between these named languages, whether within a single clause (intrasentential switching), at clause boundaries (intersentential switching), or as a momentary insertion of a single lexical item (tag-switching), this constitutes code-switching in the classical sense (Poplack, 1980). Second, code-switching is typically associated with competent bilinguals who possess sufficient proficiency in both languages to exercise choice at switching points. Third, code-switching carries sociolinguistic meaning: it signals social identity, group membership, solidarity or distance, and contextual appropriateness (Heller, 1988).

Gumperz's (1982) "we-code" and "they-code" differentiation is particularly important. In many multilingual communities, one language is associated with intimacy, solidarity, and in-group identity (the we-code, often the heritage language), while another is associated with formality and institutional power (the they-code, often the dominant language). In EMI contexts, this dynamic takes on particular salience: the local language functions as the we-code students deploy to manage the cognitive and affective demands of content learning in English, while English functions as the they-code associated with academic authority (Macaro, 2018; Lin, 2019).

2.3 Code-Switching in EMI: The Traditional View

In the context of EMI, the traditional view of code-switching is ambivalent. Research across diverse national and institutional contexts has consistently shown that both teachers and students engage in code-switching despite official "English-only" policies, and that such switching serves important pedagogical functions (Macaro et al., 2018; Tian & Shepard-Carey, 2020). However, the code-switching framework, because it assumes bounded linguistic systems, tends to position code-switching as a deviation from the

monolingual norm or a pragmatic accommodation to communicative necessity rather than a principled enactment of a different theory of language and learning.

This ambivalence is encoded in the very metaphor of "switching": the speaker moves from one language to another, activating and deactivating bounded systems as circumstances demand, but always with the implicit understanding that each system should, in ideal circumstances, function independently. It is precisely against this deficit framing and its underlying assumptions that the translanguaging paradigm defines itself (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; Li Wei, 2022).

3. TRANSLANGUAGING: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC AND PEDAGOGICAL STANCE

3.1 Paradigm Shift: The Emergence of Translanguaging

The concept of translanguaging was first developed in the Welsh language context by Cen Williams (1994), who used the Welsh term *trawsieithu* to describe a bilingual pedagogical practice in which students receive information in one language and are required to process and produce it in the other. Williams's original formulation was explicitly pedagogical; a planned instructional strategy designed to leverage students' proficiency in both Welsh and English simultaneously. This practical starting point grounds the concept in the reality of the multilingual classroom rather than in abstract linguistic theory.

The theoretical elaboration of translanguaging beyond its Welsh origins is primarily associated with Ofelia Garcia and her collaborators. In a series of influential publications, Garcia (2009), Garcia and Wei (2014), and Garcia et al. (2017) reframed translanguaging as both a theoretical lens and a pedagogical stance that fundamentally challenges the foundational assumptions of the code-switching tradition. Rather than conceiving of the multilingual speaker as possessing two or more bounded language systems that are selectively activated, Garcia and Wei propose that multilingual speakers have a single, unified, dynamic idiolect; an integrated linguistic repertoire from which they draw fluidly and flexibly to make meaning. Named languages are social and political constructs, not psychological realities (Otheguy et al., 2019).

Li Wei (2018, 2022) argues that translanguaging as a "practical theory of language" goes beyond mere description of multilingual behaviour to offer a normative claim about what good language education should look like. This is the paradigm shift that distinguishes translanguaging from code-switching; not merely in terminology but in the ontological status of language itself.

3.2 Delineating the Core Conceptual Boundaries

The core conceptual boundaries between code-switching and translanguaging can be articulated along several dimensions: ontological, functional, agentive, and pedagogical. Ontologically, code-switching accepts the existence of named languages as discrete, bounded entities. Translanguaging, by contrast, denies the psychological reality of named language boundaries and posits a single, unified multilingual repertoire. Named

languages, in the translanguaging framework, are ideological constructs that reflect the histories of nation-state formation and linguistic standardisation, not natural facts about human cognition (Otheguy et al., 2019; Pennycook, 2010).

Functionally, the difference lies in how multilingual practice is theorised. Code-switching research typically analyses the functional motivations for specific switches: a speaker switches from English to Arabic to signal in-group solidarity. Translanguaging research focuses on the holistic meaning-making practices of multilingual speakers, asking how the full range of their linguistic, semiotic, and embodied resources are mobilised in the service of complex cognitive and social goals. The unit of analysis shifts from the individual switch to the communicative event as a whole (Li Wei, 2018; Lin, 2019).

Agentively, translanguaging places a premium on the speaker's deliberate and creative appropriation of their full multilingual repertoire or what Garcia and Wei (2014) call "translanguaging space." Critically, Jaspers (2018) cautions against uncritical optimism, arguing that the transformative potential of translanguaging may be constrained by institutional power structures that reassert monolingual norms even when individual teachers attempt to create multilingual spaces. Pedagogically, a teacher who understands multilingual practices through the code-switching lens is likely to treat L1 use as a temporary deviation from the target-language norm. A teacher who understands these same practices through the translanguaging lens is likely to view multilingual repertoire use as a resource to be strategically planned for (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; Duarte, 2020).

3.3 Translanguaging in EMI: A Resource-Oriented Approach

When applied to EMI contexts, the translanguaging framework enables a fundamental reconceptualisation of the role of students' full linguistic repertoire. Rather than treating the local language as an obstacle to English-medium learning, translanguaging theory positions multilingual students' home language practices as a resource that can be deliberately activated to enhance content comprehension, support the development of academic literacy in English, and affirm students' identities as competent, multifaceted learners (Garcia, 2009; Canagarajah, 2018). This resource orientation has significant empirical support: the "common underlying proficiency" shared across languages (Cummins, 2021) means that conceptual and academic skills developed in one language transfer readily to another, undermining the pedagogical rationale for strict language separation.

In EMI settings specifically, translanguaging practices have been documented facilitating access to disciplinary knowledge, supporting peer collaboration on complex concepts, and enabling students to demonstrate understanding that might be obscured by the cognitive demands of processing exclusively in English (Tian & Shepard-Carey, 2020; Paulsrud et al., 2021). Cenoz and Gorter's (2021) concept of *pedagogical translanguaging* formalises this planned dimension, distinguishing it from casual code-switching and giving the framework its transformative potential.

4. COMPARATIVE FRAMEWORK: CODE-SWITCHING, TRANSLANGUAGING, AND EMI

The conceptual distinctions elaborated above can be synthesised in a comparative framework (Table 1) that maps the three constructs across ten analytical dimensions. This framework is intended as a heuristic tool for researchers, curriculum designers, and practitioners who need to distinguish between these constructs in empirical and applied work.

Table 1

Comparative Framework: Code-Switching, Translanguaging, and EMI

Dimension	Code-Switching	Translanguaging	EMI (as Context)
Theoretical Basis	Structuralist sociolinguistics; formal linguistic analysis (Gumperz, 1982; Poplack, 1980; Myers-Scotton, 1993)	Post-structuralist; dynamic multilingualism; holistic repertoire theory (Garcia & Wei, 2014; Otheguy et al., 2019)	Language-in-education policy; internationalisation of HE (Macaro et al., 2018; Dearden, 2014)
View of Language	Languages as discrete, bounded, autonomous codes (L1, L2, L3...)	Unified multilingual repertoire; named languages as socio-political constructs	English as privileged academic code; other languages often marginalised
Unit of Analysis	Individual switches between named language systems	Holistic communicative event; full range of semiotic resources (Li Wei, 2022)	Instructional medium; learner proficiency development in English
Role of L1 / Home Language	Acknowledged but often framed as deviation from the target-language norm	Central pedagogical resource; deliberately activated for deeper cognition & identity	Traditionally suppressed; increasingly debated as scaffold (Tian & Shepard-Carey, 2020)
Pedagogical Stance	Largely descriptive; tolerant but not prescriptive of L1 use	Explicitly normative; planned multilingual tasks as core strategy (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021)	Content-first; language support variable; growing openness to multilingual practice
Teacher Role	Passive observer / reactive accommodator of student switching	Active architect of translanguaging spaces; requires professional development (Vogel & Garcia, 2017)	Content specialist; language facilitator; often underprepared for L2 demands (Rose et al., 2021)
Identity & Power	Indexes group solidarity or distance; reflects existing social hierarchies	Challenges monolingual norm; affirms multilingual identity; transformative potential (Jaspers, 2018)	English-medium may reproduce linguistic hierarchies; tension with multilingual identities
Learning Outcomes	Mixed evidence; L1 use	Positive effects on content comprehension, metalinguistic	Proficiency-dependent; best outcomes when multilingual

Beyond Code-Switching: Delineating the Conceptual Boundaries of Translanguaging in EMI Classes

OUANASSI Abderrahmane.....OUNIS Salim

Dimension	Code-Switching	Translanguaging	EMI (as Context)
	can scaffold but may reduce target-language exposure	awareness, and motivation (Duarte, 2020)	support integrated (Curle et al., 2020)
Key Limitations	Assumes bounded languages; deficit framing; limited pedagogical guidance	Risk of uncritical application; tension with assessment norms (Jaspers, 2018)	Monolingual bias in policy; inequitable access; teacher capacity gaps (Sahan & Rose, 2021)
Key Scholars	Gumperz (1982); Poplack (1980); Myers-Scotton (1993); Heller (1988)	Garcia (2009); Garcia & Wei (2014); Li Wei (2018, 2022); Cenoz & Gorter (2021)	Dearden (2014); Macaro et al. (2018); Rose et al. (2021); Sahan & Rose (2021)

The table reveals several important patterns. First, code-switching and translanguaging differ most sharply at the ontological and agentive dimensions: the former accepts the bounded reality of named languages, while the latter dissolves named language boundaries and foregrounds the speaker's creative, identity-constituting deployment of an integrated repertoire. Second, EMI as an institutional context tends to align, by default, with the code-switching paradigm's implicit acceptance of named language boundaries and its privileging of English as the target language. Third, the pedagogical stance dimension reveals the most actionable difference for practitioners: code-switching is largely descriptive and reactive, while translanguaging is normative and proactive, demanding deliberate curriculum design. Finally, the limitations row highlights that all three constructs face distinct challenges: code-switching's deficit framing, translanguaging's tension with assessment norms and institutional power (Jaspers, 2018), and EMI's documented inequities in access and teacher preparation (Sahan & Rose, 2021).

5. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION IN EMI

5.1 The Role of Teacher Agency and Planning

The pedagogical implementation of a translanguaging approach in EMI settings places considerable demands on teacher agency. Unlike code-switching, which may occur spontaneously, translanguaging-informed teaching requires educators to develop a principled understanding of when and how to activate students' full linguistic repertoire in the service of specific content and language learning objectives (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Cenoz & Gorter, 2021). Research on teacher beliefs in EMI contexts suggests that many teachers, particularly those trained in monolingual environments, feel uncertain about or actively opposed to the use of students' home languages (Macaro, 2018). This resistance reflects genuine concern about maintaining students' exposure to English as well as anxiety about institutional sanctions but it also reflects an inadequate conceptualisation of the relationship between language and learning.

Vogel and Garcia (2017) and subsequent researchers have shown that professional development programmes that expose EMI teachers to translanguaging theory and practice can shift teacher beliefs and

classroom practices in constructive directions. Practical planning for translanguaging involves several key design decisions: identifying specific moments in the lesson when home language resources are most likely to support content comprehension; designing tasks requiring students to move across languages in productive ways; and establishing classroom norms that value multilingual practice without undermining the primacy of English as the medium of academic content (Hornberger & Link, 2012).

5.2 Illustrative Translanguaging Tasks vs. Code-Switching Instances

One of the most practically useful ways to operationalise the distinction between translanguaging and code-switching is through contrasting classroom scenarios. In the first scenario, an EMI biology teacher in a university instructs students to read a complex passage about cellular respiration in English, then discuss their understanding in Darija or French with a partner, before producing a written summary in English. This is a classic pedagogical translanguaging activity (Williams, 1994; Cenoz & Gorter, 2021): the deliberate use of the home language for processing and discussion is planned into the lesson sequence as a means of deepening conceptual understanding while ultimately reinforcing English academic literacy. The movement across languages is not a deviation from the lesson plan but its realisation.

In the second scenario, an EMI chemistry teacher spontaneously switches to French to offer a brief clarification after observing student confusion. This switch is reactive, unplanned, and driven by immediate communicative need, it is code-switching in the classical sense (Gumperz, 1982). The teacher returns to English immediately after the clarification, and no further use of French is planned or integrated into the lesson structure. Both practices are linguistically legitimate and pedagogically defensible. The point is to recognise that they instantiate different theories of language use and have different pedagogical entailments. Sayer (2013) and Canagarajah (2018) similarly argue that the difference between translanguaging and code-switching is not primarily formal but ethical and political: translanguaging is an act of resistance to the monolingual norm, an assertion of the value of the multilingual speaker's full humanity.

5.3 Impact on Content and Language Learning Outcomes

Studies examining planned translanguaging practices in EMI contexts have generally reported positive effects on both content comprehension and English academic language development, particularly for students with lower initial proficiency in English (Curle et al., 2020; Duarte, 2020). The mechanisms are multiple: reducing cognitive load by allowing home-language access to new content; enhancing metalinguistic awareness through cross-linguistic articulation; and affirming students' identities, improving motivation and engagement (Garcia, 2009; Cummins, 2021). However, the positive effects are not unconditional. Translanguaging practices that are poorly planned or misaligned with lesson objectives can fail to produce anticipated benefits. The critical variable, as Tian and Shepard-Carey (2020) emphasise, is not whether translanguaging is used but how it is used: principled, theoretically informed planning is the key determinant of whether multilingual practices serve defined pedagogical goals.

5.4 Institutional Challenges and Policy Alignment

Most EMI programmes operate within frameworks of quality assurance, accreditation, and international rankings that privilege English proficiency as a measurable outcome and treat multilingual classroom practices with suspicion (Macaro, 2018; Sahan & Rose, 2021). Institutional language policies in EMI universities frequently require or imply English-only instruction, leaving little formal space for planned multilingual practice. The misalignment between institutional EMI policy and translanguaging pedagogy reflects a deeper tension between two competing visions of what EMI is for. If EMI is primarily understood as a mechanism for developing English language proficiency, any deviation from English-only instruction represents a compromise of the programme's core purpose. If EMI is understood primarily as a mechanism for delivering high-quality disciplinary education to multilingual learners then the deliberate mobilisation of students' full linguistic repertoire is not a compromise but an enhancement (Paulsrud et al., 2021; Rose et al., 2021). Resolving this tension requires policy change at institutional, national, and international levels.

6. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

6.1 Synthesis of Conceptual Boundaries

This article has traced the conceptual trajectories of code-switching and translanguaging as applied to EMI contexts, and has proposed a set of analytical dimensions; ontological, functional, agentive, and pedagogical, along which the two frameworks can be meaningfully distinguished. Code-switching, grounded in structuralist sociolinguistics, describes rule-governed alternations between named, bounded language systems. Translanguaging, grounded in a post-structuralist, resource-oriented theory of multilingualism, describes the holistic deployment of an integrated multilingual repertoire and carries normative implications for pedagogical practice. The surface behaviours described by both frameworks may be identical; the theoretical frames in which those behaviours are embedded, and the pedagogical conclusions that follow from them, are not (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; Li Wei, 2022).

6.2 Directions for Future Research

Several directions for future research emerge from this analysis. First, carefully designed longitudinal studies comparing content and language learning outcomes associated with planned translanguaging versus unreflective code-switching in EMI contexts, across diverse disciplinary and national contexts, would significantly strengthen the evidence base (Curle et al., 2020; Duarte, 2020). Second, relatively little is known about how EMI teachers in different national contexts conceptualise the distinction between code-switching and translanguaging, and how their conceptualisations relate to their classroom practices. Third, the translanguaging framework has been developed primarily in relation to European and North American multilingual contexts, and its applicability to the diverse linguistic ecologies of EMI settings in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East requires both theoretical elaboration and empirical investigation (Lin, 2019; Paulsrud et

al., 2021). Fourth, the interaction between translanguaging pedagogy and digital technologies in EMI settings is an emerging area deserving sustained research attention (Li Wei, 2022). Fifth, future research needs to address how institutional language policies in EMI settings can be reformed to enable, rather than constrain, principled multilingual pedagogy (Sahan & Rose, 2021; Rose et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the distinction between code-switching and translanguaging in EMI contexts is both conceptually significant and practically consequential. Code-switching, grounded in structuralist sociolinguistics, describes rule-governed alternations between bounded named languages and is typically associated with a pragmatic accommodation to communicative need. Translanguaging, grounded in a resource-oriented, post-structuralist theory of multilingualism, describes the holistic deployment of an integrated repertoire and is associated with a principled, identity-affirming, and pedagogically transformative approach to multilingual learning. For EMI practitioners and policy makers, the implications are significant. Moving from a code-switching to a translanguaging framework requires not merely a change in terminology but a reconceptualisation of who multilingual learners are, what they bring to the academic space, and how instruction should be designed to honour and develop their full communicative potential. The comparative framework presented in Table 1 is offered as a practical tool for navigating this complex terrain, one that supports the emergence of more equitable, evidence-based, and pedagogically coherent approaches to multilingual higher education in the twenty-first century.

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Beyond Code-Switching: Delineating the Conceptual Boundaries of Translanguaging in EMI Classes

OUANASSI Abderrahmane.....OUNIS Salim

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Beyond Code-Switching: Delineating the Conceptual Boundaries of Translanguaging in EMI Classes

OUANASSI Abderrahmane.....OUNIS Salim

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