

The Role of Students' Mother Tongue in EFL Classes

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Abstract

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The use of the mother tongue in learning a foreign language has long been a subject of ongoing debate, particularly in multilingual contexts like Nepal. This study aimed to explore the role of students' mother tongue in EFL instruction through the lens of five key themes as for pedagogical significance; psychological and emotional impact; the use of a blended teaching approach; students' perspectives towards mother tongue and respecting intra-cultural properties by fostering intercultural coexistence between native and foreign languages. Employing a qualitative phenomenological research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and non-participant classroom observations. The results revealed that the strategic use of the students' mother tongue reduces language anxiety, boosts comprehension and builds confidence especially for the students with limited English exposure. Translanguaging proved to be an effective teaching tool for them to enhance engagement and understanding. Attitudes of teachers and students towards using their mother tongue were found much varied as those from community schools favoured its inclusion for better

comprehension and performance while the ones from the institutional schools advocated to minimize it to promote an optimum English exposure and learning environment. This research underscores the significance of maintaining a balanced context-sensitive approach in EFL classes. It orients the concerned stakeholders to focus on teacher training, curriculum design and resource management apt to the native ground realities. The findings offer valuable insights for educators, policy makers and curriculum designers to create an inclusive and effective EFL learning environment opening a wide horizon for further research on this long stranded contentious issue.

Key words: EFL, mother tongue, translation, students' attitudes, teachers' stance

Introduction

Using students' mother tongue in foreign language classrooms has been a controversial issue in language education, particularly in multilingual communities such as Nepal. The concern of language education has historically oscillated between strict monolingual approaches and more inclusive bilingual practices (García & Kleifgen, 2018). Scholars have offered divergent views regarding the pedagogical, psychological, and sociocultural significance of incorporating students' first language (L1) into English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction (Ahamed, 2019). This ongoing debate has become increasingly complex due to learners' varied linguistic backgrounds, distinct attitudes, teacher practices, and asymmetrical classroom dynamics.

In multilingual contexts such as Nepal, where English is taught as a foreign language, the judicious use of the mother tongue can address linguistic and cultural barriers, aiding comprehension and engagement (Giri, 2010). This highlights the importance of recognizing students' linguistic backgrounds while planning and delivering lessons to optimize language acquisition and learning outcomes. In this backdrop, the present study aims to explore whether the use of the mother tongue is essential in an English class, and if so, to what extent its use is justifiable, particularly for teaching specific types of contents. The researcher sought to unearth the experiences and attitudes of secondary-level teachers and students concerning the role of Nepali in English language instruction. Therefore, this study endeavors to discover the experiential reflections from teachers and students about using a mother tongue in an English class taught as a foreign language. Based on the collected data, the results and discussion are presented subsequently, organized into five comprehensive themes.

Theoretical perspectives on second language acquisition (SLA) offer differing views on the role of the first language (L1). Interactionist approaches, such as Long (1981), argue that SLA is best supported through negotiated interaction where misunderstandings are clarified and input becomes comprehensible. Sole exposure to the second language (L2) is inadequate; overuse of L1 may hinder such negotiation, limiting essential interactive processes (Beisenbayeva, 2020). In contrast, sociocultural theories highlight the supportive role of L1 in enhancing comprehension, reducing anxiety and boosting learner confidence (Krashen, 1985). These contrasting views influence modern teaching practices. The grammar translation method incorporates L1 for translation, while the direct and audio-lingual methods reject it, favoring immersion in L2 (Lee & Levine, 2020). Yet, debates over L1 use in SLA persist to this day.

Recent studies suggest that the strategic and judicious use of L1 can play a supportive role to enhance comprehension and knowledge mainly for those students who have limited English exposure. The teachers employ mother tongue to explain new concepts, manage classroom activities and build rapport with students (Timucin & Baytar, 2015). Students, on the other hand, use L1 as a tool to understand grammar, vocabulary and literary themes by removing all sorts of language anxieties (Ma, 2019; Teimouri et al., 2022). Nevertheless, a slew of conflicting attitudes seem rising in the arena of foreign language instruction.

Although extensive literature exists, the debate continues over how often, when, and to what extent L1 should be used in EFL classrooms. Littlewood and Yu (2011) argue that fully banning L1 use is often neither practical nor effective, especially in multilingual contexts. Many theorists advocate for a balanced, context-sensitive approach tailored to learners' needs (Cook, 2001; Macaro,

2005; Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009; Littlewood & Yu, 2011). Teachers should consider learners' proficiency, cultural identity, institutional resources and instructional goals (Macaro, 2005), as these factors influence both implicit and explicit aspects of L2 learning and can support effective EFL instruction.

In case of Nepal, the issue of using students' mother tongue in English classes is further striking since the linguistic diversity, varied nature of schools and their distinct infrastructures have added more complexities in instructional management (Hagen, 2013). The institutional schools heavily emphasize on English exposure while the community schools (both Sanskrit and Nepali) rely on Nepali and other Mother tongues (Eagle, 2019; Phyak, 2016). This conflicting background scenario opens the avenue for a nuanced understanding of the role of students' mother tongue in EFL pedagogy. Therefore, this study attempts to explore the role of students' mother tongue (L1) in EFL classes in Nepal by focusing on the cultural, psychological and instructional dimensions.

Literature Review

Nepal exhibits significant linguistic diversity, with over 120 languages spoken (Eagle, 2019; Eberhard et al., 2022), mainly from the Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman families, reflecting its ethnic and cultural complexity. Nepali is the official language and the main medium in government and education, though many people speak mother tongues like Maithili, Bhojpuri, Tharu, Tamang and Newar. While the 2015 Constitution recognizes all native languages as national, Nepali still dominates formal settings, especially in community schools, whereas institutional schools prioritize English. This multilingual reality, along with conflicting national, local and global language goals, complicates language-in-education planning and classroom management (Phyak, 2016; Ojha, 2018; Eagle, 2019).

This study is informed by two prominent theories of second language (L2) acquisition: the Interactionist Approach and the Sociocultural Theory.

The Interactionist Approach, notably advanced by Long (1996), emphasizes that second language (L2) acquisition is most effective through meaningful interaction. Frequent L2 input, negotiation of meaning, and communicative engagement are seen as key to promoting L2 development. The Interactionists often discourage use of the first language (L1) in classrooms, arguing it limits L2 practice opportunities (Dailey-O'Cain & Liebscher, 2015). However, a growing body of research suggests a more flexible approach. Dailey-O'Cain and Liebscher (2015) note that completely excluding L1 is often unrealistic, particularly in multilingual settings, and that limited, strategic L1 use can support L2 learning.

In contrast, Sociocultural Theory, rooted in Vygotsky (1978), views language learning as a socially mediated process where tools like L1 can aid cognitive development. For example, L1 use in explaining grammar or abstract ideas can scaffold learners' understanding (Anton & DiCamilla, 1999). Strategic L1 use helps bridge comprehension gaps and fosters fuller participation in interactions. Together, the Interactionist and Sociocultural views form the theoretical basis of this study, highlighting the value of both rich L2 exposure and thoughtful L1 integration.

Those prospering views, almost parallel under L2 acquisition theories, are reflected in different teaching methods as well. The Grammar Translation Method emphasizes making meaning clear by translating content into students' native language. In contrast, the Direct Method opposes L1 use,

asserting that students should directly associate meaning with the target language (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). In the same stream of ideation, advocates of the Audio-Lingual Method argue that using learners' native language can hinder or delay their effort to attain the target language. Meanwhile, methods such as the Silent Way and Suggestopedia are more flexible, allowing the use of the native language for giving instructions, improving pronunciation, and clarifying meaning. Similarly, methods like Community Language Learning and Total Physical Response suggest that incorporating the native language can initially enhance students' sense of security. Building upon these ideas, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which prioritizes meaningful communication and interaction in the target language, also acknowledges a limited and strategic role for the native language. Recent perspectives on translanguaging practices further extend this view, advocating for a fluid and dynamic use of all linguistic resources available to learners, including their L1, to support meaning-making, cognitive engagement and deeper language acquisition in multilingual classrooms (Garcia & Wei, 2014). Thus, multiplicity of the techniques and strategies is heartily accepted in a foreign language learning programme.

Second language (L2) acquisition theories have led to varied recommendations on L1 use in the classroom. Some scholars advocate minimizing L1 to ensure the target language dominates classroom interaction (Ellis, 2008; Gardener & Gardener, 2000; Parks, 2015). Ellis (2008) stresses that, in foreign language contexts where students have little exposure outside class, maximizing L2 use in class is crucial. Recent studies also promote increased L2 use through interactive and multimodal strategies. For example, Soruç and Griffiths (2018) recommend task-based learning, media, gestures, and selective dictionary use to boost communicative skills. Lee and VanPatten (2020) similarly emphasize sustained L2 input for effective acquisition. Harmer (2015) warns that excessive L1 use reduces valuable L2 practice and notes that teachers' language choices often influence student behavior—frequent L1 use by teachers may lead students to do the same, limiting target language engagement.

Recent perspectives have shifted toward more dynamic views of L1 use in L2 classrooms. García and Wei (2014) propose the concept of translanguaging, which recognizes students' entire linguistic repertoires as valuable resources for learning rather than viewing L1 use as interference. Similarly, Wright (2019) and Baker (2017) emphasize that strategic, purposeful use of the first language can enhance comprehension, scaffold new learning, and promote confidence in multilingual classrooms. These approaches advocate for flexible language practices where both teachers and learners engage in meaningful negotiation of meaning across languages, aligning classroom interactions with real-world multilingual communication.

With growing interest in the role of L1 in foreign language classrooms, numerous studies have offered varied conclusions. Some focus on when and why teachers and students use L1, identifying context-based and purposeful code-switching as potentially helpful (Sali, 2014). While some research finds no harm in L1 use, others suggest that bilingual students' code-switching can benefit foreign language learning (Macaro, 2005). In Nepal, recent studies by Phyak (2018) and Sah (2017) show that translanguaging in EFL classrooms enables multilingual students to negotiate meaning and enhance learning, challenging traditional monolingual approaches. Sali (2014) also found that teachers generally support limited, purposeful L1 use. From learners' perspectives, Schweers (1999) and Kayaoğlu (2012) reported that L1 use is appreciated when it aids comprehension without replacing

L2 exposure. Overall, research increasingly supports the view that strategic, moderate L1 use can scaffold L2 learning, especially in multilingual settings like Nepal. Parks (2015) further emphasizes that classroom context plays a critical role in shaping the use of the target language during ESL teacher training.

Recent studies have explored the reasons behind L1 use in foreign language classrooms and teachers' perspectives on its practical value (Paker & Karaagac, 2015). Sali (2014) found that teachers mainly used L1 for academic purposes, especially to facilitate learning. Similarly, Poudel (2010), studying code-switching among English teachers at Tribhuvan University, reported that L1 was used to explain complex ideas, manage instruction, maintain discipline, encourage participation, and address gaps in student proficiency. Ozcelik (2013) identified additional factors such as student proficiency mismatches, teachers' attitudes, their own language skills, classroom dynamics and national policy priorities. Timucin and Baytar (2015) emphasized L1's usefulness for translation, instruction, clarification, and classroom management. Likewise, Paker and Karaagac (2015) highlighted L1's role in building rapport and simplifying complex content. Collectively, these studies underline the pedagogical benefits of strategic L1 use.

Several studies have explored both teachers' and students' views on using the mother tongue in language classrooms (Kaharaman, 2009). Yatanbaba and Yildirim (2015) found that Turkish teachers used L1 to varying degrees and generally viewed it as helpful for language learning, though they emphasized it should not dominate classroom discourse. Ahamed (2019) examined university students' attitudes toward L1 use, noting most supported its inclusion in English classes when used appropriately in terms of frequency and context. However, a minority believed L1 had limited value for English acquisition, suggesting that overuse might hinder effective learning.

Raman and Yigitotoglu (2015) investigated instances of translation and code switching by novice teachers and explored students' perception on this oscillatory language change. Their analysis highlighted that both teachers and students viewed code-switching as a valuable tool in the instructional process. Its primary educational functions included fostering a sense of connection for bridging L1 and L2, enhancing learning, expressing the teachers' inner voice, conveying emotions and abstract ideas, facilitating comprehension and maintaining student engagement. Kaharman's (2009) study differed from the rest by showing that L1 use not only helped clarify meanings and complex topics but also reduced learners' language anxiety providing crucial psychological motivation. Additionally, the study found that participants' self-evaluations and comparisons with others became more positive after incorporating moderate degree of L1 in language classes.

While earlier second language acquisition research encouraged maximal use of the target language in classrooms (Jingxia, 2010), recent perspectives have adopted a more tolerant view of learners' L1 (Lee & Macaro, 2013; Sali, 2014). Lee and Macaro (2013) advocate for L1 as a learner-centered tool that enhances comprehension and lowers anxiety, though warn against excessive reliance. McMillan and Rivers (2011) found that EFL instructors in Japanese universities often used L1 for pedagogical and social functions such as translating, explaining tasks, paraphrasing student input, and managing classroom issues. Both novice and experienced teachers in their study acknowledged the value of L1 in supporting learning. Likewise, Turnbull and Dailey-O'Cain (2020) noted that L1 use helps explain grammar and manage interactions, while Hall and Cook (2022) emphasized its

scaffolding role, especially for lower-proficiency learners facing cognitive overload.

Similarly, Copland and Neokleous (2011) conducted a study with four English teachers from two post-school private language institutions in Cyprus. The transcriptions of the observed classes revealed that the teachers utilized L1 for eleven distinct functions. These included organizing the course, explaining (especially grammar), providing instructions, asking and answering questions, reprimanding, making jokes, offering praise, translating, using L1 as markers, giving hints and expressing opinions to students. However, interviews with the teachers revealed critically reserved attitudes towards using Greek in language classes despite their frequent reliance on it. They concluded that this reflects a contradiction between the teachers' actions and beliefs. They further suggest that bilingual teachers may experience a sense of guilt when teaching an L2 through L1.

In the same vein of inquisition, McMillan and Rivers (2011) conducted an attitude survey with 239 native English speaking teachers at a Japanese University which highlighted the positive role of L1 in enhancing cognitive, communicative and social functions in language classrooms. Anton and Dicamilla (1999) further support this view emphasizing that L1 use fosters assistive collaboration among learners enabling them to work effectively with peers. This issue has often been neglected in the field of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) methodology. Many ELT practitioners feel uncomfortable to use mother tongue even when they recognize its practical benefits similar to the argument expressed by Copland and Neokleous (2011). This clearly sheds some filters on the use of mother tongue in a foreign language class.

In Nepal, the role of L1 in EFL classrooms has been debated by several scholars. Bhattarai (2001, as cited in Luitel, 2005) advocated for translation as a last resort when other strategies fail, and Phyak (2005) emphasized its necessity in multilingual contexts. Bhattarai also noted that over 80% of teaching time in Nepali schools involves the use of the Nepali language, even during English conversation lessons, which often revert to translation methods. Dhungana (2004) acknowledged the dual impact of code-switching, suggesting it can both hinder and support learning. Luitel (2005), in a study conducted in Kathmandu, found that translation activities improved students' productive vocabulary more effectively than other methods. Similarly, Khanal (2004), through observations and questionnaires, reported greater use of Nepali in rural schools for defining words and giving instructions, concluding that L1 supports learning strategies and vocabulary explanation.

In light of the growing global discourse surrounding the use of students' mother tongue in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, numerous studies have already explored this phenomenon from various perspectives. However, most of these studies have been conducted in contexts that differ significantly in terms of linguistic, cultural and educational settings from Nepal, particularly the Pokhara Valley. Although this study is situated within a well-established field of inquiry, it seeks to contribute a localized understanding that has been largely underrepresented in existing literature. Specifically, this research investigates how students and teachers in different schools across the Pokhara Valley perceive and experience the role of the mother tongue in EFL classes. By focusing on this unique sociolinguistic context and employing distinct methodological choices regarding the study area, participant selection and data collection strategies, this study offers fresh insights. It not only follows up on global research trends but also addresses the specific realities, challenges and practices within Nepal's multilingual educational landscape. Thus, it enriches the broader conversation with a

nuanced, context-sensitive perspective.

Methodology

This study was conducted within the framework of a phenomenological research design grounded in the interpretivist paradigm (Leavy, 2017). Phenomenological research aims to explore and interpret the meanings individuals assign to their lived experiences, particularly those that cannot be fully captured through quantitative methods (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). In this context, the study sought to investigate teachers' and students' attitudes toward the use of the mother tongue in English language classrooms at the secondary level in Nepal.

Both primary and secondary sources of information were utilized. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and non-participant classroom observations conducted in selected schools across the Pokhara Valley. Secondary data were gathered from relevant books, journal articles, past research reports and credible online resources to support the theoretical and contextual foundation of the study. A total of six participants, comprising three secondary-level English teachers and three students, were purposefully selected from community Sanskrit, community Nepali and institutional schools to ensure diversity of perspectives. Consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

The interviews were conducted individually in quiet settings within the schools and lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. They were guided by open-ended questions to encourage detailed, reflective responses, and were audio-recorded with permission. Classroom observations were carried out without predetermined rigid schedules, allowing naturalistic and spontaneous recording of classroom activities, language use patterns, teacher strategies and student responses. Field notes were maintained during each observation session to supplement interview data and enhance triangulation.

For data analysis, an inductive coding approach was adopted, enabling patterns and themes to emerge organically from the raw data. A thematic analysis framework guided the identification of recurring ideas, experiences and perceptions related to the use of the mother tongue in English classrooms. The coding and analysis were carried out manually without the use of specialized qualitative data analysis software, as the manageable size of the dataset allowed for closer engagement with the material and deeper interpretive insights.

The selection of a qualitative, phenomenological methodology was deliberate, driven by the study's objective to uncover rich, subjective and context-sensitive understandings of the phenomenon. Given the nature of the research questions, a phenomenological approach within the interpretivist paradigm was the most appropriate choice for exploring the multiple realities of teachers' and students' lived experiences and reaching a converged conclusion.

Results

This section presents and discusses the findings derived from the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data. The results are organized under key themes that emerged during the investigation, reflecting experiences, perceptions and practices related to the use of the mother tongue in English classrooms. Each theme is discussed in relation to existing literature, providing a critical interpretation of the findings. Furthermore, relevant comparisons are made with previous studies to highlight

similarities, differences and new insights. The discussion also addresses the implications of the findings for language teaching in multilingual contexts, particularly in Nepal.

Pedagogical Significance of the first language for second language learning

Classroom observations revealed that many teachers used students' mother tongue, Nepali, as a supportive tool to enhance comprehension and learning (Observation, March 5, 2025). L1 was predominantly employed to explain abstract grammar rules, literary texts, idiomatic expressions and unfamiliar vocabulary. Echoing this practice, one teacher remarked, "I think that use of students' mother tongue is unavoidable at secondary level classes. Basically, I employ Nepali language as a technique while teaching unfamiliar cultural vocabulary items, grammatical topics and literary texts" (Teacher 1, Interview, March 7, 2025).

In a symmetric stance to this explication, one of the student informants (S3) said, "English is really a hard subject for us. If the teacher speaks some English sentences, we immediately happen to lose the thread of meaning. Therefore, I think, use of Nepali is a must in the English class". All the informants from the students' group expressed similar views on this concern. When asked about what kind of contents they wanted to be explained in Nepali, S3 replied that almost every time they want explication in Nepali no matter what the topic is related to. During the class observation phase of one of the teachers (T3), the researcher also noticed that the students seemed expectant of translation if the teacher spoke some sentences only in English.

Using mother tongue for Psychological and emotional soothing

The incorporation of Nepali in EFL classrooms serves an essential role in mitigating students' psychological and emotional challenges. Learning a foreign language, particularly English, often induces anxiety and self-doubt among school-level students, which can hinder their confidence and participation. In such cases, the strategic use of the mother tongue provides learners with a sense of familiarity and emotional security, fostering a more positive and supportive learning environment. For example, during listening activities, students frequently struggle with the speed and pronunciation of spoken texts. As one student (S2) noted, "When the teacher presents us with the recordings of the listening texts, we hardly understand the contents because of non-understanding of the pronunciation and vocabulary." In such scenarios, providing background context and summarizing the content in Nepali can alleviate fear and anxiety, facilitating smoother and more accessible learning experiences. Supporting this view, another student (S3) remarked:

"We are from Nepali medium schools. All of us are quite weak in English subject, as our teacher involves us in listening and reading activities, we feel worried for not understanding the contents. The state of fear and anxiety come to normality when our teacher translates or paraphrases those matters into Nepali language with appropriate exemplification and illustration".

These visions express how the average students perceive the target language in general Nepali context.

A blended approach to teaching and learning a language

We face several difficulties in the English class. As English is a novice language for us, we feel it difficult to understand everything clearly if explained only in English. Furthermore, the lessons like poem, drama, listening, writing, grammar and culturally engulfed texts sound really very complex to comprehend and act upon. Therefore, we request our teacher to use Nepali (switch code) turn by turn.

Only then, we find it easier to understand the tools, tactics sequence and crux of the concerned issues through this approach.

In perfect symmetry with the students' arguments, one of the contributing teacher informants (T3) said that the students look puzzled and even frozen if he used only English. He further said, "I myself feel uncomfortable if I see their faces black and blue due to not understanding". He underscored that code-switching between English and Nepali is inevitable in the specific classroom contexts of Nepal. During the class observation phase, the researcher found the teachers frequently switching the codes. However, the switches seemed meaningful since the teacher was attempting to clarify the concerns by moving to and from.

Students' perspectives towards using their mother tongue in an English Class

Students' views on using Nepali in English classes are influenced by factors such as their linguistic background, English exposure, educational context and learning goals. In government-aided community schools, where English exposure is limited, students largely support the use of their mother tongue. They see Nepali as a means to improve understanding and ease the mental stress of learning. Grammar and composition lessons, for example, become more accessible when teachers explain them in Nepali. Reflecting this, one teacher informant (T3) stated:

My students are relatively poor in English at this community school. They want me to teach everything by mixing English and Nepali. As I speak four to five sentences in English, They immediately seem baffled and request me to use Nepali. They are so weak that even the nine and ten graders are unable to spell out and pronounce some new and longer words. More possibly, due to not having sound foundation, their pleas and expressions beg Nepali language every time in the class.

In the same line of arguments as expressed by the teacher, one of the student informants (S3) said, "English is not our mother tongue. We find it difficult to do reading writing and grammatical operations. Therefore, the teacher needs to facilitate us in every activity using Nepali". Although some students and teachers show an excessive reliance over Nepali language, the students and teachers from the English medium institutional schools seemed liberated from such stronghold. One of the teachers from the institutional school (T1) said, "I rarely use Nepali in the English class. My students here find English language normal. They comprehend everything I teach and explain in English". Complying with the teacher's statement, one of the students from the institutional school (S3) said that we don't feel any difficulty to understand reading and writing in English. Only some confusions arise in listening native tongue. In fact, we are not impeded by language problems. Nepali is rarely heard in the English class. This was marked when the researcher observed the class of T2.

Sustaining Intra-cultural Identity and Fostering Intercultural harmony.

Several teachers reported that using Nepali in English language classrooms helped students preserve their cultural identity while developing intercultural awareness. Teachers emphasized that connecting English learning to students' cultural backgrounds fostered deeper engagement with the language. For example, Teacher 2 stated:

Using Nepali while teaching allows students to stay connected to their own culture. When I teach about festivals, I often compare our Dashain and Tihar with English festivals like Christmas and Halloween. This way, students see the similarities and differences and it makes learning English more

meaningful.

In alignment with this view, Teacher 2 further noted:

As an English teacher, I am a little more conscious about linguistic and cultural identities of different countries. In the name of adopting English as a medium of instruction, I deny the restriction of students' mother tongue nor is it possible to use cent percent English in the context of Nepalese schools. If Nepali is not used at a justifiable level in English classes, it may endanger the typicality, originality and traditional essence of Nepali language.

Similarly, Teacher 1 highlighted the practical challenges of teaching cultural and technical terms exclusively in English, stating:

Many of the cultural terms and technical expressions cannot be taught to students unless they are translated into Nepali. Moreover, nearly 25% of the teaching hours would better be assigned to students' mother tongue, despite being a foreign language class.

While teachers emphasized preserving linguistic and cultural identity by using Nepali, students did not explicitly express views on this. Observations showed that strategic use of Nepali helped students understand complex English concepts more easily. Teachers switched to Nepali to explain abstract ideas, complex grammar, or unfamiliar vocabulary, reducing students' cognitive load and boosting engagement. For example, during a lesson on English idioms (Observation, March 5, 2024), the teacher provided Nepali equivalents, noticeably improving comprehension. This pattern was evident in several classes, underscoring Nepali's practical role in supporting learning.

Discussions

This research was conducted to explore answers to the research questions if it is necessary to use the students' mother tongue in an English class being taught as a foreign language. Further, the concern was to explicate the perceptions of students and teachers on the question despite a set of distinct theoretical backups, methodological procedures tendered by the experts. As an inquisitive English teacher, the researcher got inspired to dig out the obscure facts into practice in the EFL context of Nepal.

Upon collecting the necessary data, the researcher analyzed them meticulously as per the fundamental principles of a qualitative research. This analysis revealed a wide spectrum of opinions and practices as expressed by the informants regarding English language environment in the school level context of Nepal. The participants highlighted that the teaching and learning of English language in the Nepalese schools has its diverse but unique structure; perhaps all distinct from the scenario of other nations across the world.

The results revealed that teachers intermittently use Nepali to explain complex ideas, particularly for cultural vocabulary, grammar and literary texts. This aligns with Cook (2001), who emphasized L1 use for meaning, grammar and classroom management, and Auerbach (1993), who argued that L1 fosters an inclusive environment. Recent studies also support the idea that judicious L1 use reduces anxiety, boosts confidence and aids comprehension (Lee, 2019; Aljoundi & Alhaysony, 2020). These findings suggest that the mother tongue is beneficial when content requires deeper cultural or linguistic understanding. However, both teachers and students acknowledged that while Nepali aids comprehension, excessive use may hinder fluency development, indicating the need for a balanced

approach (Kuldashev & Shabonova, 2024). Teachers in English-medium schools were less reliant on Nepali, likely due to greater confidence in English. Overall, these findings stress the importance of balancing L1 and target language use in foreign language teaching.

Participants emphasized that the strategic use of Nepali can alleviate anxiety, build confidence, and create a supportive learning environment, in symmetry with findings from Timucin and Baytar (2015) on its role in checking comprehension, encouraging learners and managing classrooms. Learning a foreign language can cause anxiety, and judicious use of Nepali helps mitigate stress by easing the psychological burden of processing English. For students in Nepali and Sanskrit medium schools, limited exposure to English makes occasional Nepali use essential for active participation without fear of ridicule. Classroom observations confirmed how translating English concepts into Nepali offers psychological comfort.

Regarding the value of using L1 in EFL, teachers viewed it as a blended approach to connect students' prior knowledge with English concepts. They argued that Nepali is not a barrier but an aid in enhancing comprehension, fostering inclusivity and streamlining learning in Nepal's multilingual context. This aligns with Yataganbaba and Yildirim (2015), who found that Turkish teachers used L1 to bridge gaps in grammar, vocabulary and literary meaning. Translating idiomatic expressions into Nepali can strengthen English skills. Teachers also noted that L1 aids in effective classroom management, ensuring clarity in instructions and group activities, facilitating a fluent interaction between English and Nepali.

The research captured students' diverse perspectives on using mother tongue (L1) in an EFL classroom. These perspectives were shaped by their linguistic backgrounds, educational settings and available resources. Students highlighted both advantages and disadvantages of incorporating L1 in foreign language instruction. The main argument in favor of L1 was its role in enhancing comprehension especially for beginners and less capable students. L1 was seen as helpful for explaining complex grammar, unfamiliar vocabulary and literary concepts. It also alleviated anxiety and built confidence, aiding brainstorming and writing. However, some students and teachers from English-medium schools argued that excessive reliance on L1 could hinder progress in English. They believed that English should be taught through immersion, promoting conceptualization and production in the target language. These contrasting views open up further exploration of the medium of instruction debate. Recent studies (Sharma & Phyak, 2022; García & Otheguy, 2021) suggest that while English-only approaches aim to immerse learners, selective use of L1 can offer cognitive, cultural and emotional support without hindering English acquisition. Classroom observations reflected this divide, with some teachers advocating for English-only immersion, while others supported integrating Nepali for better understanding and cultural identity preservation.

Regarding sustaining intracultural identity and promoting intercultural awareness, the results show that integrating students' mother tongue in EFL classrooms is not only a linguistic choice but also a cultural necessity. This practice helps maintain cultural identity while learning English, the global language. These findings align with Gulzar (2010), who emphasized the humanistic reasons—individual, social, cultural, and psychological—for using L1 judiciously. In a small country like Nepal, preserving native culture and traditions from the influence of English and its culture becomes even more significant. One informant (T3) highlighted the use of Nepali stories, idioms, and proverbs to

foster cultural familiarity and national pride, positioning the mother tongue as a bridge to the English-speaking world. Once students gain proficiency in English, they can explore global English culture through multimedia resources tailored to their interests.

Nevertheless, this blended approach, though consisting several merits, may underlie challenges as well. Using too much Nepali in English classes might limit students' practice with English, while using only English could make them feel disconnected from their own culture. Therefore, the teachers need to take careful decisions about when to switch between languages to keep a balance between native and foreign cultures through the medium of language.

Conclusion and Implications

This study aimed to investigate the role of students' native language (L1) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, particularly in the context of Nepalese secondary schools. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research combined classroom observations, teacher interviews and student feedback to explore how and why Nepali is incorporated into English lessons. The key findings revealed that the careful and strategic use of the mother tongue supports students' linguistic development by providing cultural, emotional and pedagogical benefits. Major themes that emerged include the pedagogical significance of L1 use, psychological and emotional support for learners, a blended approach to instruction, students' positive perceptions toward L1 integration and the role of L1 in maintaining inter and intra-cultural harmony. The results highlighted that judicious use of Nepali alleviates student anxiety, enhances comprehension and builds learner confidence, especially among students from government-aided community schools. Additionally, L1 use was found to clarify difficult concepts and offer a smoother pathway for students' gradual transition into full English immersion.

The use of students' native language in EFL classrooms is a dynamic approach that balances linguistic development with content-based cultural and emotional support. The major themes, pedagogical significance, psychological support, blended teaching, students' perspectives and intra-cultural harmony emphasize the importance of L1 in foreign language teaching. Findings show that the judicious use of L1 reduces anxiety, enhances comprehension, and builds confidence, especially for students in government-aided community schools. Additionally, L1 serves as a useful tool for clarity and streamlining the learning process, laying a solid foundation for transitioning to the target language.

Regarding the students' reflections toward using their mother tongue navigated diverse experiences as were shaped by their linguistic and social context. The students from community schools frequently argued for using native language as an essential tool for forming concepts and understanding the contents. While the teachers and students from the English medium institutional schools seek minimal reliance on the native language for accuracy, fluency, comprehension and expertise over the target language. The diverse opinions and stances explored during the research highlight the necessities to tailor such teaching approaches which prove to be suitable for the specific classroom contexts. Therefore, the teachers need to devise appropriate strategies both personally and institutionally to ensure effective language instruction.

The process of incorporating students' mother tongue into an EFL class contributes in preserving native cultural identity and promoting intercultural tolerance. By preserving students'

cultural backgrounds, it connects them to the global community, where both teachers and students can contribute to fostering a well-balanced and inclusive education. To achieve these goals, based on the participants' responses, there should be specialized teacher training, curriculum development, policy making and governmental dedication to the objective. Additionally, intensive research works conducted on the ground reality of Nepal on this topic would prove to be milestones to open a broader horizon to resolve the contentiously long stranded issue.

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