

USES OF THE FIRST LANGUAGE IN THE ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN/SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: TEACHERS' VIEWS AND ARGUMENTS

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Abstract: Drawing on the lived experiences of three community school English teachers in Nepal, this article explores the uses of the learners' first language (L1) in English as a foreign/second language (ESL) classes. As the data, we collected the written lived-experience descriptions from the teachers, observed their classes, and interviewed them. We analyzed the data thematically and interpreted them contextually. As the study found, the teachers have their lived experiences of using the L1 for its cognitive roles – namely, for checking learners' understanding, facilitating them in task performance, and increasing understanding on the part of the students in various aspects of language learning – including content, vocabulary, grammar, stories, poems, and cultural concepts. Drawing on the teachers' convictions, we have advanced that the L1 (here, Nepali) does play the role of cognitive bridging in English language learning, particularly when the students have a 'poor English base' (as perceived by the participants in this study), and when both the teacher and the students share a common L1. Hence, the general implication could be that the L1 can function as a support in teaching and learning a second/foreign language (L2).

Keywords: English as a foreign/second language, lived experience, English-base, cognitive bridging, L2 input

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English education is said to have been introduced first in Nepal in 1850 but in its earliest history it was confined to the royal family male children and close relatives, and remained almost so until the downfall of the autocratic Rana regime in 1951, after which more schools were opened and education was made accessible to the public (Shrestha, 2008). Today, like Nepali which is the official language and the most widely used lingua franca in Nepal, English occupies a significant space as a compulsory as well as an optional or specialization subject in both school and university level curricula (Poudel, 2019).

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As also stated by Poudel (2022), a sort of ‘craze for English’ dwells in the Nepali society – from the bad off to the well off. Therefore, English is often equated to the quality of education. English as a medium of instruction (EMI) even for the content subjects has always been a central policy of the private schools, which in general are financially beyond the access of children from low-income families. The private schools encourage memory-based rote learning focused on high scores in the examination. Yet, a general perception is that students from the private schools have a strong English base. On the other hand, it is commonly observed in the government-aided public schools that teaching-learning in the content subjects is conducted through the Nepali language or, in a smaller number of cases, through other first languages (L1s) of the students. In those schools, it is common to see the prevalence of translation and dependence on formal rules of grammar attributable to the Grammar Translation Method of teaching English (Bista, 2011). Therefore, the students from the public schools are usually perceived by their own teachers and the public as having a ‘poor English base’. Nonetheless, stemming from community pressures, even the government-aided public schools have substantially shifted – and have been shifting at a fast growth as a trend – to EMI schools.

Based on general observations, certain characteristics of English language teaching (ELT) in Nepal can be noticed. Like in any other subjects, teaching English is predominantly teacher centered, wherein the textbook is the main source of the learning input, and writing is considered the chief indicator of the output. As a consequence, there are little instances of classroom interaction other than text-based questioning and responses. This naturally leads to the underdevelopment of communicative skills in the students. Information and communication technology is rarely used in the English language classrooms. Such a situation naturally results in little exposure to the authentic English. An important point is that the uses of the Nepali language in the English language classroom are commonly observed in those classrooms. Arguments in favor and against such a practice can be traced in the existing literature.

Despite the generally advocated English-only monolingual policy at the macro level of English education, the practitioners around the world are using students’ L1 in ELT in various contexts (Paker & Karaagac, 2015). There is a considerable body of literature on multilingual practices involving the use of the students’ L1 in a foreign/second language (L2)¹ classroom. However, there are relatively few studies based on teachers’ lived experiences that inquire into the cognitive use of the L1 in ESL classes. This paper is directed towards fulfilling this concern by bringing into light some detailed explications of the experiences of the phenomenon lived by the English teachers of community schools in Nepal.

The L1 is generally defined as the speaker’s language “acquired at home” (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 377); or “a native language, home language, ... first language, ... primary language, and heritage language” (Ohyama, 2017, p. 7). In this study the students’ L1 is Nepali, which the teachers selected for this study and the students they teach use most dominantly and/or comfortably in their day-to-day communication, and is also used by them along with English, the target language (TL), in the ESL classes observed in this study.

¹ Throughout this paper we do not assume a strict demarcation between a foreign language and a second language.

Various assumptions and theories can be traced in the literature that stand for and against the use of the L1 in an L2 classroom. To begin with the arguments in support of it, the grammar translation method, for instance, holds the assumption that the use of the L1 makes the meaning of the TL clear (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). On the contrary, the direct method insists on L2 instruction exclusively in the TL without any recourse to students' L1 (Cummins, 2007). Some scholars, such as Krashen (1989), Mickel (2016), and Escobar and Dillard-Paltrineri (2015) argue that teachers should use the L2 in the L2 classroom since the excessive and inappropriate use of L1 hinders the cognitive processes necessary for L2 learning. Similarly, Gatenby (as cited in Phillipson, 2007) claims that "if other languages are used much, standards of English will drop" (p. 185). Also, at its extreme, the relevant literature reveals the provision of English-only classes, such as the 'circle time' class of English, in which the students are almost banned from using their L1 (Nilsson, 2020).

The communicative approach to language teaching, however, seems somehow liberal and pragmatic regarding the use of the L1 in an L2 classroom as it accepts a judicious use of the L1 where feasible (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). This study adopts the position that the use of any language that the students are familiar with can mediate the 'cognitive' aspect of L2 learning (Baker, 2011) – a construct of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of learning (STL).

The STL postulates that human learning involves higher mental processes including problem-solving, voluntary memory, rational thought, and meaning making activity; and it occurs through the process of interaction with others in social context – which is always mediated by higher-level cultural or psychological tools such as language, signs, numeracy, categorization and logic in the learner's 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978; Wu, 2018). In this study, 'human learning' is specifically concerned with the students' learning of any language other than the L1, which involves the mental processes mentioned above. As a mediating tool, the language can operate in the form of the L1 as well as TL in L2 teaching-learning; and it is argued that a collaborative dialogue in the L1 or the L2 mediates L2 learning (Swain & Lapkin, 2000). However, the role of mediation performed by the L1 alone has been considered for an in-depth analysis here.

Though the STL incorporates cognitive, affective and interactional mediations (Sharma, 2023; Wu, 2018), the teachers' lived experiences of using the L1 have led us to the analysis of its role for cognitive mediation. The particular theoretical premise guiding this study, therefore, posits that the utilization of the L1 may play a role in mediating the cognitive facets of learning a TL. This perspective aligns with the notion that incorporating students' L1 can be one of the strategies for enhancing the comprehensibility of the L2 input (Krashen, 1989).

Ruiz (1984) conceptualizes "language as a resource", rather than "language as a problem", in the L2 classroom, an argument which favors the mediational role of the L1 (or any language familiar to the students). Likewise, as Baker and Wright (2017) view, using the students' L1 in education means developing bilingualism that provides intellectual, cultural, and social resources. Thus, language, irrespective of the L1 or the L2, is considered an asset that can be utilized as well as focused for learning with a view to developing multilingualism and maintaining the students' language. The STL explains the role of L1 for interactive and cognitive tasks in the L2 classroom (Baker & Wright, 2017).

Besides, there are arguments emphasizing the use of students' L1 for facilitating the students' cognitive and academic development in the L2 class (Baker, 2011; Cummins, 1979; Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Zulfikar, 2019). Baker (2011) observes that students naturally think in their L1 to be cognitively successful whenever they are unable to process in the TL. Therefore, preventing students from utilizing their L1 means depriving them of an invaluable cognitive tool (Swain & Lapkin, 2000). In addition, Krashen's (1989) theory of using the L1 as a way of making the L2 input comprehensible overlaps with the idea of cognitive mediation under the STL. On this backdrop, we explored from the participants' lived experiences how and why the L1 is used for cognitive bridging. By and large, the aforementioned arguments have particularly emphasized the natural use of the L1 in L2 teaching-learning – with the claim that L1 is usable as an important means of thinking and understanding.

Some empirical studies have brought into light the cases involving the use of the L1 for reducing the cognitive overload while explaining complex language phenomena in the L2 classroom (Bruen & Kelly, 2014); explaining complex concepts or grammar points, and checking students' understanding; and, on the part of the students, for building meaning during group discussion, asking to clarify the instruction and pronunciation (Silvani, 2014); clarifying the topic and explaining difficult concepts (Paker & Karaagac, 2015); metalinguistic explanations during grammar instruction (Mickel, 2016); explaining vocabulary and clarifying meaning (Alshehri, 2017); explaining complex grammar concepts, instructions for class activities and classroom management (Shabir, 2017); supporting L2 learning by making the process of teaching and learning easier (Madrinan, 2014); bridging L1 to L2 while teaching and learning reading comprehension (Luitel, 2017); and for cognitive, affective, and interactional mediation in general (Wu, 2018). In this line of thought, Maluch and Sachse (2020) have identified a “strong relationship” between the students' L1 and L2 reading speed.

Notwithstanding, some studies depicting different results of using the L1 in L2 teaching are also encountered. Orfan (2023), for example, observed both facilitating and interfering roles of the L1 in various aspects of L2 learning. Others (e.g., Dang & Nguyen, 2020; Pulido, 2021; Simonet & Amengual, 2020) observed the interference of L1 in L2 learning. On the whole, these conclusions indicate towards lessening L1 interference rather than completely avoiding the use of the L1 from the L2 classroom.

The studies discussed above principally highlight the cognitive role of the L1 in the L2 classroom and the arguments in favor of or against using the L1 in the teaching and learning of the L2 based on the effects it may result in. Importantly, they also emphasize the need for a strategic L1 use rather than its complete prevention. In these connections, the present study particularly pinpoints the areas in which the teachers use Nepali, the L1, in the ESL classroom, and brings into light their rationale for such a practice. Accordingly, in the present study, the main contemplation is around the following research questions:

1. How do the teachers view and argue about using the L1 in their workplace?
2. For what purposes do they use the L1 (Nepali) in the ESL classroom?

METHOD

The details of the methodology followed in the study regarding the research participants, instruments, data collection methods and procedure, and the data explication procedure are presented below.

Participants

We purposively selected three experienced and well-reputed secondary level teachers of English (pseudo-named as Umesh, Thakur and Samira) speaking Nepali as their L1 from three well-established community schools at the outskirts of Kathmandu (See Table 1 for their demographic profile). They had various lived experiences of using the students' L1 in the ESL classroom, and were willing to share "a thorough and rich description of the phenomenon" (Vagle, 2018, p. 147) under this study in a friendly and open manner.

Table 1. Demographic profile of the participants

Participants	Gender	Age	Education	Experience (years) of teaching English
Umesh	Male	49	M. Ed. (English)	25
Thakur	Male	54	M. A., B. Ed. (English)	30
Samira	Female	48	M. Ed. (English)	26

Data Collection

The data collection process involved various techniques, including conducting overt non-participant class observations, conducting "phenomenological interviews" (Bevan, 2014), and gathering lived experience descriptions (LEDs). Each teacher underwent observation and recording for 3-4 class sessions, participated in 2-3 interview sessions, and provided LED responses twice.

During the classroom observations, we observed how participants use their home language for cognitive purposes, recorded lessons and noted nonlinguistic contexts. We also examined examples and contexts of the L1 use to reveal their functions in the class. The interviews clarified unclear contexts or functions. Our goal is to document the use of Nepali in each class observation.

We conducted interviews focusing on how the participants practiced and experienced using L1 in the ESL classrooms. Our overarching interview questions were:

1. Could you share your experiences of using Nepali in Grade 9 English Language Teaching classes in this session, both from your perspective and your students'?
2. How do you make sense of these experiences?

We phrased these questions in both Nepali and English, using different approaches to gather the desired insights. We adopted follow-up questions as well, based on the participants' responses, to uncover their specific experiences and sense making.

Concerning the LED, we asked the participants to write narratives in which they shared their lived experiences of using Nepali, the students' (and the teachers' own) L1, in Grade 9 ELT classes. In particular, we asked them to share the moments that stood out to them, the significance of the moments in their teaching career, and how the moments made them feel.

Through the different techniques of data collection, we accumulated a rich collection of the participants' responses, emotions and insights, constituting our dataset.

Data Analysis

We employed an integrated approach combining both inductive and deductive methods for the thematic analysis of the data. This approach was chosen to align with the problem and research questions stated earlier. Initially, we performed an inductive coding of the data, allowing the themes to emerge organically. Subsequently, we categorized the codes under the themes emerged, and again examined the data time and again to see the existence of new codes (if any) that accord with the themes established as such.

Thus, we engaged ourselves in an interactive and comprehensive examination of the data, breaking them down into constituent parts and synthesizing them iteratively. This process adhered to the principle of the "hermeneutic circle" (Peoples, 2021; Willis, 2007), where coding, recoding, categorizing and re-categorizing of codes into themes occurred multiple times, taking into account the study context. We continued this iterative process of developing new meanings and interpretations of the data until we achieved a final understanding and interpretation of the participants' lived experiences on the use of L1 in L2 classrooms.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The results derived from the explication of the data are presented in the sub-headings that follow – depicting how and why the participants had used and instructed their students to use Nepali, the L1, while teaching English in their respective classrooms.

Participants' Views and Rationalization

The participants tend to justify the use of the students' L1 by depicting the circumstances they work in – among the students having poor level of competence in English (so-perceived by the participants). As they express the opinion, it is due to such a situation in the classroom that the compulsion for using the L1 has occurred in teaching as well as learning. They do not see the relevance of the sole use of English in the class when a vast majority of the students cannot communicate through this language alone (i.e., without the support through Nepali); so they prefer using Nepali in association with English and argue that such a strategy has been adopted for the purpose of learning facilitation, as found in Samira's remarks:

“What does it mean to use only English when the students do not understand it? I use English when necessary, such as students are required to write in English in the exam.... But.... I have to use Nepali to make the students understand the learning stuff. I do not think it makes any sense when the teacher is barking in the front of the class, and the students are being confused.”

Thus, the classroom circumstance seems to have demanded the teacher's use of the L1; and they have also allowed the poorly performing students to use it in the class so that they could understand the language and content in the textbook. Samira adds, “When they [students] are confused and fumbling, and when it seems that the students are not able to speak in English, I say, ‘At least ask or speak in Nepali if you are comfortable with it’.” She defends her position, thus, “Nepali has to be used because most of the students do not understand English”.

Describing his experience, Thakur says, “... for students with low ability, and those who have just passed the lower grades, Nepali has to be used from time to time”. Here, the expression ‘just passed’ signals a poor level of learning achievement. In a similar vein, Umesh mentions that the students are unable to understand the lessons in depth when delivered only in English since they have “...little competencies as they study or use English only in the English class from their early grades...”; but he has to teach English anyhow, and using Nepali has been a compulsion for satisfying the students. He writes:

“I used Nepali words/phrases/sentences as the situation compelled me to do so.... It is my responsibility to teach the subject matter at any cost so that students can do better in the examination. It means that I have to use Nepali where and when necessary to fulfill the purpose.”

Purposes of Using the L1

The various purposes of using the L1 in classroom instruction shown by the data are presented and described in the text that follows.

Checking understanding

The participants have the experience of using as well as making their students use the L1 for the purpose of checking whether the students have understood the content. Such a use occurs with the conviction that ascertaining the students' understanding is essential before giving feedback; so that the teacher can decide how the feedback can be provided more appropriately. Vignette 1 demonstrates how L1 has occurred in the teacher's attempt of checking understanding.

UMESH: ‘Apple’ means /sjau/, potato means?

Ss: /alu/

UMESH: Ok then, ‘rival’ means?

Ss: (Silence)

UMESH: Because we should know the exact meaning in Nepali, only then we have feeling, /jəsko əɪʰə jo rəɪcʰə bʰənerə buzʰcʰəu ni tə/; who can tell? Suresh?

(Vignette 1)

Here, the teacher presents the meaning of the word ‘apple’ in Nepali as an example in the beginning, then proceeds ahead by asking the students to tell the meaning of another word in the same way (using Nepali). The students’ answer (/alu/) shows their correct understanding of the meaning of the target word ‘potato’. Thus, the L1 has been used in the teacher’s attempt to ascertain how far the students have understood what has been taught.

In the end, the teacher’s expression also demonstrates that he has justified the use of the L1 for grasping the content being taught; and accordingly, his action of asking the meaning is guided by the same rationale – insisting that the student/s should tell the meaning in Nepali; and, thus, he wants to check their understanding.

The use of the L1 for checking understanding was found beyond the level of word-meaning also – as seen Vignette 2. In this case the teacher begins with a clause in English that has been the matter for checking understanding.

UMESH: Having a strong desire for something. What does ‘having a strong desire’ mean? /buz^heu?, kura buz^heu?/, do you understand? ‘having a strong desire to do something’ /b^haneko ke ho/?

S: (Silence)

UMESH: Take your friends’ help

S: /bəlijo cahəna/ (‘strong desire’)

(Vignette 2)

Some reiteration is noticed here. The target of teaching (‘having a strong desire’) has repeatedly occurred in the teacher’s presentation – once in the form of the infinite affirmative clause (when learner’s attention is drawn towards the target), and twice in the form of a question. Out of these two occurrences of the same question, the latter incorporates a Nepali expression at the end. It seems the teacher is not so convinced that the students can answer the question ‘do you understand?’ asked without using the L1; so he repeatedly asks the Nepali-translated version of the question, saying /buzHeu?/ (‘[Do you] understand?’) and /kura buzHeu?/ (‘[Do you] understand the matter?’).

In the interview, Umesh made the following remark:

“Sometimes, I even say, ‘It is a difficult question, you can answer it in Nepali’ to check if the student has understood the lesson. If he answers correctly, that means he has understood the content. If he knows the content, but difficult vocabulary and structures come in their way, I allow them to say in Nepali. Then I teach them later how to say it in English.”

Here, the participant has the confidence that the students’ expression of the contents (taught through English) in the L1 reveals their understanding, and thus, the teacher can check how far they have grasped the subject matter. Therefore, Umesh seems to have instructed the students to answer the questions in Nepali. In the same line of thought, Samira justifies the use of the L1 for checking understanding, saying, “Their expression in Nepali of what they learnt in English

indicates that they have at least understood the stuff. Now, the only task left is to teach them how to express it in English.” This statement presents the teacher’s strong conviction that the students’ expression of contents (taught through the TL) using the L1 is a clear and valid indication of their successful comprehension. Doing so, the students essentially complete the initial step towards learning the newly taught matters; then they can be instructed to use the L1 for answering questions, through which the teacher can check how far they have understood the content.

Facilitating task performance

The participants were found using the L1 for facilitating the students in doing their classroom tasks in various ways, as exemplified in Vignette 3.

SAMIRA: (Dealing with the completion of a conversation) /ke mə b^hitrə zanə sək^hu? b^hənərə soḍ^hepəç^hi po/ (only after asking ‘May I go in?’) “Oh yes, please go in” /b^hənjo t̪ə/ (said this); /maṭ^hi b^hərməlai t̪ələko hemupərc^hə/ ([you] should see [the utterance] below [in the dialogue] to fill in the blank above); /ṭimihərulə maṭ^hi/ question /maṭrəl herərə k^hozirəheu b^həne ruməlinc^həU/ (If you see only the question [mark] above and try to search [for the answer], you’ll get lost); /t̪ələko/ response /herərə maṭ^hiko/ question /gərmə sək^həU/ (You can solve the question after seeing the response below); /əbə jehā/ ‘go in’ /b^həne pəç^hi ke rəhec^hə/ (now, here’s ‘go in’, so what is to be done?), Mr. Ajay?

(Vignette 3)

In this guided writing task that requires completing a conversation, the student seems to be confused whether the utterance ‘Oh yes, please go in’ or ‘May I go in?’ comes in the beginning. The confusion must have occurred due to the student’s inability to understand one or both of these expressions; so, the teacher facilitates the student, and thus clarifies its usage, using the L1. Here, the teacher translates ‘May I go in?’ into Nepali, and explains why this utterance precedes ‘Oh yes, please go in’. In addition, the teacher uses Nepali to draw the students’ attention towards the clue for solving the problem in the task, in which the student is instructed to be aware of the cataphoric relation between the two utterances. In the teacher’s clarification, the expression in the L1 (equivalent to ‘May I go in?’) has incorporated the target of learning focused by the task (‘May I...’) which is missing in the incomplete conversation given to him.

Vignette 4 demonstrates the teacher’s attempt of clarifying the student’s confusion while performing a task.

(A student writes ‘things’ ‘instead of ‘thinks’ in his homework)

THAKUR: /socnu, bicar gərnū b^həneko/ ‘things’ /hunc^hə t̪ə/? (Does ‘think’ mean ‘thing’?)

S: /e/ ‘thinks’ /po hunc^hə həl/? (Oh, ‘thinks’ is correct here, isn’t it?)

THAKUR: (To another student) ‘thing’ /hətmə kja/ (‘Thing’ doesn’t fit here, you know.)

S: ‘-ing’ /hətmə/ sir? (Isn’t it ‘-ing’, sir?)

THAKUR: /socne, bicar gərnema/ ‘thing’ /hunc^hə t̪ə/? (Is ‘thing’ correct to mean ‘think’?)

Vignette 4

In the teacher's facilitation, the entire expression is in Nepali except for the item wrongly written in English by the student ('thing', which is to be corrected). In this episode, whether we see the case of the teacher's expression or the student's, only one English item (the target of teaching) – either 'thing', 'think' or 'ing' – has occurred in one utterance (barring the use of 'sir' that has already been nativized in Nepali). While the first student immediately makes the correction after the teacher's facilitation, the next does not seem to have learned the targeted content well, so the teacher continues using the L1 for facilitation.

Samira explains that since teaching-learning takes place in Nepali in the school she is working and the students' 'English base' is poor, the absence of using Nepali in the classroom interaction (if any) becomes a source of hurdle for the students; and they even become hopeless about learning. Using the L1 in such a context does encourage them – enabling them to understand the content of learning. As she notes:

“When I speak English [only], they seem to be dumbfounded and stare blankly. The students would say that they do not understand anything, so I should explain in Nepali... When we start using a little bit of Nepali,... they start interacting and understanding a little bit, which brings [about] a facial change in them.”

In this way, the teachers' attempt of justifying the use of Nepali is noticed in the context of the students with a so-perceived poor English language base. From Samira's remark, it clearly stands out that if students confront an English-to-English speaking classroom environment, they automatically lose the way forward, and are never encouraged in language learning. At this juncture, the use of Nepali has become a tool for navigation – enabling the students to perform classroom tasks.

The participants have shared that in free writing tasks they face difficulty making the students understand what to do if the task is explained solely through English. But when the teacher instructs and explains what to do in Nepali, the situation changes – whereby the teacher becomes confident that there remains nothing unknown to the students. Thakur stated:

“When I just say, 'Write your Dashain vacation plan in about 200 words', I have found some students come back to school without doing any homework. If I explained it in Nepali as well, I would be sure that... nobody could say that they did not understand.”

Increasing students' understanding

The teachers were found using the L1 for facilitating the students' understanding. As the data reveal, they used Nepali for teaching various elements and aspects of the English language – as depicted below.

1) *Content*: The participants have emphasized that their students have difficulty grasping the newly taught content in English without mediating through the L1. As Umesh writes: “Teaching in [at] basic and secondary levels is... also [for] giving the content knowledge of the lesson”; and this purpose “...could not be fulfilled through the English-only instruction”. Therefore, teachers “have to use Nepali to explain the content”. In the LED he writes:

“Thinking that English should be taught only in English, I even tried to do so.... In doing so, I felt that even the students of Grade 9/10 did not understand the content...; and the students even asked me if I could explain a little in Nepali.”

Sharing her experience, Samira highlights that it is mostly after getting familiar with the content in Nepali that the students who really want to learn are motivated towards learning its English equivalent. To quote her words: “My idea is that if the students understand the content, then the students really interested in study can find out the ways and learn how to say it in English.” Similarly, Thakur shares his experience:

“Since Nepali should be used to clarify concepts to the students, I feel satisfied when I think that my explaining learning stuff in Nepali rather than in English will not let even 2-4 students return home confused.... The use of Nepali is compulsory, and I think it is okay.”

Putting these experiences together, we see the reality that students tend to grasp the contents through Nepali rather than directly through English; therefore, the attempt of presenting a new content to the students through English has not ensured their understanding. The teachers seem to have been satisfied with their use of the students' L1 in classroom for this purpose.

2) *Vocabulary*: Justifying the need for teaching the meanings of difficult vocabulary items through Nepali, Umesh argues that such items should be treated in this way; otherwise, they “hinder the students from understanding the theme”. In the LED, Thakur writes how the meaning of the word ‘brandish’ was taught:

I had to teach the word ‘brandishing’. I tried my best to make the students understand the word saying ‘the guards of [the] rich woman were chasing the doves waving the stick round to frighten them’. But some students weren’t satisfied with this description [in English]. Then I used Nepali: ‘brandishing stick /b^haneko haṭma lamo lott^{hi} lierə cəra ude ġirə həllaune kam/’... (Brandishing stick means the act of waving a long stick around towards the flying birds.)... This can make me sure the students have understood the stuff.

Here, the teacher initiates teaching the item by paraphrasing it in context, saying ‘waving the stick round to frighten them’; however, he changes the strategy when this attempt cannot satisfy the students – resorting to the use of Nepali for explaining the meaning of the item.

In her LED, Samira mentions the following glossary used for teaching vocabulary, in which the targeted item has been presented along with a synonym, sometimes an antonym, a hyponym, or even a hypernym. In addition, the word has been translated into Nepali for establishing a link between the L1 and the TL.

Foolish: stupid, silly (/murkʰə/)
Worm: earthworm, insect (/gədjəula/)
Innocent: ignorant, (/əɟjani/)
Hide: conceal (/lukaunu/), antonym - seek

In these depictions, the teachers have the conviction that TL vocabulary should be taught using the L1 as well because the use of TL alone cannot ensure the students' understanding. In Samira's class, the following attempt of explaining word-meaning was recorded:

(Dealing with the vocabulary item 'wood carving') "Yes, these wood-carvings are so beautiful; is it ok if I take a photograph? 'These wood-carvings' means what? . . . wood-carvings /bʰəneko kəlaʈmək səʈlima kũɟieka katʰəka bibʰinnə cinnəhəru, həʈnə?/" ('Wood carvings' means several figures artistically chiseled in wooden materials, isn't it?)

(Vignette 5)

In the beginning, the teacher utters the sentence from the textbook where the item 'wood-carving' has occurred, then she asks a question that demands the item's meaning. The question seems to have been raised for drawing the students' attention towards the targeted item. Thereafter, the teacher immediately answers the question herself in Nepali, for meaning clarification. Thus, the teacher turns from the TL to the L1 as the explanation proceeds in the course of clarifying the meaning – an instance of translanguaging.

3) *Grammar*: In the interview, Samira explains how the students' knowledge of the grammar they learned by studying Nepali could be utilized in teaching English grammar. As she claimed, she teaches by "linking, comparing, and contrasting" the newly taught grammatical concept in English with what the students have already understood in Nepali; and "such a linking helps the students grasp what is taught". She exemplifies this from her experience of teaching the relative clause and the voice (active and passive) in English:

While teaching [the] relative clause, I have found that they understand it relatively better when I remind them of /səɾəl/ ('simple') and /səmjuktə/ ('compound') sentences in Nepali grammar, and explain [in Nepali] that when we connect two sentences using the relative pronouns like who, which, where, they become like /səmjuktə/ 'compound' sentences. Even when teaching voice, after telling them that transitive means /səkərmək/ and intransitive means /əkərmək/, I can make them understand the stuff easily and distinguish transitive verbs from intransitive verbs [which is fundamental to the conceptualization of voice].

Here, though she uses the term 'compound' instead of 'complex' (a wrong use while referring to English as well as Nepali grammar in this case), the explanation reveals her idea of utilizing the 'transfer of learning' principle in which the knowledge of the L1 grammar is utilized while learning the L2 grammar. Her explanation also demonstrates how micro-level concepts in the TL can be taught by correlating them with the parallel concepts found in the grammar of the L1.

In the interview, Umesh mentions his experience of teaching English verb patterns by correlating them with the Nepali verb patterns in this way:

I give Nepali verb patterns in a separate column so that they can understand the sense of Nepali that the tense [in English] carries. Then I ask them to write V1 [of English] if the verb of the sentence they thought in Nepali ends with /c^hu/, /c^həu/, /c^həʊ/, /c^həs/, and /c^hən/; and to write V5 if the verb ends with /c^hin/, /c^hə/, and /c^he/. For example, you can use 'go' for Nepali verb /zanc^hən/. It is because our students first think in Nepali and then write in English.

Though the verb conjugation patterns in Nepali and English largely differ, the teacher has insightfully established the linkage, and accordingly taught how to write the verb forms correctly in English on the basis of what the students have thought in Nepali, without losing the sense. This strategy seems to have followed the students' psycholinguistic route of approaching the TL grammar from the existing knowledge of the L1 grammar. Umesh remarks that as they are taught in this way, "there is less possibility of an inappropriate use of the tenses in English". In the LED, Umesh gives a concrete example of using the knowledge of the present continuous tense in Nepali for teaching the corresponding tense in English:

English: is/am/are + V^{ing}

Nepali: V+/Irāheko/ + /c^hu/, /c^hə/, /c^hin/, /c^həu/, /c^hən/, /c^həs/

4) *Story*: The participants highlight the importance of using Nepali along with English for teaching stories as well. Referring to a student paying little attention while using the English-only medium in teaching a story, Thakur mentions:

"He requested me to tell the story briefly in Nepali. After I did so, he told me to tell the story in English again, stating that he would be attentive then. Then, I repeated it again [in English] and wrote some questions on the board. That student did well."

Similarly, Samira recalls her practice of instructing the students to retell the story first in Nepali, and then in English – with the assumption that making them use Nepali in the beginning ensures the students' comfort for the subsequent expression in English. In her words:

"I ask them to go through a story and inform them that I will ask questions on the story the next day. They do what I ask them to do.... I ask them to tell the story in Nepali first and then in English, sentence by sentence. Then, they try."

5) *Poem*: The participants have emphasized the need for using the L1 to enable the students understand poems. As Samira says, “more Nepali should be used when teaching poetry ...to enable the students to answer the short questions and write the summary”.

In her LED, Samira illustrates that she used Nepali to explain the meaning of the poem ‘The Foolish Fish’, as “the students were perplexed about the meaning” and inquired her in Nepali when she had “articulated the poem and its meaning” in simple English. One example she stated is:

“/ap^hni amako agjā palən nəgərekale ek murk^{bə} mac^{bə}le mərnu pərjo” (a stupid fish had to die due to his disobedience to his mother).

Thakur has a similar experience, as he explains the need for using the L1:

A little more Nepali has to be used to explain the poem. . . . Some poems do not contain complete sentences. . . . We teach a Grade one child to write: /mə euta balək hū / ‘I am a child’ as a correct usage... But when the same child grows up and becomes a poet, and writes: /ekə baləkə hū mə / ‘a child am I’, the expression is regarded correct. So, it is difficult to find out what the poem is trying to say. That is why Nepali is used more while teaching poems.

In fact, poetry is a genre that involves more complicated linguistic forms, meanings and figurative expressions. Unless one specializes in this genre, a complete explanation of poems becomes difficult. In the case of students, the level of difficulty becomes even higher than one might have assumed, so grasping the meaning directly through English has been a serious problem for them. Therefore, the teachers depend on explanations through Nepali, the students’ L1 – with the aim of facilitating comprehension, as their students confront with the problem of unintelligibility with the use of English alone. At this juncture, teachers have a conviction that the English-only instruction, unless it can impart the knowledge or concept upon the students, becomes meaningless.

6) *Cultural concepts*: The teachers are found to be comfortable while using the L1 whenever they need to clarify the cultural terms – even if the local cultural concepts can be explained through English. As Samira stated in the interview, “Things like *Saptami*, *Ashtami* (the 7th and 8th days respectively – that occur in both fortnights of a lunar month – which sometimes have special cultural significance locally), *Tij*, *Jitiya* (Nepali festivals) ...are also used in the English text[book]; the meaning of such words can be explained in English, but it is quick and easy for me to explain them in Nepali”.

Discussion

First, based on the analysis of the actual situation in which this study took place, the L1 has been conceptualized here as a language that the students and teachers as the members of the

same community use most dominantly and comfortably in their day-to-day communication, Nepali in this study, not necessarily their 'home language' (Ohyama, 2017) or the one that they had first 'acquired at home' (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). The research findings are to be understood accordingly.

In this study, a considerable use of the L1 was noticed in the ESL classroom. Particularly, the participants reported to have used Nepali for checking their students' understanding, facilitating them in performing pedagogic tasks and increasing their understanding of the contents, vocabulary items, grammar rules, story plots, poems, and cultural concepts. The teachers' rationale for using the L1 in the ESL classroom quite closely approximates Zainil and Arsyad's (2021) study concerning code switching explained under the pedagogic function (introducing new vocabulary, explaining grammar rules, comprehension check, explaining the lesson goal and emphasis) and the affective function (to accommodate limited English in the students, saving time, reprimanding and scolding, motivating, and maintaining a new flow of the lesson).

However, these practices stand polar-opposite to the ELT tenet, or the 'subtractive fallacy' as Phillipson (2007) terms it, suggesting that a substantial use of other languages in the English classroom downgrades the standard of English. Some studies have reported that such a use seems inevitable in foreign language teaching and learning in multilingual classroom contexts (Sah & Kubota, 2022) because this is 'a reality of foreign language classrooms' (de la Fuente & Goldenberg, 2020). In the present study, the teachers have viewed that such a practice is helpful for dealing with students having a so-perceived poor English-base, when the 'English-only use' cannot serve the purpose of comprehending the content to be grasped. This view aligns with Luitel's (2017) observation that using the L1 is essential mainly as a means of mediating learner's L1 and L2 in TL learning, because it functions as a bridge between the two. Yet, Orfan (2023) interprets this phenomenon somehow differently: the chance of using the L1 in an L2 classroom increases when the teachers and the students are less proficient in the TL.

The teachers' use of the L1 for checking understanding, and for teaching content and grammar is also similar to the finding presented by Silvani (2014), or those reported by Alshehri (2017) who have observed the use of the L1 for clarifying difficult word-meanings. Importantly, the participants' perceptions regarding the 'bridging' role of the L1 is in compliance with Luitel's (2017) study which has brought into the fore that, in developing the TL reading comprehension among the students having a poor level of performance in particular, the opportunity of 'bridging' created by the L1-(Nepali) translated version of the L2 (English) text does facilitate more effectively than the facilitation made without adopting the strategy of translation.

Nevertheless, the findings might pose a couple of reservations. First, just as whether or not the various forms of translanguaging practiced in English as a medium of instruction in Asian multilingual classrooms really scaffold students' learning is yet to be known (Sah & Kubota, 2022), so whether the sole dependence on the cognitive bridging role of the L1 in an ESL classroom is advantageous in the long run is not still fully explored in this study, either. Second, the practices of using the L1 in the classroom explored in this study essentially seem to be targeted at making the students understand the content at hand – positing the underpinning assumption that language teaching means enabling the students to receive or grasp the content being delivered to them. Then some crucial questions arise, including: Is receptive

understanding of the content the end of L2 teaching and learning? If so, to what extent will such kind of learning help the students' life as members of the English-speaking community (where they need to face the use of the language – a central goal of any language learning)? Indeed, both reception and production are equally important in the practical communicative life of students – the prospective users of the TL. So, one cannot be overlooked in favor of the other.

It appears that the participants, in this study, were guided by certain values imposed upon them as part of the professional involvement in their workplaces. First, it seems their practices were inclined to the principle of getting the students to 'pass the exam'; so, they were working accordingly – not necessarily with the genuine focus of learning enrichment. Secondly, they seem to have firmly admitted to the fact that teaching content is the central condition of teaching ESL, and this had been the cause of their dependence on the L1 in the course of classroom delivery.

At this juncture, it can be well speculated that the understanding of the teachers working with a group of students having a sound English-base could be figured out in a way different from that presented in this article. Such a speculation is grounded on Luitel's (2017) study which demonstrated that the students with a higher achievement profile in English had progressed in comprehending the reading texts even without the aid of L1-translation but those with a poorer achievement level could not progress without depending on this facilitation. In this pretext, if teachers perceive that the students have a poor English-base, the use of the L1 is justified as reported here. Then there is room for the argument that those teaching the students with a sound English-base can see little relevance of using the L1.

Theoretically, we can contemplate some assumptions underpinning the L2 teachers' activities while working with the students having a so-perceived poor English-base (as in this study). These include, for instance, Ruiz's (1984) concept of learner's language as a 'resource' in the course of L2 learning engagement; the argument that preventing students from utilizing L1 deprives them of a vital 'cognitive tool' (Swain & Lapkin, 2000) which assists them for better learning achievement; and Krashen's (1989) indication regarding the need for using the L1 for making the L2 input more comprehensible for students.

CONCLUSIONS

The participants in this study, whose views were shaped around teaching ESL to the speakers of Nepali, were found to have been guided by a couple of postulations relating to ESL, namely, L2 learning is a cognitive process, and L2 learning means learning the content. Of course, considering these postulations derivable from their lived experiences, the gist of the participants' arguments is that the students' L1 serves best as the 'cognitive bridge' for comprehending the contents, particularly for those students who have a poor English-base.

The arguments posit two strong points. The first is that the students' L1 is a resource rather than a barrier to learning an L2 (English here), and the second (a corollary of the first) is that the L1 can be utilized as a cognitive tool assisting the students to make the L2 input more comprehensible. Their overarching argument that there is no meaning in teaching unless the students understand the TL is also equally considerable.

As a limitation, the outcomes of this research have left some topics unanswered, though. The first concerns assessing both favorable and adverse results of learning ESL in a close attachment with Nepali, or any other L1 in similar contexts. The other is about how students so-perceived as having a poor English-base can gradually be led to their development as effective users of English independent of Nepali (or any other L1). These are the gaps worth investigating through further research.

Statement of Disclosures

We, the authors, declare herein that no organizations or individuals have any conflict of interest, financial or others, associated with this study.

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