

Using the First Language (L1) as a Resource in EFL Classrooms: Nepalese University Teachers' and Students' Perspectives

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Abstract

While challenging the widely held belief that students in English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom prefer their teachers not use the first language (L1), the study examined attitudes of university teachers and students towards using L1 and reasons for giving up on English and reverting to Nepali in English-medium lessons. Drawing on a mixed-method study that used survey questionnaire (N= 50) and interviews (N=15), the researcher identified a number of classroom speech acts that are performed by teachers' and students' in their L1. The findings revealed that both teachers and students had a positive attitude towards using L1; however, they held the belief that the overuse of L1 may impede language learning. Although the teachers seemed to discourage the use of Nepali (L1) in lessons aimed at developing learners' communicative competence, they used Nepali to help learners comprehend complex concepts of grammar and lexis. Although the excessive use of Nepali was seemingly associated with teachers' lack of communicative competence and creativity in delivering EFL lessons, students preferred their teachers to use the L1.

Keywords: First language (L1), English as a foreign language (EFL), Speech acts, Codeswitching

Introduction

One of the crucial factors that has historically been ignored in English language teaching is that students in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms already speak at least one language other than English. It is a common phenomenon in most EFL contexts, where teachers and students often share the same language and have adequate proficiency in two different languages, that "the first

language (L1) alternates with the second language (L2)" (Neokleous, 2017, p. 314). Such practice is termed as *codeswitching* (CS) in literature, which, in particular, involves using two or more languages within an utterance, or between utterances. In the spirit of L1-as-a-resource orientation (Ruize, 1984), researchers and practitioners identify such practice of recognizing students' diverse linguistic repertoires in EFL classrooms to be beneficial from both target language (TL) learning and linguistic

rights perspectives (Carroll & Morales, 2017; Skutnab-Kangas, 2000). In fact, this primordial notion of switching between languages is “entirely natural” in EFL contexts as students as well as teachers are seen “negotiating meaning by using a communicative strategy to compensate for lack of linguistic knowledge” (Macaro, 2005, p. 67). In this view, codeswitching facilitates the use of the L1 repertoire to complement meaningful communications in the TL. The use of L1, however, is a contested notion, in that many believe an ideal language learning and teaching environment is created in the TL, and L1 should have a minimal use—if not completely excluded (Macaro, 2001). Therefore, despite research indicating positive effects (e.g., Carroll & Morales, 2017; Neokleous, 2017; Vu, 2017), the use of L1 is hardly recognized in language-in-education policies in most non-English speaking countries, and the monolingual ideologies are still dominant (Barnard & McLellan, 2014).

Similarly, in Nepal, a multilingual and multicultural country, the discourses of mainstream education are greatly influenced by an English-only policy. While language-in-education policy requires English to be taught only through the medium of English, other academic subjects in higher education are also being taught in English (MOE, 2016; Sah & Li, 2017). Therefore, while shedding light on student and teacher attitudes towards L1 integration in EFL classrooms, this study aims to explore the purposes that participants’ use of L1 serve in the discourse of teaching and learning English. The article begins with a literature review on one of the most long-standing debates in the history of second language

education—whether or not to use L1 in L2 teaching—and explores a more recent shift to seeking better approaches and strategies to using L1 (Lin, 2013).

Using L1 as a Resource: A Literature Review

In the last decades of the 20th century, the use of students’ L1 was largely discouraged because scholars defined an ideal classroom as one that made minimal to no use of L1 in L2 teaching (Cook, 2001; Chambers, 1991; Halliwell & Johns, 1991). This ideology of minimizing students’ L1 was linked to the *Grammar-Translation Method*, which was believed to impede learners’ opportunities to develop communicative competence because of the use of L1 (Neokleous, 2017). The later introduction of the *Direct Method* and *Audio-Lingual Method* emphasized the use of only TL, underlining that the use of L1 was a barrier to L2 learning and L2 oral proficiency development (Macaro, 1997). Such belief was primacy to an assumption that the L1 approach was an easy approach to understand and did not involve much mental exercise. In this regard, Cook (2001) argued that the TL can be developed without any reference to the L1. Halliwell and Jones (1991) similarly suggested encouraging learners to take risks in both speaking and understanding the TL was a means to achieving success in their language learning.

In contrast, recent studies (Kyeyune, 2010; Barnard & McLellan, 2014) have advocated the use of L1 as a specific language learning and teaching strategy. With the increasing growth of globalization today, increasing numbers of people are bilingual rather than monolingual, and the number of languages

one speaks plays an important role in determining the rate of success one might achieve (Ahmad & Jusoff, 2009). The rise of multilingualism has, therefore, directed attention to CS, which primarily occurs not because of lack of knowledge, but for different communicative purposes such as to establish multicultural identities among themselves (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2007), carry out cognitively demanding tasks (Reyes, 2004), mediate understanding during peer interaction (Sah, 2014), and convey the meaning of the intended idea more accurately (Zentella, 1997). This has received a greater attention from researchers to investigate the effectiveness, conditions, and purposes of using students' local languages in EFL classrooms.

For example, Barnard and McLellan (2014) have compiled extensive studies on the use of L1 that signify a paradigm shift in the pedagogical orientation of Asian EFL classrooms. These inclusive studies find using L1 as a useful tool for improving the effectiveness and efficiency of English language teaching, however insufficiently recognized by policymakers and less desired by some teachers. Nordin, Ali, Zabir, and Sadjirin (2013) analogously found that the students in Malaysia overall maintained a positive attitude towards the practice of CS in EFL classrooms, and believed it helped them learn the vocabulary of the TL through better understanding of the words. Their study also suggested that the exercise of CS enables learners to master the English language with more confidence, which also overlaps with an earlier study of Macdonald (1993), and forces learners to communicate in the TL with their limited acquired language.

Many argue that more exposure to the TL assists learners in acquiring the language successfully and, in fact, no one denies the importance of TL exposure. However, the exposure to L2 may not always work effectively (Ellis, 1994; Richards and Rogers, 2001). Also, language teaching is not only about providing input to learners, but is equally important to convey information successfully. Using students' L1 in this respect helps teachers transfer information to learners effectively (Skiba, 1997). Similarly, as Sah (2014) explored in his research with Chinese EFL students, the use of L1 facilitates peer interaction, in which students mediate their understanding to one another for better learning to happen. This indicates that we should not insist on an English-only ideology, which may lead to frustration and anxiety if the information does not provide learners with enough comprehension (Lo & Macaro, 2012; Kyeyune, 2010). The use of L1 can help learners relax and enhance their comprehension of the input during the learning process (Ahmad & Jusoff, 2009).

There are also some studies that have investigated attitudes towards and reasons for using L1. Studies have shown varied attitudes towards using L1 that largely depends on learners' and teachers' proficiency levels, and types of lessons that are being delivered. For example, both teachers and students hold positive views if L1 is used to support low ability learners (Al-Nofaie, 2010; Franklin, 1990), to create a rapport with learners (Franklin, 1990; Macaro, 1997), to help learners with better comprehension in L2 (Alenezi, 2010; Cahowdhury, 2012; Ibrahim, Shah & Armia, 2013; Moghadam, Samad & Shahraki, 2012), to explain difficult vocabulary and grammar (Bilgin, 2013;

Harbord, 1992; Howatt, 2004), and to encourage oral participation between teachers and students (Cipriani, 2001; Sah, 2014). There are also negative opinions for using L1 when it relates to teachers' inadequacy to communicate in L2 (Canh & Hamied, 2014) and is practiced beyond pedagogical purposes. Similarly, Crawford (2004) finds that such inadequacy depends on the degree of experience.

Since the integration of L1 has proved to be beneficial, the last decade has witnessed a shift in the discussion from whether or not to use L1 to seeking effective strategies and approaches to use L1 meaningfully to teach the TL (Lin, 2013). To this end, different concepts, both societal and pedagogical, have been suggested, such as "code-switching", "translanguaging" (Garcia, 2009), "code-meshing" (Canagarajah, 2011), code-mixing, and bilingual pedagogy. Among these concepts, translanguaging, which started as a pedagogical practice in Welsh bilingual classrooms, has received greater attention today. Translanguaging is used through strategic classroom language planning that combines two or more languages in a systematic way within the same learning activity (Ayash, 2013). Distinguishing it from CS, in translanguaging practices, two or more than two languages are used flexibly and strategically so that classroom participants can experience and benefit from the permeability of learning across languages. It seems to assist multilingual speakers in making meaning, shaping experiences, and gaining deeper understanding and knowledge of the languages in use and even of the content that is being taught (Cenoz & Gortez, 2011; Lewis, Jones & Balcer, 2012). It also creates a social space for multilingual speakers "by

bringing together different dimension of their personal history, experience, and environment, their attitude, beliefs, and performance" (Wei, 2011, p. 1223).

Despite research suggesting the usefulness of L1 and shift to L1-based pedagogical approaches, a zero-tolerance policy of CS is still dominantly imposed in many Asian education systems by ministries of education and other stakeholders (Barnard & McLellan; 2014). This embargo on the usage of L1 can somehow be justified since learners are aware that whatever is mediated in the TL will later be translated in the L1, and they will apparently stop paying any attention to the TL input. Nevertheless, the manipulation of L1 in EFL classrooms can maximise the learning opportunities, provided it is used wisely with some limitations. At the same time, this may not be generalized in all contexts, and therefore needs studies focused on specific contexts.

Methods

In order to contribute further to the discussion of using students' L1 in teaching English—not only from students' perspectives but also from teachers' perspectives—and provide some pedagogical suggestions for Nepalese EFL contexts, this study has addressed the following research questions:

- What do Nepalese college EFL students and teachers believe regarding their use of L1 in EFL classrooms?
- Do teachers and students use the L1? If so, when and for what purposes?

To answer these questions, the study used a mixed-method inquiry that used survey questionnaires and interviews to collect data on the perspectives of Nepalese university EFL teachers and students towards the use of students' local language in EFL classrooms. A total of 20 university teachers (16 males and 4 females) and 30 university students (18 females and 12 males) were involved in this study. While all the participants gave their consent to participate in the questionnaire, only 5 teachers and 10 students agreed to take part in the interview. Different questionnaires were given to teachers and students. Grounded in Macaro's (2001) framework, the questionnaires contained questions to determine the participants' attitudes towards and reasons for reverting to L1 within their teaching and learning context. The closed questions prescribed the range of responses from which the respondents chose the options referring to their attitudes. The question format was multiple choice, so as to get the respondents to reveal data by making a comparison between the given choices.

The study adopted the method of triangulation in order to increase the validity and reliability of the study. *Triangulation* is a validity test of data in which data from multiple sources is used in an investigation to validate and enhance their reliability. Ten students and 5 teachers were interviewed to reflect on their responses and overall views towards using L1. Each interview lasted about thirty minutes. The interview was semi-structured and consisted of open-ended questions. It was audio recorded and further transcribed and coded to produce data. The

interviews allowed the researcher to explore issues in greater depth and encouraged the interviewees to express opinions in their own words. An attempt was made to understand from the interviewees when and why they used CS and how beneficial they thought it could be for Nepalese EFL classrooms. Further, the data collected through survey questionnaires were analyzed manually. First, the responses were manually transferred into a spreadsheet, then the answers were counted and coded. This calculation was then presented graphically.

Findings

The questionnaires and interviews revealed the participants' responses on a number of issues that are depicted as below:

Attitudes towards the use of L1

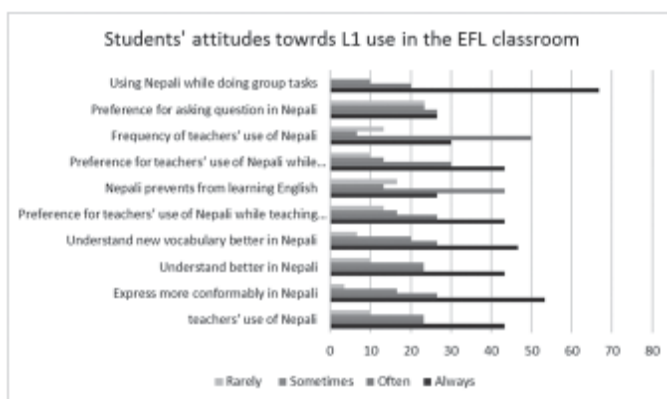


Figure: 1 Students attitudes towards L1 use

The responses to the questionnaire revealed that the students had positive attitudes towards using Nepali in EFL classrooms. The majority of students, 43.33% of them always, and 23.33% of them equally often and sometimes, preferred their teachers to use Nepali. They found their teachers using Nepali enhanced their comprehension,

especially when they struggled to understand complex concepts. At the same time, about half of them believed that they expressed more confidently and easily in Nepali. 45.8% of the students additionally thought that they understood the meaning of vocabulary better and more clearly when explained in Nepali. The majority of students, for example, 43.33% always, 26.7 often, and 16.7% sometimes, wanted their teachers to explain English grammar in Nepali. Similarly, a large number of students always and often used Nepali to ask questions since it made interaction with the teacher and other students easier. They also (66.7% always and 20% often) used Nepali when involved in group work. These statistics indicate a high frequency of CS taking place in Nepalese EFL classrooms. However, they showed the awareness that the use of Nepali (43.33% often and 26.7% always) prevented them from learning English. They accepted that they should minimize the use of Nepali in order to enhance fluency and to practise English language intensively inside the classroom. As one of the students shared in the interview, “using Nepali makes me confident in sharing ideas in the classroom and interacting with my teacher and peers. So, I think using L1 is a good idea. It is better to use Nepali than remaining quiet in the classroom.”

Although the students preferred a maximum use of English in the classroom,

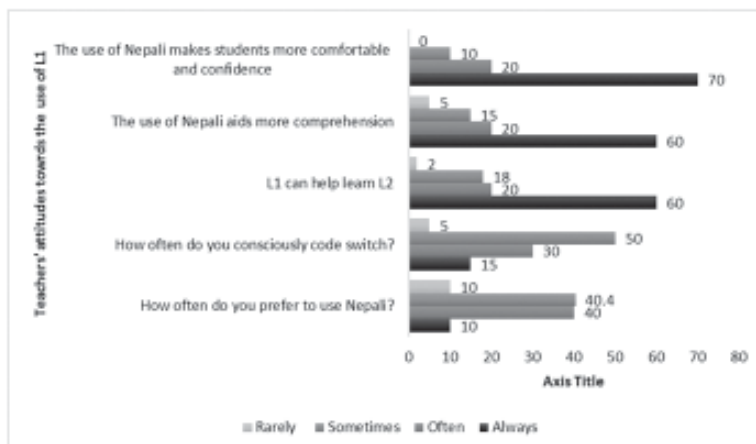


Figure: 2 Teachers' attitudes towards L1 use

they looked for some spaces for Nepali to fully engage in discussions. The use of Nepali allowed them a chance for their active participation in classroom discourse socialization. Aligning with the notion of L1-as-a-resource, the students seemed to be aware that, through the use of L1, they were able to use their repertoire from Nepali in situations when they felt short of English competence.

Both teachers and students appeared to have positive attitudes towards the use of Nepali. In line with the majority of students' preference for Nepali, 40% of the teachers used Nepali sometimes and an equal number used it often. This revealed that, although teachers used Nepali, the frequency depended on the requirements of the individual classroom. 50% of the teachers sometimes, 30% often, and 15% always made a conscious use of Nepali when required but 5% of them did not like to consciously use the L1 at all. Similarly, 60% of the teachers thought that the use of L1 was an effective strategy for language learning and teaching. Equally, most teachers believed that the use of L1 aided comprehension.

In line with the student belief, one of the teachers added that:

I intentionally use Nepali as I believe that it is important to some extent. It can be useful if it is used moderately and where needed. It is better to use it for students who are not able to understand instruction in L2.

This represents the common belief and indicates that the teachers were cautious about the random use of L1. They seemed to be strategic as they thought that, while L1 fosters L2 learning, L1 needed to be used only in a situation when it was required, especially with students who struggled to understand the instruction in English. In contrast, another teacher did not find it beneficial to use L1 in EFL classroom; he, rather, suggested teachers be creative in order to make the lesson comprehensible enough that the students did not feel the need for L1 in the classroom. As he mentioned, "It is not always a good idea to use Nepali in a foreign language classroom; we should rather create comprehensive contexts for understanding in the target language."

Further, the participants divulged a number of factors that caused them to use Nepali in EFL lessons. The majority of students expressed that the major motivation to opt into L1 related to their low-level proficiency in English. They used Nepali while *asking questions if they lacked the vocabulary to express their ideas, if they could not pronounce some English words, and with their peers for fun*. In contrast, two students stated that they tried to follow their teachers' instruction of not using Nepali since they needed to practise the TL to become more proficient in English. This also related to the lack of a policy in terms

of language use. As one of the students mentioned:

There is not any strict rule for using Nepali or English in and outside the classrooms. So, we use Nepali whenever we like to use, and we try to use English when our teachers strictly command us to do that.

As the teachers advised, they seemed to code-switch when they realized that their students were not following their instruction in English. One teacher also admitted that he wanted to discourage the use of Nepali, but he was forced to use it to make his points clear to students. What follows next is the discussion on the functions of L1 use.

Functions of code-switching

The respondents advised a number of functions of code-switching in EFL classrooms.

1. Comprehensibility

Almost all participants had a common stance that they liked to use Nepali for better comprehension; however, two teachers disfavoured the use of L1. They tended to give up on English and use L1 to enhance their comprehensibility. One student asserted that "when our teacher explains some complex concepts in Nepali, it helps us internalize the concept in memory so that we can write in examinations."

Although most participants favoured the use of L1 in order for developing comprehensibility. One of the teachers contrastively mentioned that:

Using L1 might negatively affect learning. I think that teachers should create comprehensive contexts for understanding in the TL. We should help students use the foreign language more effectively and to become accustomed to its use. Learners need to practise English, not Nepali if they want to develop their fluency.

2. Explanation of vocabulary and grammar

A large number of students reported that they understood the meaning of vocabulary and complex concepts better and more clearly when they were explained in Nepali. Similarly, the majority of them wanted their teachers to explain English grammar in Nepali. Nevertheless, most teachers advocated such use of L1 with low-level learners. For example, one of them said that “there is no harm in using L1 with beginners but as they keep developing their proficiency level, the use of L1 needs to be minimized simultaneously.”

3. Classroom interaction

A large number of students reported that they often used Nepali to ask questions since it made the interaction easier with teachers and their peers. The teachers, however, seemed to prohibit students from using Nepali, yet the students used Nepali if the communication with their peers in English was too difficult. About 70% of the students additionally indicated that they used Nepali while doing their group work when they found it difficult to interpret the information in English while carrying out some tasks with their

partners. One of the teachers explained the significance of using Nepali as he said that “as long as the students participate and engage in classroom discussion, the use of Nepali is far better than not participating.”

The use of English also fostered their confidence to contribute to classroom discussions. In this regard, one student viewed that:

In some lessons, when my teacher strictly forbids the use of Nepali, I do not feel confident enough to speak in the English language. But, I am confident and share my ideas in some lessons when they allow using Nepali.

Teachers' ability to use English and its relation to code-switching

Most students overwhelmingly disagreed that their teachers used Nepali due to lack of proficiency in English. However, the majority of teachers agreed that it was true in some cases that the teacher's use of Nepali reflected a lack of proficiency in the TL. While illustrating the lack of teachers' proficiency, one of them added that:

Some teachers are not creative and use Nepali in the absence of being able to apply successful techniques for engaging learners in English. There are some teachers who do not know how to speak English well and do not have the self-confidence to use English.

In contrast, another teacher advocated the use of English. He mentioned that “Nepali is one of the tools that the EFL teachers use to deliver the information more

comprehensively, rather than using it because of a lack of proficiency in English.”

L1 as a barrier to learning

Although most participants viewed the use of English as a prominent tool for language learning, many of the students showed awareness that the use of Nepali prevented them from learning English. They accepted that they should minimize the use of Nepali in order to enhance fluency and to practice the English language inside the classroom. Similarly, those teachers who disfavoured the use of Nepali felt that the use of Nepali might negatively affect learning. In line, one teacher said that:

I do not think we should let students use Nepali in EFL classes that focus on developing students' proficiency. Nepali should be prohibited in order to force learners to listen and speak in English. We should also discourage a reliance on translation.

Discussion

This study revealed that both teachers and students had positive attitudes towards using Nepali in EFL classrooms, which asserts the findings of some recent studies (e.g., Barnard & McLellan, 2014; Magid & Mugaddam, 2013; Nordin, et al., 2013). The choice for code-switching is largely linked to increased comprehension for knowledge transformation, which also aligns with Humphries and Stroupe (2014).

The study also identified the situations in which teachers code-switched and the reasons for doing so. The teachers switched to Nepali to enhance the students' comprehension since learners with a lower level of proficiency in L2 struggled to

understand lessons. Halliwell and Jones (1991) argued that learners should take risks when speaking and they should attempt to understand in the TL. However, in this study, the teachers believed that incomprehensible input was not helpful in learners' acquisition of a second language. According to Krashen's Input Hypothesis, the language received by learners needs to be comprehensible. Therefore, using L1 moderately with lower-level learners might be useful. This view replicates Nation's (2003) proposal of using L1 if students are not competent language users. Additionally, the teachers also stated that they used Nepali in limited contexts such as for grammar and vocabulary teaching, which is also akin to Canh and Hamied (2014). This is in contrast with Harbord's advice (1992) that the use of L1 in grammar lessons should be strictly prohibited. This researcher believes that L1 should be avoided while students are working on the language used in specific contexts such as exploring grammatical structures but that the use of L2 is not counter-productive if, by doing so, the teacher helps learners to understand patterns in the TL. Moreover, the students, here generally used Nepali because of their low language competence. Firstly, they used Nepali to ask teachers questions, which in Cameron's (2001) terms is seeking help from their teachers and peers. Secondly, they used Nepali when they lacked vocabulary and structures in the TL and, in agreement with Chaudhery (2012), for ease of communication with peers while involved in group activities. They also used L1 to transfer information to their peers, in agreement with Olmendo's (2003) and Humphries and Stroupe (2014) findings. They also switched to Nepali when they were not able to pronounce particular sounds.

There is conflicting evidence in the literature that the use of L1 reflects teachers' lack of language proficiency. While the students in this study disagreed with this view, the majority of teachers, perhaps surprisingly, agreed to some extent, which is in alignment with Canh and Hamied (2014). One of the teachers, who was relatively inexperienced, said that he used L1 a great deal as he was not very creative in English. A similar view was proposed by some teachers who believed that teachers use L1 as they are not able to put the meaning across sufficiently clearly in the TL. This does not concur with Harbord's (1992) research that L1 is also used by teachers who are competent speakers.

Conclusion

The present study looked at the attitudes of both teachers and students towards using L1 in university EFL classes in Nepal. It also ascertained the situations in which both teachers and students switch from English to Nepali. This study revealed a positive attitude of both teachers and students towards CS. They tend to use L1 as they believe it helps language learning in a number of ways, such as it aids 'comprehensibility', 'understanding of vocabulary and grammar', and 'classroom interaction'. They, therefore, believed that CS can be a prominent tool for teaching EFL, particularly when teaching lower-level learners. The majority of students believed that their teachers switching from English into Nepali and vice versa helped them understand the concepts better. The higher level of comprehension also motivated them to learn the TL. However, some students thought that it often prevented them from learning the TL. These views were mirrored by the teachers, most

of whom argued that CS had been beneficial for their students, with only a few viewing it as harmful to L2 language learning. Teachers also added that their students often feel more comfortable and more confident about contributing to the class discussion when speaking in Nepali.

It is recommended that future studies be undertaken with larger samples to gain more insights into teachers' and learners' attitudes towards using Nepali in Nepalese universities when teaching English. Observation-based qualitative research, combined with quantitative measurement of learners' progress over time, could be used to ascertain whether the use of L1 assists in L2 language learning. Moreover, future research should investigate the relationship between the learners' use of L1 and their level of motivation. It would also be productive to ascertain the attitudes of advanced level learners and their reasons for their CS.

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