Teaching English in Multilingual Contexts: EFL Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences

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Abstract

Teaching the English language, promoting multilingualism is a challenging job for English as foreign language (EFL) teachers. They need to teach the English language on one hand and promote multilingualism on the other. In this scenario, this article explores how EFL teachers perceive teaching the English language in multilingual contexts and how they promote and preserve multilingualism in their classrooms. For this purpose, data were collected through in-depth interviews with three purposively selected secondary-level EFL teachers teaching in three different districts in Nepal. After analyzing the data using the thematic analysis method, it was found that EFL teachers focus on promoting the English language since teaching and learning English opens the doors for a host of opportunities, they promote multilingualism giving space to students" mother tongues in English classes, and they address the linguistic diversity found in their classroom and promote multilingualism in the course of teaching English with the help of translanguaging pedagogy.

Keywords: English language teaching; multilingualism; multilingual education; translanguaging pedagogy

Introduction

English, a widely spoken international language, serves as one of the six official languages of the United Nations. Patel et al. (2023) argue that English is a universal lingua franca preferred everywhere from academia to social media, medicine to aviation, popular culture to technology. It is widely regarded as the de facto global lingua franca in fields like education, technology, and mass media (Phyak & Sharma, 2020). Both native speakers in the West and non-native speakers in the East are actively promoting English, recognizing its global significance (Imam, 2005). In today"s interconnected world, English is often seen as a language of power, essential for economic progress and social upliftment (Gargesh, 2006). This growing perception of English as a global language has led to an increasing emphasis on its importance and status worldwide.

English in Nepal, similar to other South Asian countries like India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, is widely used for various purposes. It holds significant importance, as it does in many other nations. The popularity of the English language and the motivation to learn it are continually increasing in Nepal (Curriculum Development Center [CDC], 2022). Although English is not an official language and is considered a foreign language, it is extensively used for practical purposes such as education, employment, international trade, and tourism. English has become a vital part of life for the Nepalese people (Giri, 2015). It is viewed as a tool for economic and educational advancement, providing opportunities for linguistic superiority and social mobility (Giri, 2020). Supporting this idea, Loch (2019) writes, "the general phenomenon in Nepal seems to be that people nowadays instinctively associate English and English education with the chance of enjoying better opportunities in life" (p. 13). As a result, the number of English speakers in Nepal is increasing day by day. Eagle (1999, p. 302) observes:

> *English is the second most widespread language in Nepal in terms of popularity, education, and use. It is spoken at all socio-economic levels, by both literate and non-literate people. No statistics is available for the number of people who speak or read English. The general impression is that a large percentage of the population speaks at least some English, with varying levels of accuracy and fluency.*

English language teaching is prioritized due to its global significance in Nepal. Accordingly, English is taught as a compulsory subject not only in school level but also in almost all undergraduate programs at the university level (CDC, 2022). Additionally, it is taught as an optional subject at all levels (secondary, bachelor"s, and master"s), and the English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) policy has been implemented. To enhance school sustainability and attract more students, schools have integrated extended instructional hours for English language courses and EMI into their educational strategies and teaching practices (Devkota, 2019). The due emphasis on English has raised several questions: What role does English play in a multilingual context? Does it support or hinder multilingualism? How can indigenous languages be promoted if the focus remains solely on English? Should we concentrate only on our native languages in a globalized world? These questions are complex and seek thoughtful answers that reveal the place of English and English language teaching in a multilingual nation like Nepal.

As "Nepal is a multilingual country" (Constitution of Nepal, 2015) "having 124 national languages" (National Statistics Office [NSO], 2023), most Nepalese classrooms are full of linguistic diversity. Nepal's linguistic diversity presents challenges for language teachers who aim to teach English preserving and promoting multilingualism. Since students from various linguistic backgrounds come to English classes, a strict English-only policy may lead to monolingualism. Pratt (2002, as cited in Jenkins, 2015) argues that being monolingual is as being handicapped. This suggests that teaching the English language, respecting the linguistic diversity in the classroom is crucial. Promoting multilingualism in English language teaching not only helps students become bilingual or multilingual but also prepares them to compete globally and communicate effectively in English. EFL teachers play a crucial role in fostering multilingualism

while teaching English. They can respect and promote students‟ native languages and allow their use in the classroom because previous linguistic knowledge positively impacts further language learning and overall academic success (Bono & MeloPfeifer, 2020). As Bono and Melo-Pfeifer (2020) write, "Heritage languages represent valuable resources to learn English as a second or foreign language, provided that pedagogical practices are implemented to allow them to co-exist and interact in the classroom…" (p. 13). Garcia (2008) found that students‟ home languages can act as "scaffolding" in education. However, not all EFL teachers may recognize the benefits of students‟ native languages for learning English. In this context, this article aims to explore EFL teachers‟ understanding of English in a multilingual context and their strategies for preserving and promoting multilingualism in their classrooms. More specifically, this paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

a)   How do EFL teachers perceive teaching the English language in multilingual contexts?

b)   How do they preserve and promote multilingualism in their classrooms?

Literature Review

Students in the Nepalese language classrooms come from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Addressing this diversity can be challenging for EFL teachers. Some EFL teachers teach English addressing the diversity found in their classrooms with the help of various approaches/strategies that give space to students‟ mother tongues or the language the students are familiar with. Some EFL teachers, on the other hand, adopt an English-only policy while teaching the English language. The English-only policy is an attempt to use English as the only means of instruction and interaction in the EFL classrooms (Auerbach, 1993). It is guided by the principle that maximizing the amount of time spent on the target language would improve learning efficiency (Hoang, Jang, & Yang, 2010). This policy has been popular among EFL teachers because it is believed that the more exposure the students get in English, the more quickly they learn it; they will internalize it and begin to think in English as they are forced to use it (Auerbach 1993). However, a strict English-only approach in EFL classes can overlook the linguistic diversity of students and impede second language learning.

Similarly, with the implementation of the EMI policy in schools, it becomes difficult for teachers to foster multilingualism. EMI involves using English to teach subjects other than English in countries where English is not the primary language (Dearden, 2015). In Nepal, the EMI policy is emphasized due to the socio-political significance given to the English language. Students may struggle to engage in classroom interactions in English compared to their native languages (Phyak & Sharma, 2020). Adopting a foreign language as a means of instruction may decrease students‟ academic performance rather than making them academically sound (Sah & Li, 2018). Similarly, Poudel (2022) states that the aggressive shift (sometimes blindly) towards the EMI is adverse for a multilingual and multicultural context. The EMI policy can lead to the erosion of local multilingualism, indigenous languages, and traditional knowledge under the guise of enhancing quality education (Phyak& Sharma,

2020). Poudel and Costley (2023)state, "This practice is not only monolingual but also „exclusionary" from a social justice perspective…fluid, dynamic and successful language practices that are in use on a day-to-day basis outside of the classroom are vilified and stigmatized inside the classroom" (p. 29). As a result, students may underperform academically, and various ethnic groups may face a loss of linguistic identity. To address this and support multilingualism, multilingual education and translanguaging pedagogy should be promoted. These concepts are briefly outlined below.

Multilingual Education

Multilingual education involves teaching students in more than two languages. This approach integrates multiple languages into the curriculum, either as mediums of instruction or subjects (Acharya, 2019). In Nepal, this typically includes the students' native language, Nepali (the official language), and English as a foreign language (Taylor, 2010). Despite debates about including small community languages in the curriculum alongside national languages (Acharya, 2019), recent language education policies in Nepal have leaned towards bi-lingual or in some contexts, trilingual education.

Research indicates that children benefit from being educated in their native language in conjunction with the dominant language of instruction, which is often a second language (Sierens & Avermaet, 2014). Learning in a familiar language provides a strong foundation for acquiring a second language and enhances overall academic performance. Dhakal (2015) suggests that teaching in a child's mother tongue or a language they understand well reduces dropout rates and improves educational outcomes. UNESCO (2011) highlights the relevance of multilingual education in Nepal, noting that it helps students learn effectively in their first language during early grades and improves their competence in English, which is crucial for accessing broader opportunities.

Translanguaging Pedagogy

Translanguaging is a process of meaning-making through flexible and integrated language practices (Phyak, 2018). Similarly, Baker and Wright (2017, p. 28) define translanguaging as "the process of making meaning, shaping experiences, understandings, and knowledge through the use of two languages" (p.28). Translanguaging pedagogy involves leveraging students' bilingual abilities to develop new understandings and academic language skills (Garcia & Wei, 2014). This approach is beneficial in linguistically diverse classrooms. Translanguaging scholars view language not as distinct, separate systems in our minds, but as a fluid and limitless resource (Poudel & Costley, 2023). Translanguaging does not merely involve using the first language (L1) but recognizes all of a student's linguistic knowledge as a resource for learning a less dominant language (Creese & Blackledge, 2010). It supports both language acquisition and academic

achievement by building on students' existing language skills (Beres, 2015). For students with minority languages, translanguaging helps incorporate their linguistic strengths and reduces feelings of alienation by integrating familiar language and cultural references (García & Wei, 2014).

Sembiante and Tian (2023) state, "Translanguaging democratizes the learning space, allowing access and opportunity for linguistically diverse language learners to engage and participate in education" (p. 921). In translanguaging, the use of the two languages is carefully planned, and the teachers are aware of the language they use for each activity, and the students are encouraged to use multiple languages to carry out various tasks (Cenoz&Gorter, 2021). Phyak (2018) found that translanguaging can increase student participation, break down communication barriers, and enhance academic content teaching. This approach helps students who might be hesitant to speak due to limited English proficiency, improving their engagement and academic performance. Garcia, Johnson, and Seltzer (2017) identify four key purposes of translanguaging in education: supporting comprehension of complex content, developing academic linguistic practices, accommodating bilingualism and diverse knowledge, and fostering bilingual identities and socioemotional development. Overall, translanguaging pedagogy can significantly benefit students' academic performance and support their native languages while developing their English skills. Wei (2018) notes "translanguaging is effective in educational settings where the language of instruction differs from the learners' languages" (p.15). Therefore, EFL teachers should incorporate translanguaging pedagogy to enhance English language teaching in multilingual classrooms.

Methodology

To explore EFL teachers'' perceptions on English language teaching in multilingual contexts and the ways they adopt to preserve and promote multilingualism in their classroom, I purposively selected three secondary level EFL teachers teaching at community schools as the participants. The participants were from renowned public schools of Kathmandu, Dhading and Tanahun districts of Nepal. One participant was selected from each district. Since I wanted to select the participants having more than a decade long experience in teaching the English language in multilingual contexts, I purposely chose such participants. The description of the participants is presented in table 1.

Table 1. Description of the Participants

Participant Code	Teaching Experience	School Code	Address
T1	12 years	KMV School	Kathmandu, Nepal
T2	18 years	NSS School	Dhading, Nepal
T3	13 years	SSS School	Tanahun, Nepal

After being informed of the objectives and the confidential nature of the study, the participants provided their verbal consent to take part in this study. After the consent, I arranged time for interviews and conducted in-depth interviews with the participants in two different phases. The interviews were conducted via Zoom meeting because I was unable to go to the sites to take interviews with them. In the first phase, the participants were interviewed and their interviews were recorded with their permission. I used the openquestion „funnel" technique for all of the interviews. The 'funnel' technique of interviewing, as outlined by Cohen and Manion in 1989, begins with general, non-threatening questions to help the interviewee feel comfortable, and once the interviewee is more at ease, the questions become progressively more focused and detailed (Whitehead, 2002). After transcribing the interviews, I realized that some important points (like when and why EFL teachers make use of and/or allow the use of mother tongues in EFL classrooms) related to the experience of participants, which were crucial to this study, were missing. So, I arranged the next phase of interviews to include some more points related to participants" experience. Then, I embedded the data gathered through the second phase in the interviews taken in the first phase.

The thematic analysis method was used to analyze data. To analyze the data and present the themes, I followed the six phases of thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, I transcribed all the interviews and became acquainted with the data by reading and re-reading it. Next, I systematically coded the data from all transcripts, generating initial codes. After that, I grouped these codes into three potential themes and their subthemes, organizing all relevant data accordingly. I then reviewed the themes to ensure their accuracy and relevance. Finally, I named the themes and compiled the report. Although the interviews were conducted in Nepali, I translated selected excerpts myself to provide verbatim examples for clarifying the themes, striving for the highest accuracy in translation.

Results and Discussion

The data were collected under two main aspects: perception of teachers towards English language teaching in multilingual contexts and the strategies they adopt to preserve and promote multilingualism in their classroom. The experiences shared by all the participants are discussed in three main themes below.

English for Opportunities

In Nepal, EFL teachers work in multilingual environments and must navigate and respect the linguistic diversity of their classrooms. Despite this diversity, their primary focus remains on promoting English, as their role is to develop their students' proficiency in the language because learning English provides numerous opportunities for students. According to the participants in this study, mastering English is essential in today's globalized world because English serves as the global language of communication (Patel & Jain, 2008). Stating the status of the English language around the globe today, T1 shared;

I know, sir, we have to promote multilingualism and respect the linguistic diversity of our classroom, but we cannot ignore the English language. As you know, sir, English is an international lingua franca, international language, and global language; it is a must to teach and learn the English language to make our students survive in this globalized, competitive world.

This data shows that English being an international lingua franca and global language, teaching and learning English is necessary to help students survive in this global competitive world. As mentioned earlier, Gargesh (2006) views English as a language of power and a tool for economic advancement and social mobility. Individuals who are proficient in English often enjoy a higher social and economic status, gaining both recognition and prestige. This status serves as a strong motivator for people to learn English. Stating the reasons for teaching the English language, T2 shared:

In our society, so many people have good social and economic status. I mean, they are considered successful people. There may be different reasons behind their success, but one of the strongest reasons is that they are good at English. They have got a good job due to their English language.

The quote by T2 not only reveals that English is a means of economic uplift and upward social mobility but also gives a host of opportunities to those who learn it. In EFL countries, learning English provides numerous opportunities for individuals (Pandey & Pandey, 2014). Likewise, Cenoz and Gorter (2010) regard English as a valuable resource that creates pathways to better prospects. This suggests that teaching English to students is essential, as it equips them to access various opportunities. In this line, T3 shared:

If our students learn the English language, they will get a good job with a handsome salary. If our students know only their mother tongues and/or Nepali language, they have scope only in Nepal, but learning English makes them able to compete in the global market.

These lines depict that EFL teachers take the English language as the means that helps students to compete in the global market because "it is the language of the global market" (Farrell & Giri, 2011, p. 15). Knowing only the mother tongue or Nepali restricts the students from getting opportunities that are within a particular nation (here, Nepal). On the other hand, knowing the English language helps students get opportunities within the nation and internationally.The discussion highlights that despite their awareness of multilingualism, EFL teachers" focus is on promoting the English language because they believe that proficiency in English opens up numerous opportunities that are not available through knowledge of only their mother tongue or Nepali. English in Nepal serves all four functions namely instrumental, regulative, interpersonal, and creative/innovative functions (Giri, 2015). For this, it is necessary to teach and learn the English language in Nepal. Nonetheless, these teachers also support multilingualism in their English instruction.

Promoting Multilingualism in English Language Classes

EFL teachers can enhance their English teaching effectiveness and improve students' overall academic performance using students' mother tongues or official language as a medium of instruction alongside English. This also provides opportunities for students to develop proficiency in multiple languages (Cenoz & Gorter, 2010). Additionally, it supports the promotion of both general multilingualism and the students' native languages. Multilingualism can enhance cognitive development and strengthen first language skills (Cenoz, 2009). Supporting this, T2 mentioned that he integrates both Nepali and English in his teaching practices, which has facilitated easier learning of English for his students. Like T2, T1 also supported that multilingualism is an important means that helps to teach English effectively and facilitates learning. She shared:

> *From my own experience, I can say that the use of student's mother tongue, Nepali and English, as the medium of instruction really helps our students to comprehend what we teach them. It helps to improve their academic performance because they understand what we teach. What is the use of using only English in the classroom if our students do not understand it? So, I teach English via the language my students are familiar with.*

The experience and statements shared by T1 and T2 here imply that EFL teachers often use English as the medium of instruction and use the Nepali language or the language with which students are familiar in their EFL classes. It means they do not adopt the English-only policy due to several reasons. The use of both languages (as multilingual education advocates) as the medium of instruction in EFL classes helps students learn English easily, and teachers address the linguistic diversity of their classes. This ultimately promotes multilingualism. In a different query, asked to explore when EFL teachers allow their students to make use of their mother tongues, T3 shared that he allows students to speak in their mother tongues very often, though he encourages them to speak in English. While teaching cultural texts, he encourages his students to speak in their mother tongues. All the students share how a particular sentence or word is uttered in their own mother tongue, and he asks the students to make a comparison among the words/sentences. Encouraging students to use their mother tongues in certain situations helps them feel that their language is valued in the classroom. This, in turn, motivates them to use their native languages both in and outside of school. Additionally, allowing students to use their mother tongues in the classroom not only aids in revitalizing minor languages but also promotes multilingualism.

Translanguaging Pedagogy for Students' Participation in the Classroom

EFL teachers utilize translanguaging pedagogy to encourage their students to speak and to participate in different activities in the classroom. Even though the participants did not explicitly use the term 'translanguaging pedagogy,' their practice of incorporating Nepali into English instruction indicates that they frequently use this approach. They often employ Nepali as the medium of instruction to teach English content, which helps their students make meaning and/or comprehend the given content easily.

In a query, when the teachers make use of Nepali as the medium of instruction while teaching English, T2 shared, "I often use Nepali to teach English to my students when I come to realize that my students are not getting my point due to the English language I am using." This experience shared by T2 shows that translanguaging pedagogy helps students to understand the content easily. Students may remain silent throughout the class because they neither grasp the language nor comprehend the content being taught. This often occurs when the medium of instruction is solely in English, leaving them unable to understand or express what they have learned. Phyak (2018) states, "Translanguaging can be used to break students" silence in the classroom" (p. 58). T3 also shared a similar type of anecdote:

> *Once, I taught a text named 'Yogmaya' (it was a text prescribed in the class ten textbook in Nepal). I explained everything related to Yogmaya in English. My students were quiet during the lesson, and I assumed they understood the material. However, when I asked them to explain what they had learned, only a few were able to respond. I realized they hadn't fully grasped the content, so I re-taught the lesson using both Nepali and English. Afterward, when I invited them to express their understanding in whichever language they feel comfortable with, I was pleasantly surprised to see that most of them were able to speak up.*

T1 shared a similar type of anecdote where she allowed her students to speak in their mother tongue, which helped her to break the long silence of her students. She shared:

> *Once, a student who had grown up in India enrolled in my school. He used to remain silent in the classroom. I discovered that his silence was due to a language barrier, as he was unfamiliar with both English and Nepali. I encouraged him to speak in the language he was comfortable with, and he was eventually able to share his understanding in Hindi.*

These two anecdotes shared by T1 and T3 suggest that translanguaging pedagogy helps students to comprehend what teachers teach and make class interactive. Students make meaning of what they have learnt. Translanguaging pedagogy creates opportunities for students to co-construct their identities and negotiate meanings (Garcia & Palmer, 2017). It also helps teachers address classroom silence by giving a voice to students who struggle with language barriers. When students are allowed to speak in a language they are comfortable with, whether their mother tongues or Nepali, they can better express their understanding. This approach fosters a more inclusive and equitable classroom environment where every student can participate (Beres, 2015). By incorporating translanguaging, students feel more comfortable communicating and can practice their home languages, which contributes to their multilingual development (Bartlett & Garcia, 2011).

Translanguaging pedagogy helps students understand texts and express their comprehension more effectively. It supports social and educational success for multilingual students (Canagarajah, 2011), helps break classroom silence, enhances interaction, and promotes multilingualism by giving a voice to students who might otherwise remain silent due to language issues.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed how EFL teachers perceive English language teaching in multilingual contexts and what strategies they employ to preserve and promote multilingualism in the course of teaching English language. As discussed above, the EFL teachers take English as a means to enable their students to compete in the global market. They focus on promoting English since it opens the doors to better opportunities for students. Keeping the growing need for the English language in mind, they also teach English, addressing the linguistic diversity found in the EFL classes. For this, they often use translanguaging pedagogy because the English-only policy adopted to teach English neither makes students competent in the English language nor respects their linguistic rights. Translanguaging pedagogy not only helps students to address linguistic diversity but also preserves and promotes multilingualism. Moreover, translanguaging pedagogy helps those students who remain silent due to the lack of proficiency in the target language speak in the EFL classroom since they find their mother tongue recognized and respected. The findings of this study imply that, in the Nepalese context, translanguaging pedagogy can be useful means to teach the English language on one hand and promote multilingualism on the other. Moreover, it helps to revitalize and promote minor languages. To conclude, translanguaging pedagogy will prove to be a boon in teaching the English language and promoting multilingualism in multilingual Nepal if it is used and adopted by all EFL teachers.

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