

## **Cognitive support through students' first language in English language learning: Delving into the experiences of teachers from Nepal<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*Use of learner's first language (L1) in second/foreign language (L2) learning has been a perennial concern for language pedagogues. This research-based deliberation will contribute to the discourse associated with this issue – which is related to the process of navigating learners on their language learning route. The research had the aim of studying how teachers use students' L1 (Nepali) in teaching English as an L2, and how they justify it. The exploration was made using the data collected from the experiences of 3 teachers working in 3 different schools of rural location in Nepal. Teachers' written descriptions and interviews were used as data collection techniques. Then data were analyzed thematically with contextual interpretation. Teachers were found employing the students' (and also the teachers' own) L1 resource quite a lot in teaching various aspects of English including the subject matter found in the texts, cultural notions, word-meanings, grammatical conceptualization & clarification, teaching story and poetry. As they emphasize, such a use has been a compulsion in favour of students' learning facilitation – due to the students' poor level of competence in English. The study has re-established the reality that learners' L1 does play the role of cognitive bridging in English language learning when the target language is taught to the students having a 'poor English base', and when both the teacher and the students share a common L1.*

**Keywords:** First language, second/foreign language, learning facilitation, cognitive support

### **Introduction**

When we ponder on any of the issues in second language/foreign language (L2) teaching-learning, our contemplation already implies that we are concerned with the learners who

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have already grasped (or got mastery over) some language, and have been habituated in using it to a noticeable extent. In this condition, it has been accepted that the learner tends to think in the first language (L1) and link it with the L2 in the course of learning the target language (TL). Teachers also tend to use the learners' L1 (if the L1 is shared by both the parties) in the teaching of L2. In this way, use of learner's L1 in L2 learning has been one of the perennial concerns in language pedagogy. Though, there have been arguments in favour of using L1 as well as counter arguments opposing this viewpoint. This deliberation is expected to contribute to the discourse associated with the issue just mentioned – which is relevant in the process of navigating learners along their language learning route. This article is prepared based on the collection of data from an empirical study which was similar to the one conducted by a team led by the author previously (Luitel and others, 2023). In this way, the data were collected to see the replicability of the previous findings: Intended for further exploration into the teachers' practices of using Nepali – the students' and teachers' 'home language' (Ohyama, 2017) – while teaching English, and their views regarding the rationality of such a use.

Though the new study being reported here is similar in scope to the previous one (Luitel and others, 2023) and has employed similar methodology, this was conducted in a different location – a distant place of the country, far away from the capital city, having less influence of English in public life and in the educational settings. And, data were collected from the teachers of different age group (younger generation) having less experience of teaching English in schools compared to the ones who had participated earlier. Inspired from the previous study, the data were analyzed particularly with a view to see how, in the teachers' opinion, the use of students' L1 can play role for providing cognitive support in the learners' struggle towards grasping the L2 (English). Thus, it attempted to see teachers' beliefs regarding the role of 'translation bridge' in second/foreign language learning (Luitel, 2017).

### **Method of study**

The data were collected from 3 teachers teaching English in different secondary schools located in the rural places of Pakhribas Municipality – the eastern part of Nepal – where almost all households use Nepali to communicate at home and in the community; and the

students get exposure to English only after going to school. The sample teachers are also the locals of the same locality, having Nepali as L1. They were familiar with the researcher for a long time, so there was a well-established rapport; and, like in the previous study, they were consulted to seek consent for data collection. Accordingly, they were eager to share “a thorough and rich description of the phenomenon” being studied (Vagle, 2018, p. 147). Their (pseudo-names given here) demographic profiles are briefly presented as:

*Amrit*: a male participant teacher aged 29 with the educational qualification of M. Ed. in English, having 8 years of teaching English in 6<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> grades

*Binay*: a male participant teacher aged 33 with the educational qualification of M. A. in English & B. Ed., having 10 years of teaching English in 9-10<sup>th</sup> grades

*Rejina*: a female participant teacher aged 37 with the educational qualification of B. Ed. in English, having 12 years of teaching English in 4<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> grades

In the course of data collection, the participant teachers were interviewed for seeking their views and experiences regarding the use of students’ L1 (Nepali) in the English classes while teaching. In the interview, they were asked to provide specific examples or incidents in the sharing of experiences so far they remembered – and particularly how they justified the use of L1 so far as the strength of its cognitive support is concerned, in the teaching-learning of the various aspects of English language. In addition, they were also asked to give a 4-5 page write up mentioning their experience and views. Unlike in the previous study, their classes were not observed.

Having collected the data employing the techniques just mentioned, the data were analyzed thematically followed by contextual interpretation.

### **Findings**

In the teachers’ depiction of the working conditions in which they are teaching English (in the context of the schools in rural locations), they have stressed the point that the students they are teaching have a very poor level of English language competence. And, in such a condition, even though the teachers were instructed in the teacher preparation courses not to use a language other than English in teaching the English language courses, they were compelled to use L1 (Nepali) – as the students could not grasp the TL unless

translated into L1. As they explain, there seems to be no point in solely using English because the students fail in grasping anything in the L2 in absence of the use of Nepali. In this way, teachers have the tendency of using Nepali together with English while communicating with students in the class. According to their arguments, this has been done for the purpose of facilitating the students' comprehension and thus establishing the cognitive linkage between the content matter being taught and the TL to be developed. In this connection, it would be relevant to see the written statement given by Binay:

*Students cannot understand English, so my attempt of using English alone does not make any sense. Then what to do? I tried in the beginning to speak only in English, then students commented "हामी बुझ्दैनौं सर" [We don't understand, sir]. Then I realized that I was making my students confused by using English alone. I saw no meaning of English without using Nepali in teaching. Now I instruct them to use English only when they need to write in exam, and to do the written homework and other class tasks but not for classroom interaction. They can comprehend and interact only through Nepali.*

To see the teacher's depiction in these words, we come to know that they are in a position to use L1 mostly because of the poor level of performance of the students in the class – with the hope of making them understand the contents being taught, as a strategy to support them in comprehending the matter to be learned by them in English. In this connection, Amrit admitted (in the interview): "In the class, I myself sometimes insist on saying before them [the students], 'If you can't say in English, say in Nepali... but you must say, in whatever way'. I should do this because they can't say in English."

Rejina writes her experience of teaching the students with poor language ability in these words:

*We even have a practice 'passing' the students who do not deserve the minimum score to be upgraded. So, mostly I have to face the students who have been upgraded to the upper classes without the minimum base in English. Although I did not want to use Nepali in the beginning, I began using it after a year of my teaching when no student could answer my question in English. As the most important thing is making them understand at any cost, we have to use the translation technique [from English to Nepali] for their comfortable learning.*

Thus, these teachers are found working in the classrooms where they face the students who are not in a position to grasp the meaning of the TL (English) expressions. In such circumstances, teachers seem to have a compulsion to use Nepali for facilitation in the students' understanding. Students, on the other hand, are also found happy with the use of L1 in association with L2. As Rejina pointed out: "If I leave the sentences from the textbook untranslated in classroom presentation, they become indifferent and do not care; but when I translate into Nepali, then they become curious and begin to ask questions [in Nepali, though]."

Thus, teachers seem, first and foremost, to have been concerned with the students' understanding; and therefore their use of L1 has been for learning facilitation to the students. As found, their attempt of facilitation is not limited to just one or two element/s or aspect/s of English. Below are described some of the important ones.

1) *The subject matter found in the texts:* Teachers are found, first and foremost, much worried about the content matter given in the textbook. Even if the contents are from the context of Nepal or Nepali society, the students do not understand them unless they are supported by the L1 during the teacher's explanation. In absence of the mediation through Nepali, as the participant teachers believed, their students cannot grasp the content. In such cases, as Rejina opined, "...there is no point to make a start of second language development, since any skill we want to develop in the learner requires a content base." Therefore, teachers are in a position to use Nepali for the purpose of explaining the content. Binay wrote his opinion, in this connection, as:

*Making the students understand the content first in Nepali and gradually leading them towards expressing the same thing in English becomes a psycholinguistically more comfortable route for students' English language development. From the content base already grasped through Nepali, they can go ahead with somehow higher level of confidence.*

2) *Cultural notions:* Considering the comfort (or discomfort) in teaching the distant cultural (the ones that are not easily demonstrable in the community and those which are incompatible to the local and national socio-cultural context), the teachers express the opinion that it is not possible for them to teach such concepts to the students without depending on explanation through Nepali (the L1). As Amrit writes, "it is more

comfortable for me to clarify many of the Nepali folkloristic notions and mythical stories or characters [occurred in English texts] through Nepali like *Shravan Kumar* or *Budha Subba*, even though I can describe them in English”.

3) *Word-meanings*: In the learning of L2, students mostly feel that word-meaning learning is basically the ‘re-labeling’ of the words already acquired in the native language (Luitel, 2005). And, this idea is particularly applicable in the case of the words having the same meaning being available in the L1 as well as L2. Psycholinguistically, as such, the students feel it more comfortable to learn the vocabulary items through translation – making a demand for using L1 for this purpose. When teachers understand this, they are inclined towards making use of the L1 in vocabulary teaching.

Studying the data, as Amrit points out: “Difficult word-meanings in English must be treated through Nepali; otherwise there is a big disturbance for the students to comprehend anything we teach.” As he reported, he tried to explain the meaning of ‘autocratic’ saying ‘the word is related to a ruler who has absolute power’; or ‘...taking no account of other people's wishes or opinions’. Though the teacher tried his best to explain through the definitions and demonstrated the use of word through context as well, students could not be satisfied. Next day, when he used the term ‘निरंकुश’ (the word equivalent to ‘autocratic’ in Nepali), then students felt comfort in grasping the meaning – as the Nepali term was already familiar to them. Amrit writes, “Neither a synonym, definition, antonym, or even contextual clarification could satisfy the learners in such problems. There was a feeling of success only after translation....”

In this connection, it would be important to mention the author’s quasi-experimental study undertaken previously (Luitel, 2005) which indicated that translation tasks have been proved more effective than the non-translation tasks in developing the learners’ vocabulary in EFL (English as a foreign language) context.

4) *Grammatical conceptualization & clarification*: As Binay mentions the reality that he experienced:

*“....Some of the key concepts of grammar such as the knowledge of first person-second person-third person, subject-object distinction, transitive and intransitive verb, were easier to teach them [the students] with reference to the ideas/concepts that they had already learned while*

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*studying Nepali grammar – before they were introduced with these*  
*concepts in English....”*

In the case of the Nepali language, there are distinctions including प्रथम पुरुष-द्वितीय पुरुष-तृतीय पुरुष (equivalent to the ‘first person-second person-third person’ distinction in English), कर्ता-कर्म (equivalent to ‘Subject-Object’ distinction in English), and सकर्मक क्रिया-अकर्मक क्रिया (equivalent to ‘transitive verb - intransitive verb’ distinction in English). Thus, if the students are already taught these distinctions in Nepali before introducing them with the same conceptual distinctions in English, it becomes a facilitation for them to learn the grammatical concepts by linking the English terms with the ideas and terms that they are familiar with the L1. In the interview, the teachers have pointed out that they compare and link with the grammatical notions that the students are familiar with Nepali – which facilitates a lot for the learners in grasping the notions being taught. In the case of difficulty for students in understanding, they are, thus, clarifying the concepts by establishing the cognitive link through the corresponding notions and terms learned in Nepali.

5) *Teaching story and poetry*: Stressing the difficulty faced in the teaching of literary genres including stories and poems, teachers often point out the need for seeking help through L1 in facilitating the students’ comprehension. Rejina has said:

*When I feel that students’ are unable to grasp the incidents mentioned in the story, immediately I stop reading the story and.....begin telling them the story in Nepali. Then I have to read the lines in English and again translate them to the students line by line. Students become happier after I do so; and.... I can instruct them to do the question-answer afterwards.*

Regarding the teaching of poems also, the teachers have reported their strong belief that excessive use of L1 has been a compulsion for clarifying the meanings of the poetic lines, and particularly for contextual interpretations. In the words of Binay, “There is no use of imposing the meanings of complicated forms of expression like those in the poetic lines, unless the students understand. And, using L1 for clarifying the English poetic lines is mandatory for my students to make them understand.”

In this way, teachers seem to have expressed the reality that their students cannot grasp the literary contents with comfort unless the teacher translates the content into Nepali.

Their expression underlies the assumption that using L1 can ensure the learners' comfortable understanding. Regarding poetry, as it can involve the use of figurative phrases/sentences, the linguistic forms included therein are more complicated than in the case of other genres. In such cases, the learners having poor knowledge in English seem to be helpless in absence of the linkage between the language and the content. Teachers also feel it uncomfortable to explain the poetic lines when students do not understand anything.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, the classrooms that the teachers are working in are full of students already habituated with using Nepali; and naturally, they have the tendency of thinking in L1 – which is, as stressed by de la Fuente & Goldenberg (2020), 'a reality of foreign language classrooms' in general. It is in this particular context that the teachers express the view that the practice of using L1 becomes essential for learning facilitation, when the use of L2 alone cannot serve the purpose of grasping the newly taught contents in the target language (English).

As the findings depict, the students faced by the teachers in teaching English are struggling with serious problems in grasping the contents, and are seeking cognitive support in learning the L2. The teachers, in one way or the other, seem to have been familiar with the learners' problems; and accordingly they have adopted the strategy of establishing the L1-L2 bridge through the cognitive support made possible with the use of L1. In practice, they have employed L2-L1 translation technique for dealing with the students in the class for this purpose. Importantly, this practice was found among the relatively younger generation teachers as well, and in the context where English has less domination in society and educational settings (compared to the situation in our previous field study).

From the study of teachers' responses, it appears that the use of L1 (Nepali) while teaching English (as an L2) has been an obligation in favour of students' learning facilitation; as the students have a poor level of competence in English. This finding clearly supports our previous conclusion. It has, thus, been established that learners' L1 does play the role of 'cognitive bridging' in English language learning when the TL is



taught to the students having a 'poor English base', and when the teacher and the students share a common L1.

Theoretically speaking, the findings of this study are also in congruence with the idea that learner's language (L1 in this case) can work as a 'resource' in the course of their engagement in L2 learning (Ruiz, 1984). Moreover, in this, teachers are also found in favour of the argument that keeping the learners isolated from their L1 essentially deprives them of an important 'cognitive tool' (Swain & Lapkin, 2000) which could be helpful for them towards learning a new language more comfortably.

However, we should be cautious for one important point regarding the role of L1 in L2 learning. Though the L2-L1 translation has been reported as a useful strategy by the teachers, the question yet to be answered is: Does it provide any support for students in developing the productive competence (reflected in speaking and writing skills in particular) in L2 development? Regarding this concern, further explorations are required to bring the empirical realities to the surface.

*[The article was reviewed by Prof. Dr. Hem Raj Kafle, Kathmandu University]*

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