

# Translanguaging as a Mediator of Learning: Observation in the EFL Classes of Nepal

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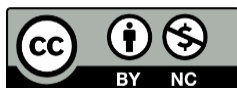
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## Abstract

This paper explores the implementation of translanguaging in English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) classes, focusing on its application in the context of sociocultural learning theory. By conducting naturalistic observations of 21 Grade 9 EFL lessons in three community schools in Kathmandu, the study investigated the benefits of translanguaging for Nepali-English emergent bilinguals. Thematic analysis of the classroom discourse using ATLAS.ti revealed that translanguaging effectively facilitated English learning through cognitive, affective, and interactional mediations. The research context featured low motivation and cognition levels, with Nepali as the common mother tongue (MT) for both teachers and students. In this scenario, translanguaging played a crucial role in mediating English language learning. The study underscores the importance of embracing students' MT alongside English to foster a more effective and meaningful learning experience for emergent bilinguals in the contexts similar to the researched one. This highlights translanguaging as one of the valuable tools in target language learning (TL).

**Keywords:** affective mediator, cognitive mediator, EFL class, interactional mediator, translanguaging

## Introduction

Despite the widespread support for the mainstream monolingual approach to EFL education at the global level, many English teachers and learners around the world are embracing MT-TL translanguaging as an alternative within their classrooms in different situations. The term 'translanguaging' comes from the Welsh word 'trawsieithu', coined by Cen Williams in 1994. It refers to the intentional and structured use of one language (e.g., English) for input activities like listening or reading, and another language (e.g., Welsh) for output activities like writing or speaking, all within the context of the classroom. This practice of "planned and systematic use of two languages inside

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the same lesson” has been noted by various researchers (Karaagac, 2014; Liu & Fang, 2022; Lewis, Jones, & Baker, 2012; Wu, 2018).

Translanguaging has evolved as a pedagogical approach for bilingual classes, where both languages are integrated and used coherently to mediate the mental processes in learning (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Baker, 2011). This approach emphasizes using bilingualism as a resource rather than considering it a problem (Celic & Seltzer, 2013) and encourages students to navigate between their home language and English (Canagarajah, 2011). The goal is to foster the development of new language skills while maintaining existing ones (García & Wei, 2014) and embracing the entire linguistic repertoire of multilingual individuals (España & Herrera, 2020).

In this paper, translanguaging is conceptualized as the pedagogical praxis of utilizing both students’ MT and the TL through code-switching, code-mixing, translation, or a combination of these practices in EFL classrooms. This is particularly relevant in contexts where all students and teachers share a common mother tongue, for example Nepali in the study site.

Theoretical arguments and research findings support the use of translanguaging in language teaching, especially in EFL classes. It is argued that translanguaging enhances comprehension of subject matter, improves target language skills, and facilitates collaboration between school and home environments (Baker & Wright, 2017). It also celebrates students’ home languages and cultures, engages students cognitively, and enhances academic vocabulary in their home and target language as well. (Celic & Seltzer, 2013).

Canagarajah (2011) argues that translanguaging is a natural occurrence and cannot be fully controlled by monolingual educational policies in the context of teaching a second language. When teachers share the students’ MT, translanguaging becomes even more effortless. García and Wei (2014) suggest that translanguaging supports the use of students’ MT for teaching and learning.

Empirical research studies have explored translanguaging practices in foreign or second language classes, highlighting its positive impact on English learning. For instance, Kano (2012) demonstrates how translanguaging helps Japanese students develop their English essay writing skills in a New York context. Nambisan (2014) observes various ways teachers and students use translanguaging for communication, feedback, and assistance. Wang (2016) shows that many students prefer multilingual instruction, while Phyak (2018) observes the use of translanguaging to encourage participation and teach academic content in Nepal. Anderson (2022) finds that multilingual practices in ELT classes in India help students succeed in exams and integrate English into their spoken language.

However, these studies primarily focus on students’ understanding and active participation in the classroom but do not explore how translanguaging specifically

mediates English learning. This paper aims to address this research gap by using a naturalistic observational research design and adopting the sociocultural theory of learning. The study investigates how translanguaging influences students' learning of English through cognitive, affective, and interactional mediations. The central question guiding this research is: How the use of students' mother tongue in translanguaging can act as a mediator to facilitate the learning of English, in EFL classes.

Translanguaging as a pedagogical praxis has gained recognition for its benefits in bilingual classrooms, encouraging the integrated use of both the students' MT and the TL. Existing research highlights its positive impact on students' language skills, cognitive engagement, and cultural appreciation. However, there is a need to explore how translanguaging mediates English learning, which this paper aims to address through a sociocultural lens. The potential implications of this study can contribute significantly to the field of language education and promote a more inclusive and resourceful approach to multilingual practices in EFL classes.

## Methodology

This paper deals with searching for the translanguaging moves and acts of teachers and students in EFL classroom from the mediational aspect of the sociocultural learning theory. To response the specified research question, I have adopted a qualitative "naturalistic observation study" (Ryan, 2019, p. 37) design in that I observed the selected classes without any direct interaction with the teachers and students. The methodology in detail has been discussed below.

### *Selection of Classes*

I purposively chose Grade 9 EFL classes in three secondary level community schools in Kathmandu where the teachers utilized translanguaging in their classrooms and allowed open observation and recording of lessons. Table 1 displays the demographic information of the teacher participants.

**Table 1.** *Demographic Profile of Teacher Participants*

TP	Gender	Qualification	Training	Teaching experience
T1	Female	MEd (English)	TMTT	26 years
T2	Male	MA, BEd (English), BL	TMTT, TOT, TPD	30 years
T3	Male	MEd (English)	TPD, TOT	25 years

Note. TP=Teacher participants; TOT = Training of Trainer; TPD= Teacher Professional Development; TMTT = Ten Months Teacher Training

Similarly, the demographic details of the student participants are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** *Demographic Profile of Student Participants*

	School/Class	Sc1/C1	Sc2/C2	Sc3/C3	Total
Home language	Only Nepali	15	13	18	46
	Nepali and Tamang	4	9	4	17
	Nepali and Nepal Bhasa	1	5	1	7
	Nepali and Bajurali	1	-	-	1
	Nepali and Magar	-	1	-	1
	Nepali and Rai	-	1	-	1
Grand total					73
Ethnicity	Brahman	-	1	-	1
	Kshetri	1	2	4	7
	Tamang	10	11	7	28
	Newar	2	9	10	21
	Gurung	-	1	2	3
	Magar	1	1	-	2
	Kami	6	2	-	8
	Damai	1	-	-	1
	Rai	-	1	-	1
	Gandarva	-	1	-	1
Grand Total					73

### ***Research Tool and Equipment***

The research tools include an observation guideline and a notebook. I used an MP3 recording device as an equipment for recording the classroom discourse.

### ***Data Collection Methods***

I collected the necessary information by conducting direct class observations and meticulously recording the data.

### ***Data Collection Procedure***

I approached each teacher individually, explaining my purpose, and obtained their consent to observe and record their Grade 9 EFL classes. Initially, there was little use of translanguaging in the classroom discourse, so I refrained from recording for the first three days. However, as time went on, I noticed an increase in the use of translanguaging, and I began audio-recording with an MP3 device. I observed and recorded a total of 21 Grade 9 EFL lessons, noting both verbal and nonverbal interactions between teachers and students as per my observation guidelines.

### ***Data Analysis Procedure***

The data was thematically analyzed using ATLAS.ti 9, employing both inductive and deductive approaches. First, the audio-recorded translanguaging

discourses from three selected classes were refined and transcribed into written text documents. These texts included class vignettes and nonverbal elements observed during classes. Next, the documents were added to an ATLAS.ti project library. The coding process involved iterative cycles of initial coding, recoding, splitting, merging, and renaming codes. Networks were created in the project and exported as visual representations. A code report with comments and supporting quotations was generated. Finally, a comprehensive analysis report was written, utilizing the networks and the code report from the previous steps.

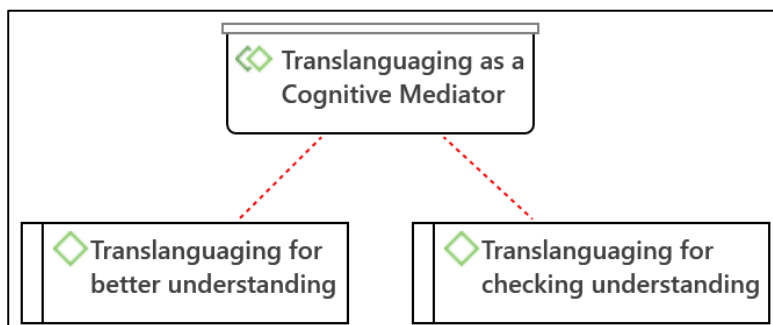
## Results

The classroom discourses in the selected community school Grade 9 EFL classes were found to involve Nepali-English translanguageing in situations where the students confront the problem of understanding, when they are reluctant in learning, and when they do not respond to English-only instruction. Accordingly, as per the theoretical framework of the study, the results have been presented under the themes of translanguageing as cognitive, affective, and interactional mediator as follows.

### *Translanguageing as a Cognitive Mediator*

Language is considered “the most pervasive and powerful cultural artifact” for shaping human understanding and cognition (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007, p. 201). In this paper, the focus is on Nepali-English translanguageing as a cognitive mediator in EFL classes. This topic highlights how translanguageing facilitates students’ comprehension of language, content, and other subjects, especially when English-only discourse falls short. The emergence of this theme stems from the combination of two codes, as represented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Codes Supporting Translanguageing as a Cognitive Mediator



Note. = 'code group' or 'organizing theme'; = code or 'basic theme'

**Translanguageing for Better Understanding.** Understanding the input is the prerequisite condition for learning to take place (Krashen, 1981). The teachers were found using translanguageing in the classroom, allowing its use among students to

help them better understand the subject matter. I noticed that they specifically employed translanguaging when students faced difficulties comprehending English-only content. For instance, the following classroom interaction shows that T1 used translanguaging to clarify a question for a student who could not understand it in English:

T1: Why does the company send some of their surveyors . . .  
 S: *tyo bhanyaa ke ho miss?*  
 T1: *Company le kina surveyors laai far western part of Nepal ma pathaayo? tyahin chha ta padha ta* (referring to the text)

This class vignette also shows that the students are allowed translanguaging so that the students can clearly express their problem to the teacher for the purpose of understanding. This approach effectively supported the students' learning and comprehension.

Similarly, T2 uses translanguaging to make clear one student's remark to other students in the classroom in the following class vignette:

S: (Reads what he has written.) We should be able to be satisfied with whatever we have.  
 T2: Yes, we should be satisfied with whatever we have; *haami sanga je chha tyasmaa khusi humuparchha, chitta bujhaaumi parchha, bhanera usle bhanchha*

The teacher (i.e. T2) also uses translanguaging to make the important information though about outside topic clear to the students as shown in the following conversation:

T2: (Teacher reads the notice written in Nepali which came in between the class. Students start talking in Nepali) *aba yo period pachhi chhutti*  
 S: Sir, engineer *haruko pani chhutti ho?*  
 T2: *an, sabaiko hunchha*

T3 (teacher 3) also makes use of translanguaging to make the concept of tag question clear to the students:

T3: English *maa* tag question, in Nepali?  
 Ss: (Talk to each other in Nepali.) *prasna, puchhre . . . puchhre prasna*  
 T3: *puchchhre prasna, yo prasna puchchar jasto bhaera baakyako pachhaadi aaunchha; kina aaunchha?*  
 Ss: *sahamat chha ki chhaina bhanera*

Thus, translanguaging seems to increase the students' understanding of the concepts related to the language and content in the textbook or outside topics.

**Translanguaging for Checking Understanding.** Teachers check students' understanding by using translanguaging, employing both English and Nepali in class. This cognitive mediation helps students grasp the teaching content effectively. Through eliciting Nepali from students, teachers provide necessary feedback, ensuring better comprehension. For example, T2 utilizes this approach while teaching vocabulary in the following class vignette:

T2: What is 'ass'?

Ss: (Silence)

T2: *gadha, nau kakhhaamaa aaera 'ass' maane gadhe sikaamu paryo haina?*

Similarly the following classroom discourse shows the use of translanguaging for checking students' understanding:

T3: Having a strong desire for something. What does having a strong desire means? *Bujheu? kuraaj bujheu?* do you understand? 'having a strong desire to do something' *bhaneko ke ho? . . .*

S: *baliyo chaahanaa*

T3: *baliyo bhaneko kasto? saahro? kehi kuraaprati baliyo chaahanaa humu, ho?*

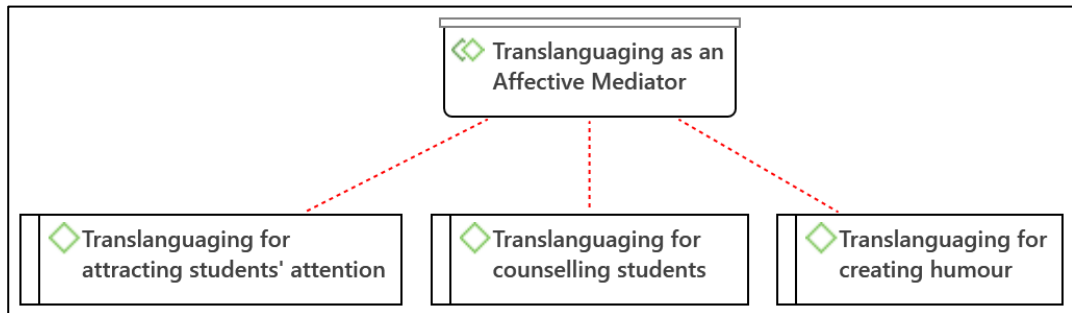
However, the last exchange of the above conversation shows over use of Nepali by the teacher. How about saying 'baliyo means?' instead of 'baliyo bhaneko kasto?' so as to maximize the use of English?

To sum up, translanguaging serves as a valuable cognitive mediator in the classroom. By employing translanguaging in the classroom discourse, teachers facilitate better student understanding, meeting one of the essential conditions for effective learning, as advocated by Krashen (1981).

### ***Translanguaging as an Affective Mediator***

This theme explores how translanguaging influences students' affective aspects like motivation, interest, and satisfaction, making them more receptive to learning (Krashen, 1982). Teachers use translanguaging to engage students for attracting their attention, providing study and discipline advice, and using humor, jokes, and stories. Three codes have been identified based on the data as shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Codes Supporting Translanguaging as an Affective Mediator

Note. = 'code group' or 'organizing theme'; = code or 'basic theme'

**Translanguaging for Attracting Students' Attention.** Attention is a fundamental requirement for comprehending any input. It not only fosters engagement but also paves the way for effective learning. During class observations, it was evident that teachers often employed translanguaging as a strategic tool to capture students' focus. For instance, when students showed disinterest in English-only instructions, the teacher skillfully used translanguaging to regain their attention.

T2: (T2 is discussing answers of the questions in previous homework, but students seem not paying attention to him) Oh, Listen to me. (Students again do not seem to be attentive.) *sundai nasunni, boleko ta summu paryo ni hai; yahaan ke bhaneko chha sunni ke, okay?*

This approach demonstrated how attention and interaction are interlinked, ultimately facilitating the learning process.

**Translanguaging for Counselling Students.** Counselling motivates students regarding discipline or study. Translanguaging aids when students have low English proficiency, making counselling more impactful. Teachers utilized translanguaging in class to counsel students effectively. In the following class vignette, for example, T2 used MT with English for better communication in counseling.

T2: *bela bhaisakyo kaatnu paryo* (indicating a student with long hair)

T2 asks one of the students to write his answer on the whiteboard; but the student hesitates to do so. Then the teacher says: *nau kakshaamaa padhne maanchhe*, whiteboard *ma lekhnna gaahro maannu hunchha ta?* Other students also convinced him saying: *lekha na lekha, kehi hundaina*. The student finally writes his answer with modest handwriting as:



Question no. 2 = we shouldn't be satisfied with what we have

Subsequently, the teacher encourages him in a friendly manner to come forward and write on the board, complimenting his neat and clear writing: “*yasto raamro lekhne raichha, gaahro maanera; la kasto spasta chha*; how clear writing” (T3). This positive response undoubtedly impacts the student’s emotional state, fostering a more favorable attitude towards his studies.

In his classroom discourse, T3 used translanguaging not only to encourage students to refrain from copying from others but also to emphasize the importance of independent thinking while working on class assignments or homework.

T3: Do not try to copy from your friends; ‘*mero ta kehi kshamataa chhaina, jaandina*’ *bhanera sochera saathitira pharkine hoina, ali-ali ta jaanyaa chha ni*; you have to think something in your mind, you can think, understand? . . .

This approach inspires students to engage their minds, reflect on the subject matter, and express their own ideas through their writing.

**Translanguaging for Creating Humour.** Humor is a powerful tool that holds significant influence in drawing students’ attention, enhancing communication, offering comfort during challenging moments, and reinforcing positive behaviors among students (Nair, 2020). When teachers employ humor, it not only helps build rapport with their students but also plays a vital role in EFL classroom by employing translanguaging to create amusing situations and foster a positive learning environment.

For example, when T1 speaking to one of her students, suggesting that he should see/read the text, uttered “*herna paryo ni kaanchhaa*”, the student smiled nodding his head. Other students also noted it with a bit smiling turning to the student. Such an utterance also promotes the teachers’ rapport with the students.

The teachers very often crack jokes or tell short stories in Nepali in EFL class. T2, for example, when the students shook their head instead of verbal response, such as ‘no’ or ‘I don’t know’, the teacher initiated the following conversation:

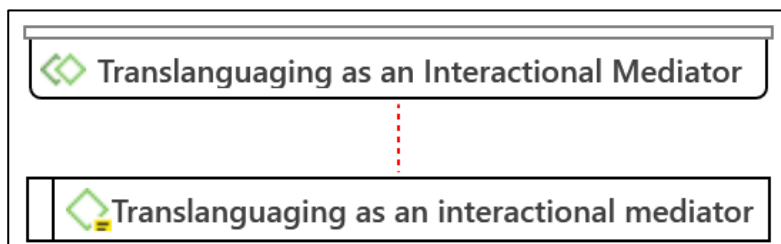
T2: *sunu yahaan, “timilaai acunchh”? bhandaa timi ke garchhau? You shake your head, yes? ani ke bhanaai chha bhane ni, yo taauko ta garhaun hunchha, hoina?*  
 Ss: *ho*  
 T2: *taauko ta heavy hunchha, lagbhag ek dhaarne hunchha; jibro chain saano hunchha, [ek] tolaako; tyaso bhaera ke bhanaai chha bhane tolaako jibro phadkaarnu bhandaa dhaarneko taauko hallauna sajilo; bujheu? Padhera, uttar dimu bhandaa acundaina bhanera mumto hallauna sajilo but you should speak, rather than shaking your head.*



Afterwards, the teacher transitioned back to the main teaching point. The translanguaging classroom discourse, overall, seemed to be highly effective in fostering an open and receptive environment for students, breaking the barriers imposed by the English-only monolingual policy and practice.

### ***Translanguaging as an interactional mediator***

Every language that people can understand plays a crucial role in facilitating social interactions, and these interactions, in turn, influence human learning (Fahim & Haghani, 2012; Lantolf, 2011). The classroom observation revealed that students asked questions using both Nepali and English. The teachers deliberately encouraged the use of translanguaging to overcome silence in the classroom, promoting more active interactions among students and between students and the teacher. As a result, this theme involves the incorporation of a single code, as depicted in Figure 3.

**Figure 3.** Code Supporting Translanguaging as an Interactional Mediator



Note:  = 'code group' or 'organizing theme';  = commented code

Silence in language teaching classes is not always desired, as selected class observations reveal acts of translanguaging that encourage student participation and break the silence as in the following class vignette for instance:

- T3: (While teaching if sentence) If it rains heavily at 9:30 tomorrow, what will you do (to a particular student)?
- S: (Silence)
- T3: You are about to set out, about to come to school, but it rains heavily, what will you do?
- S: (Silence)
- T3: *paani paryo beskana, hidna laako thiyau, aba ke garne?* What will you do? *ke garchau?* Will you stay at home or come [to school]?
- S: [I will] Come [to school].

In both of these class examples, translanguaging is used to break the silence and foster more interactivity in the EFL classroom. However, the nature of the conversations in the vignettes indicates that either the students lack proficiency in English or are hesitant to speak it in the classroom. Translanguaging, in this

context, plays a crucial role in encouraging these students to actively participate in teaching and learning activities.

In summary, the Nepali-English translanguaging classroom discourse serves as a mediator for learning English, encompassing cognitive, affective, and interactional aspects. This is particularly important when English-only discourse fails to fulfill this role, possibly due to students' limited English proficiency or the inherent complexity of the English input they receive.

## **Discussion**

Translanguaging classroom discourse has been found to play a significant mediational role in learning a foreign language, impacting cognitive, affective, and interactional aspects of the learning process. The use of translanguaging as a cognitive mediator facilitates students' understanding of learning content and enables teachers to check understanding and provide appropriate feedback. This is supported by previous research by Baker (2011), Baker and Wright (2017), and Wang (2016), who emphasized how translanguaging aids in organizing mental processes, promoting a deeper understanding of content, and utilizing linguistic resources for negotiating meaning.

However, some studies argue against the use of languages other than the TL, claiming that it may hinder language learning. For instance, Escobar and Dillard-Paltrineri (2015) found opposition to using the students' native language in an EFL classroom in Costa Rica, based on the belief that it impedes L2 learning. Nevertheless, it is essential to consider the context and proper use of translanguaging, as inappropriate or excessive use may indeed have negative consequences.

Translanguaging also affects the affective aspects of language learning, including motivation, interest, and satisfaction. By using translanguaging to attract students' attention, offer counseling, and create humor in the classroom, teachers can better prepare students for learning. This approach aligns with the Center for Applied Linguistics's perspective that limiting the use of the mother tongue can negatively impact learners' affective filter (Baker, 2011) and Cummins's (2001) view that rejecting a child's mother tongue is akin to rejecting the child themselves.

However, there are contrasting arguments against the positive affective role of translanguaging in the L2 classroom. Celic and Aydin (2018) contend that excessive use of the mother tongue may divert learners' attraction away from learning English. Similarly, MacDonald's argument (as cited in Mickel, 2016) suggests that if students know they can ask questions or seek clarification in their native language, they might not pay enough attention to instruction in the target language, hindering their motivation to learn.

In terms of the interactional mediational role of translanguaging, the appropriate use of translanguaging encourages students to actively participate in learning, leading to a more interactive classroom environment. This is consistent with the idea that collaborative dialogue in either the native or target language mediates language learning, as argued by Swain and Lapkin (2000) and Cummins et al. (2005). Wang's (2016) observation of translanguaging as a co-constructed dialogic approach, as well as Phyak's (2018) reflection on using translanguaging to break students' silence and increase their classroom participation, further support the use of translanguaging for interactional mediation.

While there is limited literature contradicting the interactional mediational role of translanguaging in language and content subject classrooms, the present research study demonstrates that translanguaging can be effectively utilized for mediation in various micro classroom contexts and macro sociopolitical situations.

In conclusion, the findings from this study highlight the potential benefits of using translanguaging as a mediational tool in foreign language learning classrooms. Nevertheless, it is crucial to consider the appropriateness and balance of translanguaging use to avoid any negative effects on language learning. Further research and exploration in different educational contexts can provide deeper insights into the efficacy of translanguaging as a mediational strategy for language instruction.

## **Conclusion**

The findings suggest that when emergent bilinguals are learning the target language in the researched context characterized by the students possessing relatively low motivation and cognition, and when the students' home language is shared by both the teachers, translanguaging can serve as an effective tool to mediate TL learning.

However, it is crucial to note that the effectiveness of translanguaging depends on its appropriate and strategic implementation. The degree to which the MT is involved in MT-TL translanguaging classroom discourse plays a pivotal role in facilitating TL learning. Consequently, it becomes the professional teacher's responsibility to discern the appropriate amount and nature of translanguaging that best enhances learning across cognitive, affective, and interactional dimensions, considering the classroom context.

In essence, adopting a thoughtful and balanced approach to translanguaging can yield significant benefits in the language learning process, particularly for emergent bilinguals. By recognizing the unique needs and circumstances of their students, educators can harness the power of translanguaging as a valuable tool to support and enhance language learning in diverse learning environments.

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