

## Affective Mediation of Mother Tongue in Grade 9 ELT Classes in Kathmandu

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<p><i>Article Info:</i> Received: August 10, 2023 Revised: September 9, 2023 Accepted: September 21, 2023</p>	<p><b>ABSTRACT:</b> The use of mother tongue (MT) in a target language (TL) class has become a contentious issue for a long time. This paper examines the use of students' MT in TL classes, focusing on Grade 9 English language teaching (ELT) in community schools of Kathmandu. Community school English teachers' experiences of using students' MT for affective mediation were explored through written 'lived-experience descriptions' (LEDs) and phenomenological interviews with three purposively selected teachers. Using ATLAS.ti, the collected information was analyzed from a sociocultural viewpoint, emphasizing the affective mediational function of MT in second language (L2) learning. The study reveals how teachers use students' MT for counseling, attention-grabbing, fostering interest, and making classroom activities enjoyable. The pedagogical implication is that incorporating students' mother tongue for counseling, attention-grabbing, fostering interest, and creating enjoyable classroom activities, particularly when students share a common mother tongue with their teacher and show less interest in learning English, has significant potential for inspiring and guiding students effectively.</p>
<p><i>Keywords:</i> Lived experience, affective mediation, use of mother tongue, phenomenology, target language</p>	

### Introduction

Despite the pervasive advocacy for the TL monolingual teaching of any foreign or second language at the policy level, the TL teachers and learners have been making use of the learners' MT in various contexts specially in ELT classes across the world (Karaagac, 2014). The term 'MT' has been conceptualized in a number of ways. Ohyama (2017), for example, observes it as "a native language, home language, . . . first language (L1), . . . primary language, and heritage language" (p. 7), while Richards and Schmidt (2010) take it as the "first language which is acquired at home" (p. 377). However, my conceptualization of the MT in this study is that it is the most dominant and comfortably used language in the students' day-to-day communication. It is not necessarily the language that they acquire first at home though it is the case for most of the students in the research site. In accordance with this conceptualization, the students' MT used in the selected Grade 9 ELT classes happened to be Nepali.

There are numerous pieces of literature and studies that shed light on such MT-TL bilingual practices in language teaching with special reference to ELT classes. Here, I review some arguments and empirical findings regarding the use of the MT in the TL classes for

affective purpose. According to the Center for Applied Linguistics (2001; as cited in Baker, 2011), imposing restrictions on the use of the MT in classrooms can have negative psychological repercussions on learners. This includes feelings of being backward, inferior, and stupid, as well as experiencing fear, confusion, and trauma. In the same vein, Cummins (2001) emphasizes that when a child's MT is rejected in the educational setting, it amounts to rejecting the children themselves.

Likewise, according to The IRIS Center (2015), when children observe the importance given to their mother tongue (MT), it fosters a constructive and beneficial sense of self-identity, as well as a heightened sense of pride in their cultural and linguistic background. The students' prior knowledge and experiences, including their proficiency in their mother tongue, play a significant role in shaping and bolstering their identity. These arguments highlight the affective function of using the MT in TL classes.

In the Australian context, empirical studies have shed light on the various uses of MT in language learning. Crawford (2004) discovered that the MT is employed for cross-lingual and cross-cultural comparisons, which hold affective value. In the context of Irish higher education, Bruen and Kelly (2014) found that using the MT to explain complex language can effectively reduce learner anxiety levels. Similarly, Silvani (2014) observed that the MT is utilized to maintain a conducive classroom atmosphere in Arabian and Chinese contexts, Alshehri (2017), Paker and Karaağaç (2015) and Qian et al. (2009) found that the MT is employed to establish rapport with students. Additionally, in the Chinese context, Wu (2018) discovered that the MT is utilized for cognitive, affective, and interactional mediation in TL classes. This suggests that the MT plays a multifaceted role in facilitating cognitive processes, addressing affective needs, and enhancing interaction among learners in the Chinese educational context.

The mentioned studies focus on various micro pedagogical functions of MT in TL learning, particularly within its affective function. However, none of these studies extensively explore MT's specific role in the affective aspects of TL learning. Additional research in this area is necessary to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how MT can effectively contribute to language learning emotionally. Furthermore, there is a gap in the existing literature concerning the use of MT in TL classrooms from teachers' lifeworld perspective. Limited research examines this phenomenon, along with a scarcity of studies exploring MT use through the lens of sociocultural theory, which recognizes the affective implications of students' MT in TL learning. This study aims to fill these gaps and make a valuable contribution to the existing literature.

By investigating the use of MT in TL classrooms from both teachers' lifeworld and sociocultural theory perspectives, this research endeavors to provide valuable insights and enhance the current understanding of this subject matter. This, in turn, could lead to more effective language learning practices and pedagogical approaches.

The research problem, therefore, was how the Nepalese community school English teachers experience and make sense of their use of Nepali in Grade 9 ELT classes in relation to its affective mediation in students' learning English. The key contemplation of this paper, accordingly, was: How can the use of MT (i.e., Nepali) in Grade 9 ELT classes have an affective function in learning the TL (i.e., English) in the teachers' lifeworld?

The study's findings will significantly impact various aspects of TL education. This includes language policy, curriculum planning, textbook production, and teaching methods. Stakeholders in similar contexts will benefit from valuable insights. For instance, in settings with low student motivation and cognitive abilities, and where students and teachers share a common MT, the research can aid decision-making. Evidence-based information and recommendations will enable stakeholders to develop effective language policies, design appropriate curricula, produce relevant textbooks, and enhance teaching and learning activities. Ultimately, this study aims to empower stakeholders in their roles and contribute to more effective TL education.

### **Methodology**

The chosen research design for the research objective is Heideggerian interpretive phenomenology, addressing research question that differs from Husserl's descriptive approach by involving full engagement of researcher and participants' worlds. In Heideggerian interpretive phenomenology, the phenomenon is understood as being "lived out interpretively in the world," as opposed to Husserl's approach which brackets the external world in order to focus on the structures of the phenomenon as experienced in participants' consciousness (Vagle, 2018, p. 9).

Several key concepts within Heideggerian interpretive phenomenology justify the avoidance of Husserl's concept of bracketing in transcendental phenomenology. The concept of "dasein" highlights the situatedness of knowledge and the meaning of a phenomenon (Willis, 2007, p. 99). Fore-sight or fore-conception pertains to the researcher's preexisting expertise, knowledge, and past experiences, which encompass their judgments, preconceived notions, and biases (Lopez & Willis, 2004; Peoples, 2021). The hermeneutic circle refers to the iterative process of developing meaning or understanding of a phenomenon, involving constant revision and interpretation (Peoples, 2021; Willis, 2007).

Utilizing the hermeneutic phenomenology, this study delves deeper into the phenomenon, considering the context and lived experiences of both the researcher and participants. Contextual interpretation emerges, influenced by the world in which they exist, and findings evolve through circular revisions based on new information gained. The paper's conclusions are context-sensitive and not broadly generalizable. The methodology encompasses research participants, tools, data collection methods, procedure, and data analysis. This approach ensures a comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon within the specific context of MT use in ELT classes.

### **Research Participants**

I purposively selected three highly qualified, trained and experienced English teachers from community schools (referred to as T1, T2, and T3) who possessed firsthand experiences in utilizing the MT in Grade 9 ELT classes, and could candidly "provide a thorough and rich description of the phenomenon" (Vagle, 2018, p. 147). The participants' demographic descriptions are given in Table 1.

Table 1. *Demographic Profile of the Participants*

P	Gender	Age	Education	Training	Teaching experience
T1	Female	48	MEd (English)	TMTT	26 years
T2	Male	54	MA, BEd (English), BL	TMTT, TOT, TPD	30 years
T3	Male	49	MEd (English)	TPD, TOT	25 years

Note. P = Participants; TMTT = Ten Months Teacher Training; TOT = Training of Trainer; TPD = Teacher Professional Development; All the aforementioned trainings are in-service.

### **Research Tools**

The tools for the collection of the required information were a diary, email and phone call invitations for the LED of the phenomenon of investigation, and interview guidelines.

### **Methods for Data Collection**

I collected the necessary information by employing the LED and “phenomenological interview” methods (Bevan, 2014).

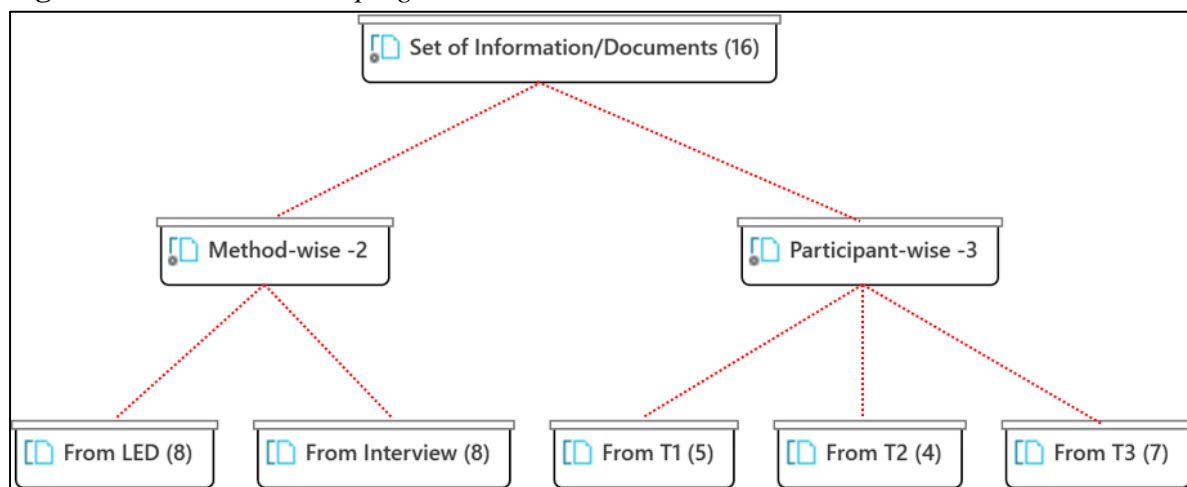
### **Data Collection Procedure**

I recruited willing participants for a research project, asking them through email and phone to share their LEDs on using MT in class. I received eight (2 + 2 + 4) detailed responses. I conducted a total of eight (3 + 2 + 3) interviews, both online and in-person, to explore their interpretations and reflections on the phenomenon.

### **Data Analysis Procedure**

The collected data was analyzed using an inductive-com-deductive mixed approach to thematic analysis, utilizing ATLAS.ti, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). Initially, I generated codes inductively from the collected information, and subsequently organized them deductively based on their alignment with the affective function of using MT in ELT classes. The information was analyzed and reanalyzed multiple times, following the hermeneutic principle of revision. This iterative process allowed me to develop new meanings with each new piece of information until reaching the final understanding and interpretation of the teachers’ lived experiences regarding the use of MT in ELT classes.

More specifically, I created a total of 19 written text documents. This involved transcribing and translating the oral data, translating the data originally written in Nepali, and refining the data that was already there in English. In the second step, I organized the documents into groups based on participants and the methods employed, ensuring a systematic approach for further analysis (see Figure 1). This arrangement facilitated a more streamlined and focused analysis process.

**Figure 1.** Documents Grouping

Note. 📄 = smart group of documents; 📄 = basic group of documents; the numbers enclosed in parentheses represent the number of documents within each group; the numbers separated by hyphens indicate the different types of documents present within the group.

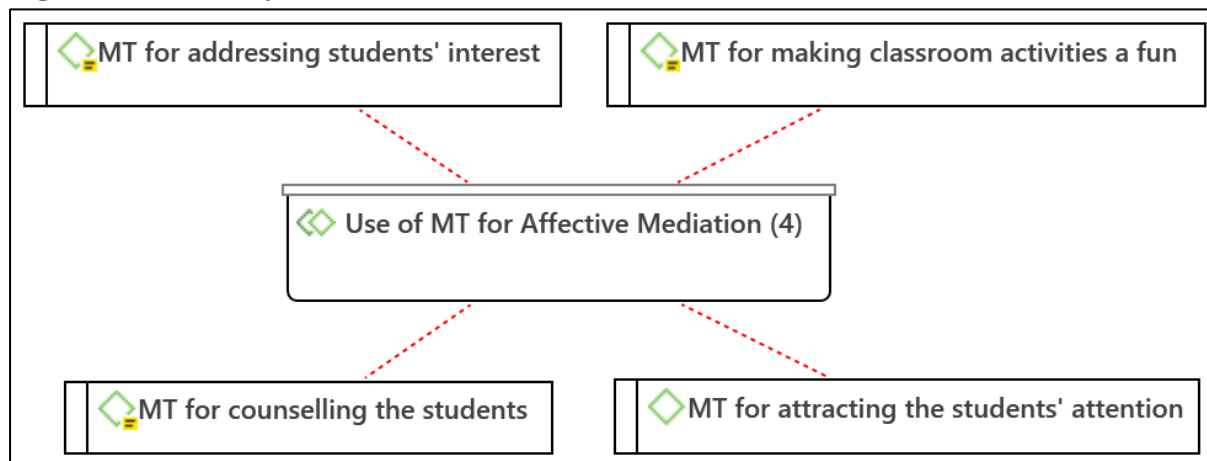
After conducting the initial coding of the documents, I proceeded with subsequent stages, which involved recoding, splitting, and merging the codes in a cyclical manner. I also renamed the codes as part of this iterative process. After several revisions, I eventually completed the coding process. I identified the codes as “basic” themes and organized them directly under the overarching “global” theme, which represents the main topic of the study (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Then, I created, saved, and exported the network of connection between the global theme and basic themes from the ATLAS.ti project in the image form (see Figure 2).




Finally, I proceeded to report the codes according to the identified themes. Each code was accompanied by relevant comments and supporting quotations extracted from the project data. This approach allowed for a thorough exploration and documentation of the themes that emerged from the analysis.

Using the networks and ATLAS.ti report, I then compiled the analysis section of the paper. The networks provided visual representations of the relationships and connections among the codes, aiding in the interpretation and presentation of the findings. The ATLAS.ti report provided additional insights and information to support the analysis and enhance the overall quality of the paper.

## Findings

The teachers were found to report that they have the lived experiences of using MT for counselling the students, attracting their attention, addressing their interest, and making classroom activities a fun—all of them connected to the affective mediation of MT for learning English, as Figure 2 depicts.

**Figure 2.** Network of Global and Basic Themes

Note. MT = mother tongue;  = code group;  = code;  = merged code

### ***MT for Counselling the Students***

The teachers in the study had experiences of using the students' MT to effectively counsel them. T1, for instance, shared her experience of using Nepali to address various student issues, such as “absenteeism, problems related to menstruation, as well as personal problems like torn clothes, bullying, threats, and family or economic issues.” T1 mentioned that the students express their problems in Nepali, and she also communicates with them in Nepali when they need sanitary pads or have severe pain due to menstruation. According to T1, students tend to voice their complaints in Nepali, even during English classes, when they are dissatisfied with the school administration or subject teachers. This is “because they find it easier to express their intended meaning in Nepali” (T1 Int 1).

T1 justified the use of the MT for counseling students by highlighting that not all students understand English well. Therefore, she utilized Nepali to explain matters and bring about changes in students' behavior by ensuring that everyone understands what is being talked about.

T2 shared his experience of using students' MTs other than Nepali, such as Newari, to encourage them to perform well. He mentioned that he used phrases like “*baa: laa*” (meaning, ‘it is good’) to praise Newari students. T2 also mentioned that while he taught English content in English, as much as possible, he resorted to counseling in Nepali to capture the students' attention.

T3 noted that using Nepali as the teacher in ELT classes motivated even the more reserved students to speak up. According to T3, counseling students about their family and personal problems in English may not be as effective in connecting with them on a deeper level. T3 further explained that when the explanation was given in Nepali, students experienced a breakthrough which led them to feel that his problem had been resolved. T3 justified the use of Nepali in such situations by stating that simply speaking fluent English would not have the same impact on students because the teacher's English might not touch their hearts and minds. In his words, “barking in English fluently cannot move” the students since the teacher's English wouldn't touch their heart and mind (T3 Int 2).

Drawing from my own personal experiences, I have encountered numerous instances where teachers have utilized the students' MT for counseling purposes. Additionally, as an English teacher myself, I have employed MT in both school settings and advanced ELT classes. It is possible that counseling in a TL may lack the same level of depth and emotional connection as counseling conducted in one's MT.

### ***MT for Attracting the Attention of Students***

Attention is a vital aspect that empowers individuals to stick to cognitive tasks, irrespective of challenges they may encounter. Moreover, attention facilitates engagement, leading to effective learning (Jacob et al., 2021). The application of MT to capture students' attention is supported by several quotes derived from field data. For instance, T2 shared his insight based on teaching English-to-English, where he observed that students with lower abilities "divert their attention, fail to comprehend, and consequently fall behind in the long run" (T2 Int 1). T2 also recounted an anecdote in which the use of MT proved helpful in guiding inattentive students. When a distracted girl failed to pay attention while he was speaking in English, he resorted to Nepali and asked, "*e naani timi ke sochiraakheki* ['hello *naani*, what are you contemplating']? *padhaaimaa dhyaan chha* ['Are you focused on your study']?" (T2 Int 2). This unexpected interaction caught her off guard, prompting him to persuade her in Nepali to listen attentively and informing her that he would later ask questions about the lesson. Only then did her wandering attention become focused on the subject matter. The teacher's realization was that switching to Nepali effectively captured students' attention. In essence, students tend to pay attention to instructions that they find comprehensible and interesting.

I cannot recall any specific instances of utilizing Nepali language in my ELT classes during my tenure at a secondary school in order to capture the students' attention. However, I have frequently employed the Nepali language to persuade the students so that they could take their studies seriously. For instance, I would often convey the message: "*haami tapainharukaalaagi padhera aaunchhaun ra dinkaadin tapainharukaa agaadi yasari prastut garchaun bhane tapainharule aaphnaa laagi ta padhnu paryo ni*" 'We diligently prepare and deliver lessons each day for your benefit. It only makes sense for you to reciprocate with diligent study for your own progress'.

### ***MT for Addressing Students' Interest***

The teachers employ the use of the students' MT, Nepali, in ELT classes to cater to their interests and demands. T1 expressed that "incorporating a small amount of Nepali" had a noticeable impact on them [(i.e., the students)], bringing "about a positive change in their facial expressions" (T1 Int 1). This suggests that using the students' mother tongue in the classroom creates a sense of satisfaction. T1 further emphasized that even in schools that claim to follow an English-only approach, "Nepali is inevitably utilized during English instruction because it is what the students desire" (T1 Int 3). This implies that at the micro-level of classroom practice, incorporating the native language is unavoidable in ELT classes, despite the meso-level policy advocating for English-only instruction.

In her LED, T1 conveyed that "the use of the Nepali language was essential for both student satisfaction and comprehension of instructions and lessons" (T1 LED 1). Additionally, T1 described that she highlighted the differences between English and Nepali grammar, such

as verb forms and voice, to provide a clear contrast and facilitate the students' understanding, which in turn made them feel "content and delighted" (T1 LED 1). Furthermore, T1 stated that the students "not only enjoyed but also preferred using their MT to freely express their thoughts and opinions" (T1 LED 2).

T2 had a notable observation that when students used Nepali, they "appeared engaged and interested in the class" (T2 Int 1). He shared a classroom anecdote: "He [(i.e., one of his students)] requested him to briefly tell the story in Nepali. After complying, the student asked me to retell the story in English, expressing that he would pay better attention then" (T2 Int 2).

T3 also had a similar experience, noting that even well-performing students frequently expected him to utilize Nepali in class (T3 Int 1). In T3's LED, it was mentioned that "the students even demanded explanations of the lesson's essence in Nepali" (T3 LED 1). This demonstrates that the language choice in ELT classes is influenced not only by the teachers' preferences but also by the students' interests.

Throughout my own learning career, I have never encountered students expressing objections to the use of Nepali in ELT classes, both at school and college. As a teacher, I am always enthusiastic about accommodating the majority of students' interests by incorporating the MT into the classroom to enhance their motivation and understanding of the subject matter. This sentiment can likely be shared by many students and teachers of English as a foreign language.

### ***MT for Making Classroom Activities a Fun***

Participants in the study reported the use of MT to make classroom activities more enjoyable by incorporating anecdotes, jokes, and stories. One participant, referred to as T2, shared his personal experience of using Nepali jokes and explained why he preferred using Nepali when telling jokes. According to T2, the true essence of Nepali jokes might not be fully conveyed in English, and some students might not fully understand them (T2 Int 1). This could be attributed to the fact that certain expressions containing Nepali proverbs, idioms, and sayings lose their meaning when translated into English. To illustrate this point, T2 provided an example of a phrase he would commonly use when students appeared distracted from their studies: "*haatmaa pustok manma dash thok nagara hai,*" which roughly translates to 'keep your focus firmly on the book in your hand, and do not let your mind drift.'"

T2, the teacher, emphasized that jokes were frequently delivered in Nepali to ensure that all students in the classroom could comprehend and enjoy them. He noted that when jokes were told in English, "twenty-five out of the thirty students grasp the content and engage with enthusiasm, while the remaining five may need Nepali version of the Jokes to fully participate" (T2 Int 1). Therefore, T2 concluded that "to ensure that all 30 students can participate and enjoy the humor, jokes are primarily shared in Nepali" (T2 Int 1).

I, as a teacher, also used to employ the tactic of switching the classroom interaction to Nepali to create an enjoyable atmosphere. This approach involved going off-topic intentionally. There were two main reasons behind this decision. Firstly, not all students had a strong grasp of English, so switching to Nepali ensured that everyone could follow along. Secondly, conveying the precise meanings of certain authentic Nepali sayings and stories proved to be extremely challenging in English. Therefore, utilizing Nepali led to more accurate and effective communication in such instances.



## Discussion

The study's overall findings indicate that the teachers identified English-only lessons as a barrier to effectively conveying the message and creating an enjoyable ELT classes for their students. To address this issue, teachers turned to the use of the MT for counseling, motivation, classroom discipline, and addressing students' interest in language learning. This approach aimed to foster an environment where students were more receptive, reducing their psychological or "socio-affective filter" (Krashen, 1981), and ultimately engage them in learning.

These findings strongly suggest that incorporating the MT is highly beneficial for clear instruction, breaking classroom monotony, motivating students, and encouraging active participation in teaching and learning activities. Participants acknowledged that integrating the MT helped bridge communication gaps and ensured full comprehension of the intended message. Additionally, its use injected variety into the classroom environment, enhancing the learning experience. Through this approach, teachers successfully motivated students and encouraged their active involvement, resulting in improved teaching and learning outcomes.

The account of teachers' lived experience can be supported by various scholarly perspectives. Firstly, the Center for Applied Linguistics (2001; as cited in Baker, 2011) suggests that restricting the use of the MT in classrooms can have negative psychological effects on learners. Additionally, Cummins (2001) highlights the importance of acknowledging and valuing a child's MT, equating the rejection of their MT with the rejection of the child themselves. UNESCO (1953, 2003) (1953, 2003) emphasizes that one's first language is a crucial aspect of cultural identification and empowerment.

Furthermore, Cummins et al. (2005) argue that foreign language learners (English in this case) are more likely to engage academically when their identities are acknowledged and supported in the instructional process. Paker and Karağaç (2015) found that using the students' MT helps establish rapport with them. Moreover, Qian et al. (2009) concluded in their research that a suitable amount of MT use in the classroom contributes to fostering a close student-teacher relationship.

By drawing on these scholarly perspectives, it can be argued that the use of MT in the classroom takes care of the psychological well-being of learners, recognizes the importance of cultural identity, promotes student engagement, facilitates rapport-building, and fosters a positive student-teacher relationship.

However, it is important to acknowledge that there exist a significant number of counter arguments and research findings as well that challenge the use of students' MT in language learning contexts. For instance, Celik and Aydın (2018) contend that excessive reliance on L1 hinders learners' engagement and interest in learning English. They argue that when learners constantly resort to their native language, they divert their attention away from acquiring proficiency in the TL.

Additionally, MacDonald's (1993; as cited in Mickel, 2016) study suggests that the use of MT can have adverse effects on student motivation to learn the TL. This implies that when students heavily rely on their MT to decipher and comprehend the TL, their intrinsic motivation may diminish, as they may perceive the process as less challenging or engaging.

Furthermore, Swain (1986; as cited in Mickel, 2016) argues that when students are presented with the same message in both their MT and the TL, they tend to disregard the TL,

which they may not fully comprehend. Consequently, they do not make an effort to decode the meaning conveyed in the TL. This highlights the potential negative consequences of relying on MT translations, as it may hinder students' language processing and comprehension skills.

These counter arguments and findings underscore the complexities and potential drawbacks associated with the use of MT in language learning. They suggest that excessive use of MT can hinder learners' language acquisition and divert their focus away from the TL. Similarly, relying heavily on MT may diminish students' motivation and hinder their engagement with the TL. Additionally, presenting messages in both languages may lead students to ignore the TL and impede their efforts to decode and comprehend the language.

The affective use of the MT has elicited a range of arguments and findings that appear to possess comparable validity, albeit demonstrating both alignment and divergence with respect to its application. Obviously, these competing perspectives emanate from disparate contexts characterized by distinct attributes. For instance, within a particular context where an excessive reliance on non-mediated translation prevailed in L2 classrooms, the utilization of MT may have been conscientiously discouraged. Notably, even the present study asserts a similar viewpoint, emphasizing concerns pertaining to the overutilization of MT in ELT classes.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the findings of this study indicate that utilizing the students' MT for its affective function can be beneficial in engendering a deeper emotional impact and promoting change among students, particularly in situations where an English-only message may not effectively penetrate their emotional barriers. By employing MT to lower the students' affective filter, which tends to remain high when using English exclusively, the process of opening them up to new input becomes more efficient. However, it is crucial to exercise caution and strike a balance, as excessive reliance on MT can limit exposure to English and subsequently reduce the students' opportunities for English language acquisition.

Therefore, it is imperative for teachers to be cognizant of the circumstances in which students struggle to engage with the English-only medium, and determine the appropriate amount of MT usage necessary to overcome the language barrier without compromising the students' exposure to English. By recognizing and addressing these challenges, educators can create a supportive learning environment that optimizes language acquisition while also considering the affective factors that influence students' receptiveness to English instructions.

This study focuses exclusively on the affective aspects of utilizing students' MT in ELT classes within three community schools in Kathmandu. This implies a need for future research to expand the scope and explore additional research areas.

This study's concern is confined within the affective aspect of using the students' MT in ELT classes in three community schools in Kathmendo. This suggests further research broadening the scope and the field (area) of the research

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