

Native Language in English as a Foreign Language Classes: Teachers' Lived Experiences

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Abstract

Along with the prevalence of post-method pedagogy in English language teaching, the use of learners' native language (NL) in English as a foreign language (EFL) context has become a vital issue. Considering the issue, this article aims to dig into the phenomenon of NL usage with special reference to Nepal. For achieving this objective, I followed a phenomenological study design to explore the teachers' lived experiences. I purposively selected ten university English language teachers to observe their EFL classes based on age, qualification, gender, and teaching experience. The information obtained from the unstructured classroom observation led me to the four themes such as conditions, reasons, strategies and consequences. The findings reveal that most informants used NL for better and more efficient communication; they used NL in different ways; and learners were at ease, self-assured, and pleased with NL usage. This implies that EFL teachers need to use the learners' NL sparingly.

Keywords: contexts, EFL classroom, native language, reasons, strategies

Introduction

It is generally assumed that the target language, especially English, should be taught by using English itself. It is also believed that the learners' native language (NL) should be discouraged, if not prohibited, in the classroom. Moreover, English use is taken as a matter of prestige, although the learners may fall prey to misunderstanding and, as a result, miscommunication. English-only policy, in English as a foreign language, has overridden multilingual and mother tongue education because of the belief that students' number and quality are degrading in non-English medium schools. Further, English is regarded as a passport to travel around the world easily. Such beliefs are responsible for the voice of EMI and against the use of the learners' native language in the foreign language classes in the context of Nepal.

In Nepal, 123 languages are used as native languages (CBS, 2011). Linguistic diversity in Nepal is evidenced by 83,87,66,38,32,20, and 37 languages used in communication in provinces one to seven, respectively (CBS, 2011). Despite this fact, people use the Nepali language for wider communication as "a native, second, or contact language" (Neupane, Dawadi, & Poudel, 2021, p. 39). Thus, the Nepali language maintains its position as a native language (NL), for it bridges the linguistic communities (that have different NLs) in mutual intelligibility. However, in the Nepalese context, English is a second lingua franca

because most people learn it after acquiring their NLs (Gass et al., 2013). Furthermore, English is used in everyday communication in informal settings via social media like SMS, Facebook, e-mail, the Internet, and so on. English is also a foreign language as it is not used as a means of informal communication (except in very limited contexts) (Neupane, Dawadi, & Poudel, 2021) and has been limited to formal settings like English language classrooms, some educational institutions, and international communications. The English language teachers and the students are reluctant in using English in informal contexts. This is validated by the fact that English is a foreign language where it is not used as an official language (Lee, 2021) and where it does not have “any specified role but is taught as a subject in schools” (Giri, 2015, p. 96). Despite this dyad possibility, I have used English as a foreign language (EFL) in this article because I have explored the uses of the English language in an EFL classroom environment.

This is why the use of English as an EMI in Nepalese classrooms has been a debatable issue for years. This echoes Sweers’ (2003) claim that the use of the learners’ NL is desirable for a sense of security, naturalness and intelligibility in EFL classes. This situation calls for the need for ‘translingualism’ (cf. Celic & Selzer, 2012/2013, Conteh, 2018, & Mertin, 2018).

Plentiful theoretical foundations and empirical shreds of evidence show the need for NL use in EFL classes. Atkinson’s (1987) revolutionary work has endorsed some contexts to use learners’ NL in the EFL classroom. For example they are eliciting language, checking comprehension, giving complex instructions to basic levels, co-operating in groups, explaining classroom methodology at basic levels, using translation to highlight a recently taught language item, checking for sense, testing, developing circumlocution strategies (p. 241). Likewise, Auerbach (1993) has asserted, “Starting with the L₁ provides a sense of security and validates the learners’ lived experiences, allowing them to express themselves. The learner is then willing to experiment and take risks in English” (p. 19). Justifying the use of NL in EFL classes, Auerbach (1993) has also recommended some occasions of NL use, such as record keeping; classroom management; negotiation of the syllabus and the lesson; setting the scene; language analysis; presentation of rules governing grammar, phonology, and spelling; discussion of cross-cultural issues; instructions or prompts; explanation of errors; and assessment of comprehension.

Following similar avenues, Schweer’s (1999, as cited in Schweers, 2003) study also proves the need for using NL in FL classes. In the same vein, Mattioli (2004) has cited Macaro’s (2001) words, “No study to date has succeeded in demonstrating a “causal relationship between exclusion of the L1 and improved learning”” (p. 13). These studies validate the use of learners’ NL in EFL classes. Besides, Richards and Rodgers (2003) have preferred the use of learner-centred approaches that is indicative of the use of language for communication. Therefore, advocating the English-only policy in EFL classrooms has been debatable.

Some Nepali researchers (like Sah, 2017, & Joshi, 2018) have also attempted to explore the issue. Sah (2017) investigates the university teachers’ and students’ positive attitudes towards the use of NL in university EFL classes in Nepal. Similarly, Joshi (2018) presents these reasons for NL use such as “natural tendency, sense of security, cognitive support, NL as a resource to FL, ease for group/pair work, among others” (p. 53). These studies focused on the aspect of the learners’ intelligibility and were limited to code-switching and

translation as the strategies of using NL in EFL classes.

Based on the foregoing delineations, this article caters for the issue of NL usage in EFL classes in terms of contexts, reasons, and consequences of NL use in the EFL classes in the Nepalese context.

Methodology

The study adopted a phenomenological design for it aimed to envisage teachers' lived experiences (Dornyei, 2011) regarding the use of NL in EFL contexts. As the informants, I purposively selected ten teachers' classes from constituent and affiliated campuses of the universities like Tribhuvan (n=8), Nepal Sanskrit (n=1), and Pokhara (n=1). Table 1 provides biographic information on the informants whose pseudonyms are included for maintaining anonymity. I used four parameters for selecting the informants such as gender, qualification, experience and age. The purpose of these parameters is to observe the use of NL in EFL classrooms by a diverse group of teachers at the university level (all of them were teaching at university classes at the time of research).

Table 1

Biographic Information on the Informants

Name (Pseudonyms)	Gender	Qualification	Experience (in years)	Age
Ram	Male	PhD in English	20	46
Hari	Male	M.A. in English	5	32
Sita	Female	M.Ed. in English	15	42
Gita	Female	M. Phil in Eng. Ed.	17	44
Shyam	Male	M.A. in English	6	31
Sarita	Female	M.Ed. in English	3	28
Hira	Male	PhD in Eng. Edu.	9	35
Laxmi	Female	M. Phil in English	11	35
Kamala	Female	M.Ed. in English	13	36
Kamal	Male	M. A. in English	7	31

The tool for collecting information was unstructured observation (Dornyei, 2011) that elicits natural information. The data were gathered by observing ten informants' classes using a purposive sampling strategy. I, as a researcher, maintained diaries instead of recording the lectures so that I could observe in the naturalistic setting to obtain realistic classroom data. Then, I used the diaries for content analysis.

For maintaining ethical considerations, the researcher used informed consent from the informants and maintained anonymity by using pseudonyms for them. The themes were developed and illuminated with exemplars wherever necessary for the analysis.

Results and Discussion

The information obtained from observation has been codified into themes for elaboration and corroboration. Such emerging themes are conditions, strategies, reasons, and

consequences of NL use in EFL classes.

Conditions

Under this theme, the researcher investigated the situations in which the informants used NL in EFL classes. This theme comprised two sub-themes, like general and specific. Of them, general conditions were referred to by occasions, whereas specific ones by contexts.

The researcher observed that all the informants used NL to explain difficult concepts of English, whereas none of them used NL to conduct fun activities. It shows that they were not comfortable using NL to conduct fun activities but were comfortable using NL to clarify the difficult concepts of FL to the learners. The informants did not use NL for other general conditions, like giving instructions, facilitating pair/group work, maintaining naturalness in learning, maintaining discipline in the class, and motivating the learners. However, none of them paid attention to talking to individual learners and lubricating classroom interaction. This finding reveals that the EFL teachers are not aware of the techniques that focus on learner-centred teaching. However, the researcher could not investigate whether they would use NL for such learner-centred teaching conditions.

Specific conditions, in this research, are referred to by contexts that create conditions in which NL is needed. The researcher observed some contexts of NL use, such as making the concept clear, motivating learners, clarifying the abstract concepts, initiating the class, explaining abstract vocabularies, lubricating the learning process, giving the main idea of the lesson taught, teaching exceptional cases in grammar, and communicating ideas. However, all the informants were alertly minimizing their NL uses, maybe because they wanted to show off their tendency to use only English. Yet, *Ram* and *Hari* were bold enough to use NL to motivate the learners and to bring the FL concept home into their NL. These contexts show that NL should and can be used where FL impairs communication.

Strategies

Under this theme, I observed how often and how the informants used NL. The informants were found using NL in different states. For instance, *Sita* and *Gita* used NL most frequently, *Shyam*, *Sarita*, *Hira*, *Laxmi*, and *Kamala* rarely, whereas *Kamal* sometimes. It was really interesting to find out that the informants used three strategies of NL use such as translation, code-switching and code-mixing. *Hira* and *Laxmi* code switched and translated for facilitating intelligibility, illustrating jargon and exceptional cases of grammar. This finding corroborates *Sah's* (2017) study. Likewise, other informants' codes switched for clarifying the meaning of abstract vocabularies and culturally different concepts. The remaining informants were observed mixing NL and FL at times randomly. These results prove that the English teachers use NL in the classroom in one way, or the other, or multiple ways in the same period.

Reasons

Reasons for NL use were teacher- and learner-related. The observed teacher-related reasons were the habit of using the mother tongue, making learning interactive, lack of adequate knowledge in the FL, teachers' inability to tackle the complex type of texts. These reflections are based on the informants' classroom behaviours. For instance, *Gita* tried to deliver her lecture only in English, although she sometimes mixed Nepali with English.

Likewise, *Kamal* translated FL into NL when he could not present synonyms, antonyms, or contexts to disambiguate the utterances. Furthermore, *Hira* used Nepali when the students remained dumb-folded and inactive; as soon as he switched to Nepali the students began interacting with him.

Similarly, I observed student-related reasons abundantly. The researchers' diaries show that when the informants tried to give delivery in English only, the learners were either demotivated or remained passive listeners. This context proves the lack of learners' knowledge, confidence, and poor competence in the foreign language. The next significant reason for the informants' NL use was observed to be inadequate practice and performance on the part of both the teachers and the learners. Solidarity, security, and sensitivity to culture have also been observed to be the reasons for NL use. Furthermore, the informants tried to connect FL concepts to NL.

These student-related and teacher-related reasons echo mainly naturalists' principles of language learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2003) that reside in teaching learners in naturalistic settings.

Consequences

Of the ten observed classes, Hari firstly gave a lecture in English only, followed by Nepali only to drive the meaning clear to the learners. Some learners remained passive, whereas others were undisciplined until he explained the lesson in English. As soon as he switched the code into Nepali, all the learners were attentive, active and alert. This proves that the use of Nepali in English classes feels learners secure, confident and satisfied; and feels teachers satisfied and easy in the delivery of the English lessons.

Notwithstanding the English only belief, *Kamala* also used NL to drive the clear concept of the FL text, motivate the learners, make the pace of learning fast, simplify the complex schema of FL, and develop critical thinking on the topic being taught. Nevertheless, the learners were producing incorrect utterances in English, performing at a low standard, relying on translation, and exhibiting hesitation in using English.

It is really interesting to find that all the informants used NL in one way or the other despite their diverse backgrounds like gender, age, experience and qualification. These observations reveal that NL use effectively clarifies complex concepts, feels security in language learning, and maximizes comprehension of the topic. On an opposite note, it inhibits FL fluency, competency, use, and usage. These imply that the learners should be encouraged to use FL even though NL can be used judiciously. Put it differently, NL can be used only as a last alternative.

However, an awkward result was observed that the informants were reluctant in using communicative techniques like group/pair work, classroom interaction, and motivating learners. These general conditions can mean that English teachers are not in perfect harmony with the modern trends of teaching that demand learner-centred teaching techniques (Richards & Rodgers, 2003). Thus, "NL use is facilitative of teaching in a learner-friendly environment that increases learners' intelligibility and enhances good rapport between teachers and students" (Neupane, Dawadi, & Poudel, 2021, pp. 49).

The teachers of varying age groups, qualifications, experiences, and genders were observed using NL. This finding justifies that EFL teachers prefer using learners' native language where and when necessary. This matches Atkinson's (1987), Auerbach's (1993), Schweer's (2003), Mattioli's (2004), Sah's (2017), and Joshi's (2018) studies that justify the shrewd use of the NL in the EFL classes for several reasons.

Conclusion and Implication

The observation of teachers' unwillingness to use communicative activities and classroom interactions prove that they are unaware of the recent teaching approaches like participatory and communicative approaches to language teaching. However, the informants were using their uses unwillingly. This observation indicates that the EFL teachers lack adequate confidence in using the learners' native language in the classrooms. It also implies that they are unaware of its relevance and appropriacy.

There may be numerous reasons for NL use in EFL classes, some of which observed in this study are of two types such as teacher-related and student-related. The former reasons are related to the teachers' inadequacy, whereas the latter is to the learners' inadequacy. The intermediate reasons exhibit the inappropriate resources and materials for learning.

The use of NL in the EFL context generally inhibits fluency and therefore hinders learners' developing pragmatic and discourse competence. Nevertheless, NL use creates a congenial atmosphere for the learners, boosts a strong rapport between the teachers and the learners, and develops learners' understanding. Thus, the learners' NL should be used sparingly in EFL classes. Since this study has limitations in the study area, informants, method, and scope, it calls for further intensive studies for generalizing the findings. Yet, the significance of this study is that it has opened up avenues for other studies on a large scale.

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