



Teachers' Multilingual Awareness in English Classrooms: Observed Practices

Resham Acharya

Central Department of English Education, University Campus, FOE, Tribhuvan University

Lok Raj Regmi¹

Department of English Education, Mahendra Ratna Campus, FOE, Tribhuvan University
regmilokraj20@gmail.com

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Abstract

The use of learners' language(s) in second/foreign language pedagogy has ever been a highly debated issue. On the one hand, the proponents of the direct method and audio-lingual method remained in the position to prohibit learners' home language(s) in SL/FL classrooms while scholars such as Cummins (2007) and Garcia (2008) have informed the supportive role of learners' languages in such contexts. Being informed by recent literature, this study was carried out to explore the practices of teachers' multilingual awareness, particularly focusing on the use of learners' languages in English classrooms. The findings of the study showed that Nepalese teachers of English are aware of multilingual practices in English classrooms. They were found to practice mother tongue translation, code-mixing or switching and paraphrasing as multilingual pedagogic activities. Considering the reasons for using learners' language(s) in English classrooms, the study indicated that children's languages help learners understand the concept, promote learners' participation in learning activities, and create spaces for minority children in terms of language.

1. INTRODUCTION

Having more than 123 languages spoken (CBS, 2012), Nepal portrays itself as a linguistically diverse country where English is taught and learnt as a foreign language. Regarding teaching of English, Nepal has undergone various transitions. Initially, being motivated by the grammar-translation (GT) method, English used to be taught by translating it into the Nepali language, the language of contact among people from diverse language backgrounds in the country. The GT method allowed heavy use of learners' familiar language (Nepali) in English classrooms, which seemed to allow multilingualism in English classrooms (though not in its true form incorporating all the linguistic minorities). Later, guided by the direct method and audiolingual method, pedagogic practices dominantly happened in English

¹ Corresponding author

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discouraging the use and practice of learners' home languages. These methods emphasized monolingual pedagogy in foreign language or second language pedagogy (Acharya, 2021) suggesting target language be the sole medium of communication and implying the prohibition of learners' home languages would maximize the effectiveness of learning the target language (Paker & Karaagac, 2015). The practice of these methods implies that English should be the language of communication and the sole medium of instruction in English classrooms to provide the learners with better opportunities to get the required input and to develop greater proficiency in English (Acharya, 2021). However, more recently, the works of literature have shown that educating children in the dominant language in EFL contexts is unjust. For example, taking the case of Nepal, studies such as Kandel (2013) and Acharya (2021) have shown that only the use of English in EFL classrooms has excluded linguistically minoritized children from their rights to education.

Advocating justice for linguistic minorities, the works of literature have stressed the use of learner's home language(s) in English classrooms. For example, Larsen-Freeman (2000) states, "The native language of the students is used in the classroom in order to enhance the security of the students, to provide a bridge from the familiar to the unfamiliar, and to make the meanings of the target language words clear" (pp. 101-102). Similarly, scholars such as Cummins (2007), Garcia (2008), Pillar (2016), Felm (2017) and Cenoz, Gorter and May (2017) have also shown more supportive roles of learners' home languages in learning a second language opposing the assumptions of direct and audiolingual methods that using learners' language hinders learning a second or foreign language(s). Learners' home languages are argued to be supportive of learning the dominant language [i.e. learning English in Nepal] (Garcia, 2008) with the belief that learners' first and second languages are interdependent in language learning (Cummins, 1979). These views infer "New understandings are constructed on a foundation of existing understandings and experiences" (Cummins, 2007, p.232). Similarly, using learners' language in dominant language classrooms recognizes a child's mother tongue, culture and context (Felm, 2017) and identifies learners' social, political and economic pressures (Garcia, 2008) that benefit the learners in learning English by helping them for conceptual development, encouraging their participation in learning and avoiding the feeling of isolation and discrimination (Acharya, 2021 & Wright, 2002). Similarly, UNESCO (2014) reports that the use of learners' home languages facilitates the learning of both academic subjects and a second language as the learners can have better opportunities to concentrate themselves on the subject matter at school instead of struggling to understand the language of instruction in English. Therefore, teachers in EFL classrooms are suggested to draw learners' attention to similarities and differences between their language and foreign language and

strengthen effective learning strategies in a harmonized way across languages especially by engaging prior understandings, integrating factual knowledge with the conceptual framework, and taking active control over the learning process through meta-cognitive strategies (Cummins, 2007).

Moreover, learners' languages in English classrooms provide a sense of security and validate their lived experiences encouraging them to express their understandings (Schweers, 1999) and take risks with English (Acharya, 2021) coping with problematic situations (Duff and Polio (1990). Using learners' languages in English classrooms is also reported to be beneficial for various purposes such as teachers explaining the grammar, giving instructions, helping students check themselves, and correcting activities (Cook, 2001; Greggio & Gill, 2007; Moghadam et al., 2012), building rapport and reducing social distance with students (Jingxia, 2009). Further, it is used to give the meaning of unknown vocabularies (Senel, 2010) which is found economical to provide a word's meaning directly (Thornbury, 1999) and arouse students' interest towards the lesson (Yildirim and Mersinligil, 2000).

The works of literature discussed above have shown two confronting arguments regarding the use of learners' languages in English classrooms. The study, for example, Paker and Karaagac (2015) has shown the complete ban of learners' languages in English classrooms with the claim that such languages play a role negatively. On the other hand, studies such as (Cummins, 1979, 2007), Schweers (1999), Cook (2001), Garcia (2008) and others have shown the positive roles of learners' language in second or foreign-language classrooms. EFL teachers in Nepal were also, either knowingly or unknowingly, found to use Nepali and other local languages in English classrooms. Hence, considering Garcia's (2008) theory of multilingual awareness, this study aimed to explore the practices of teachers' multilingual awareness highlighting how teachers use learners' home languages in English classrooms.

2. REVIEW OF STUDIES ON USING LEARNERS' LANGUAGE(S) IN ESL/EFL CLASSROOMS

Advocating for pedagogic shifts, recent literature has shown the positive roles of learners' home language(s) in second/foreign language learning. As our focus was to explore practices of teachers' multilingual awareness regarding the use of learners' home language(s) in English classrooms, here we present the review of some studies which have contributed to and advocated for the use of L1 in second/foreign language learning. For example, Sah (2018) carried out research to find out Nepalese EFL students' and teachers' beliefs regarding their use of L1 in EFL classrooms adopting mixed method inquiry. His study showed both students and teachers have positive attitudes towards using Nepali language in English classrooms. The

students wanted their teachers to use Nepali in English classrooms to help them understand complex concepts and to ease them in classroom interactions.

Observing teachers' perspectives and practices on the use of students' L1 in EFL classrooms in the Indonesian context, Sundari and Febriyanti's (2021) study showed that teachers preferred using their first language for activity objectives, translation, comprehension check and activity instruction to get maximal result from students' side. Similarly, Manandhar, Karim and Gnawali (2024) studied on ELT in mother-tongue-dominant schools in Nepal. One of their focuses was to explore the advantages of using L1 in English language classrooms from teachers' perspectives, especially in Nepal Bhasa (Newari language) dominant primary level school in Lalitpur. Their findings revealed that teachers apply their students' mother tongue(s) in English classrooms to reduce learners' dropouts due to not understanding everything discussed only in English. The teachers also viewed that learners' mother tongue(s) in English classrooms build a language learning foundation. Shimray and Wangdi (2023) investigated the beliefs of foreign English-speaking teachers in the Thai EFL context on the use of students' L1 in English classes. Their study showed that judicious use of students' L1 in English classrooms is useful for them despite the claims of the advocates of the direct method that the success of learning an L2 is determined by the maximum exposure to it. Their study, further, showed that using L1 in L2 classrooms can improve the outcome of vocabulary and grammar knowledge, deeper understanding of the lesson, and the relationship between teacher and students.

The studies reviewed above show the positive roles of using learners' home language(s) in EFL/ESL classrooms. However, these studies are perceptual in nature defocusing practice in the classrooms. So, to overcome this gap, the present study looked at the practical aspect, i.e. the pedagogic activities practised by the teachers in classrooms.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Informed by the belief that the use of learners' language in English classrooms offers better prospects of learning a second or foreign language, this study takes multilingual awareness as a theoretical foundation. Language awareness (LA) is "explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use" (Cenoz, et al, 2017, p. ix). LA is also known as knowledge about language (KAL) in teaching (Cots, 2008), critical language awareness (Fairclough, 1990), or multilingual language awareness (Garcia, 2008), is used to encompass understandings of language, its teaching and its learning (Wright, 2002) based on the roles described by Edge (1988). According to Edge, LA involves (a) knowledge of language (ability to use language appropriately in many situations), (b) knowledge about language (forms and functions of systems such as grammar, phonology, and vocabulary), and (c) pedagogical practice (creating

language learning opportunities and classroom interaction). Incorporating all three senses, this study takes LA as the knowledge of and about language for creating language learning opportunities.

This study, however, does not take language awareness as a “long-held normative ascendancy of monolingualism” (Cenoz, et al., 2017, p.vi) in relation to language use in teaching and learning; but as the one relevant to the essence of the present globalized context including the norms of multilingualism and diversity from the perspective of “multilingual turn” (May, 2014). Hence, this study makes use of multilingual awareness as a theory. Multilingual awareness is the understanding of the social, political and economic struggles surrounding the use of two or more languages (Garcia, 2008) in learning another dominant language (i.e. English in Nepalese classrooms). For Shohamy (2006), it is an understanding of how languages are used in undemocratic ways to exclude and discriminate minority languages. This study, typically, adopts teachers’ multilingual awareness in English classrooms. Here, we believe teachers’ multilingual awareness is their understanding of about diverse languages surrounding the school community and using those understandings in English classrooms to create better learning opportunities.

3. METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Believing that meaning is socially constructed by having interaction with participants, we adopted interpretive or constructive paradigms and qualitative research. Particularly, we used the phenomenological study to explain ‘being and consciousness’ based on the analysis of observable phenomena (Litchman, 2006) not being based on a priori knowledge independent from experience (Parodi, 2008 cited in Padilla-Diaz, 2015). It emphasizes the meanings and objects based on the conscience of phenomena highlighting elements related to human perception and the intentionality of consciousness. So, we attempted to search and identify subjective elements of consciousness focusing intention of understanding reality from a single point of view (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Further, as a method, we proposed to explore the lived experience of teachers on the phenomena. Thus, this study, as per the essence of phenomenological research design, has attempted to draw the lived experiences of subjects upon the use of learners’ languages in English classrooms.

Believing teachers teaching students from diverse language backgrounds could best provide their lived experiences on the practices of learners’ language in English classrooms, we made a pilot visit to find multilingual schools. Then, believing that private boarding schools do not allow using learners’ language in English classrooms, we chose five community schools using a judgmental sampling procedure and five English language teachers from these schools.

As we believed that basic-level students are more frequently taught using their familiar language(s), we purposively chose basic-level teachers.

To collect data for the study, we observed their classes and based on observation, we interviewed them. To gather the required information, we observed five classes of each teacher and interviewed them thrice. As per the nature of the study, we used a qualitative approach to data analysis in general including transcribing, editing, summarizing, organizing, categorizing, and deriving conclusions (Attride-Sterling, 2001). Particularly, we used a thematic approach to analyze the data collected from the sampled teachers.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study presents the practices of multilingual awareness of teachers in EFL classrooms. The practices of multilingual awareness of teachers have been thematically presented below.

Nepalese teachers being aware of multilingualism in EFL classroom

This section presents Nepalese teachers being aware of multilingualism. The following vignette presents how far teachers are aware of multilingualism (learners' languages in the classrooms).

T: Pasang Lhamu Sherpa... Pasang ke? [Pasang Lhamu Sherpa...Pashang What?]

Ss: Pasang Lhamu Sherpa [Pasang Lhamu Sherpa]

T: timiharulai pasang lhamu Sherpa ko baarema ke ke thaha chha? ... uni kaha janmeki hun re?... belayat ki America? [What do you know about Pasang Lhamu Sherpa...Where was she born?Britain or America]

Ss: thaha chhaina, sir... [We do not know Sir]

T: la aba padhne hai ta ... [okay ...Now, let's read]

When we observed another class with the same teacher, he showed his awareness of multilingualism as below;

Yesterday, we learned about Pasang Lhamu Sherpa. Pasang Lhamu Sherpa ko baarema haamile hijo kehi sikyau ki sikenau? Sikyau hai...Pasang Lahmu ko born year ...janma miti ...tespachhi haamile ke padhyou? Her father's name, her mother's name ...ani two mountains she climbed ...unle chadheko duita himaal ... [Yesterday, we discussed about Pasang Lhamu Sherpa...What did you learn about her? When was she born? What was her father's and mother's name? ...And what are the two mountains she climbed?]

The vignettes show that teacher was aware of multilingualism in the English classroom as he used, though not all other minority languages, Nepali language in the classroom. When

we asked him why he used the Nepali language in English classroom, he said that his students could easily understand him as he said; “*I find my students feel easy in understanding if I present the new concept ... so I feel it has helped them in acquiring knowledge*”. The teacher also said that he frequently uses Nepali language in English classrooms to help his students understand the concepts easily and quickly. The evidence shows his awareness to multilingualism in EFL classrooms, although it could not show the true sense of multilingual awareness as he only used Nepali language in English classrooms. For us, the true sense of multilingual awareness is as Felm (2017) and Garcia (2008) argue for recognizing each child’s mother tongue, culture and context to create opportunities for learning an L2.

Considering the case of another teacher, who was teaching at multilingually diverse school and English as medium of instruction (EMI) practicing school, she was found to use local languages like Newari, Magar, Lama and other for helping students understand the content as the following vignette shows;

Yes...today we read about adjectives...Do you know what is adjective? ... thaha chha adjective bhaneko ke bhanne? ... Listen, yo euta sabda ho jasle kunai manchhe athawa cheej esto ya usto bhanera gun tatha dos batauchha ... bujheu? ... [This an word that describes about people or things]

The data above show that the teacher, despite teaching at EMI practicing school, used the languages familiar to the students. However, as she belonged to Newar language community, she said she also used Newari language (one of the minority languages) in English classroom. As we observed her class, the students were also found to be using local languages to express the concept they knew, which seems to be similar to what Garcia (2008) calls multilingual awareness.

4.1.The model of multilingual awareness practiced

The model of multilingual awareness, for us, is the way based on which multilingual education is practiced and children’s languages are drawn in second language learning. Garcia (2008) presents three models of multilingual awareness, supposed to be practiced in the classrooms, on the basis of the kinds of teachers who impart diverse instructions requiring diverse degrees of MLA. The first is by actively drawing on children’s home languages, in which the teachers may lack proficiency, subject-matter knowledge and pedagogic knowledge but they need to have specialized knowledge about social, political and economic struggles of students’ languages. The second is through team-teaching in which one teacher teaches in one language and the other teaches in another language. In this case, individual teachers are monolingual but classroom instruction takes place in multiple languages. The third one is teachers using two or more languages in instruction and the teachers also have knowledge of two or more languages.

Observing the classes, we found the third model of multilingual awareness being practiced in English classrooms. Teachers were multilingual having knowledge of/about more than two languages. For example, T1, as he said, has knowledge about languages such as Nepali, English, Hindi, Sanskrit, and Bhote (i.e. Sherpa) and T4 said she has knowledge about Nepali, Newari, English, and Hindi. They were found to use all the languages they were familiar with in English classrooms, but most dominantly English and Nepali.

4.2. Multilingual pedagogic activities practiced in English classrooms

Pedagogic activities are the specific acts that the teachers and students make or do in the classrooms to support learners' learning. However, our purpose was to identify the activities that enhance multi-lingually aware practices. On the basis of teachers' practices, we found three activities being practised in the classrooms which are discussed as follows;

Translation. Translation has been an influential method throughout the history of language teaching to help students read and understand foreign language (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Generally, it is assumed that the learners can best learn a second/foreign language when foreign language is translated into the mother tongue and vice versa. Translation is perceived as a natural and necessary activity in the classroom as it shapes our way of thinking and supports learning a second language (Duff, 1996). It is generally considered to be a bilingual activity which includes the rendering of ideas from one language to another. Further, as translation makes use of learners' mother tongues in the classrooms, we believe that it supports multilingual language awareness in English classrooms.

In the present study, we observed that teachers supported their students learn English by translating the English language into local languages (most dominantly into Nepali). The cases we observed in their classrooms where they practiced mother tongue translation as presented as follows;

Yesterday we learned about Pasang Lhamu Sherpa ... hamile hiyo pasang lhamu sherpa ko barema sikyau hai ...

... two mountains she [Pasang Lhamu Sherpa] climbed ... unle chadheko duita himal

Which is the tallest mountain in Europe? ... Europe ko sabai bhanda aglo himal kun ho?...

Another case of practicing translation as a form of multilingualism in English classroom by another teacher was;

Do you know what is adjective ... adjective bhaneko ke ho timiharulai thaha chha ...

Adjective bhaneko bisheshan ...

It is a word that tells about characteristics of things ... esle kunai cheej ya manchhe haruko gun tatha dos ko barema batauchha...

The evidences above show that teachers frequently translate English into Nepali in English classrooms. The examples also show that teachers use this technique to support their learners learn English easily in a sense that they can transfer their knowledge of first language in learning second or foreign language. This situation could be taken as, how Brislin (1976) argues, the learners can transfer of thoughts and ideas from one language to another language. Hence, we argue that translation is one of the activities to support teachers' multilingual language awareness in classrooms.

Code switching or mixing. Besides the use of translation, the teachers were also frequently using English and Nepali simultaneously. It means the teachers were frequently

switching English into Nepali or frequently using a mixed variety between these two. Code switching is often defined as the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems (Romaine, 1989). In other words, it is a situation when the conversants use both languages together to the extent they change from one language to the other in the course of a single utterance (Wardhaugh, 2008). However, code-switching and mixing are differentiated. If the switches from one code to another are absolute, it is code switching and if the switch is in the middle of the sentence, it is mixing (Rai, 2005). Code-switching is, in fact, a bilingual activity and when it is used in the classroom for pedagogic purposes, of course, it encourages for multilingual education.

In the present study, we found code-switching/mixing was used as a pedagogic activity that supports multilingual use in the classrooms showing teachers' awareness of learners' languages in the classrooms. Our focus was to observe English classrooms and we found some code-switching events taking place in the classroom showing their multilingual awareness.

...He is mountaineer, kuro bujheu...

...ko chahi mountaineer re?...

...mero baabaale electric kaam garrnu hunchha ...

...Mount Everest himal kun deshma chha re?...

The examples above show that the teachers often use two or more languages simultaneously in the classrooms and at the same time they also allow their students to use mixed language, for example, the mixture of English and Nepali. We observed that teachers were not using such forms for fashion and nor as a result of their incompetency in English, but they were doing so as to help their students learn English. Therefore, it is inferred that the use of code-switching/mixing (between or across Nepali and English) in English classrooms was one another pedagogic activity that show teachers' awareness of learners' languages.

Paraphrasing. When we observed the classes of teachers, they were found to use the paraphrasing technique frequently as a pedagogic activity for helping the learners in English classrooms. Generally speaking, paraphrasing is a process of restating a text or rewording something written or spoken text to achieve greater clarity. For Danielsson (2007), a paraphrase expresses a statement, a phrase or a single word, in some other words. However, the paraphrases that took place in the observed classrooms were bilingual and the teachers were paraphrasing English words or sentences in Nepali so that learners could feel easy in learning English. In other words, teachers frequently explain English text in Nepali, which we have perceived as paraphrasing. However, frequency of using this activity in the classrooms varies among the teachers that T1 and T4 were more frequently using this activity than others were doing in the classrooms. Let's consider some cases of paraphrasing technique to be used in English classrooms.

Case 1

T: ...What is ostrich?...

Ss: [speechless]

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T: mmm ... ostrich euta chara ho ... tyo Africa ma painchha ... tara nepalma bhane paidaina ...jun udna sakdaina ... tara ufrera etauta garchha.

Aba bujheu ostrich bhanne k rahechha?

Ss: bujheu sir ... yo euta chara ho ...ani udna sakdaina ... ufrinchha...

T: ... la very good ... (Source: class observation of T1)

Case 2

T: Adjectives ... Do you know what is adjective?

Ss: No ...

T: la suna ... it is a describing word ... yo euta sabda ho jasle kunai bastu ya chij athawa manchhe ko barema gun tatha dosh ko barema bhanchha athawa yo esto u unto bhanera chinauchha ...(Source: class observation of T4)

The cases show that teachers use paraphrasing as technique to help learners in learning second or foreign language in bilingual contexts. We observed that teachers did not only explain the contents within the same language they were teaching in, but also they explained in learners' familiar languages while teaching second or foreign language. In this context, teachers were not only translating sentences or utterances singly from word to word, but they were rephrasing in different way (basically in Nepali), which we perceive as paraphrasing. The cases in the observation showed that teachers use paraphrasing (in learners' familiar languages) as a pedagogic activity in English classrooms.

4.3.Reasons for practicing multilingual activities in English classrooms

When we asked why teachers use multilingual activities in English classrooms, the participant teachers provided various reasons. For example, T5 shared her experience that she practiced multilingual activities in English classrooms so that learners could feel they are recognized in the classrooms, could participate in teaching and learning process so that they could enhance their learning in English classrooms. Her perception was;

... why to become so smart among the learners by only speaking English ... nor should I compel them use English only ... If I do so, neither they understand what I ask nor can they respond my questions ... They only look down ... So, I let them use Nepali and their familiar language(s) ... At least, they participate in learning activities ... and express clearly what they have known ... and put their arguments easily and clearly (Source: Interview with T5)

The data show that the dominant practice of English in the classroom does not provide the learners with a favourable environment so that they cannot openly participate in the teaching and learning process. The participant teacher shared if she allowed the students use their language they can openly and easily express and participate in teaching learning activities to enhance their learning. Similarly, T2 experienced if learners are described with their

language and allowed using them, they can easily understand the concept as she shared her experience;

... when the students feel difficult to understand the concepts such as culture-related concepts like 'Maha Puja' ... I describe them through Newari language to Newar children ... and ... through Nepali to Nepali-speaking children. (Source: Interview with T2)

The data show when students feel difficulty in understanding certain cultural concepts, they often describe in learners' language so that they can easily engage themselves in the learning process and understand the concepts. The teachers also opined when learners' languages are used in English classroom, they can overcome English only classrooms grabbing their spaces that they feel they are also there in the classrooms. For example, T3 shared;

When learners are allowed using their language, they openly express the things...and they feel that their voices are heard...so that they are psychologically motivated in learning...

The data show that using learners' language in the classroom is a psychological aspect that opens up learners to expressing their ideas or understanding. Further, multilingual practices also ensure students' rights to have an education.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore practices of teachers' multilingual awareness, especially focusing on the use of learners' languages in English classrooms. The use of learners' languages in English classrooms has been a highly confronting issue in the literature of second/foreign language pedagogy. The works of literature have shown that using learners' languages has been taken both as supportive and hindrance. This study particularly took the recent literature such as Garcia (2008), Cummins (2007), Felm (2017), and Cenoz, et al. (2017) that emphasize the positive role of learners' languages in the dominant language classroom (i.e. English in Nepalese context). The use of a dominant language could be "hegemonic" (Phillipson, 1992) as it deprives the learners of minority languages [all the languages other than English] from learning. However, Nepalese teachers of English are found to be practising multilingualism in English classrooms whatever the languages they are familiar with, they use and allow the students to use in English classrooms. Further, as multilingual pedagogic activities, the teachers are found to practice mother tongue translation, paraphrasing and code-mixing or switching. Teachers have also found that they practice multilingual activities in the classrooms to help them understand the content easily, participate in the teaching and learning process and to find their spaces in English only classrooms. Therefore, on the basis of the findings of the study, we would like to suggest English language teachers teaching in any non-English speaking context to use and let the learners use their languages to enhance their

learning and create their spaces in the dominant language so that they do not feel they are deprived of their right to education.

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