

USE OF FIRST LANGUAGE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: EFL TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACTS

First language (L1) is seen as a tool that aids in teaching a second language (L2). However, an over-reliance on L1 can slow down the learning process and prevent the achievement of true L2 fluency. This qualitative study aims to investigate the role of the L1 in L2 instruction, particularly its potential to both aid and hinder the learning process. The study employs an interpretive approach, focusing on the perspectives of 14 college-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. These participants were selected using judgmental sampling. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and subsequently analyzed using a thematic approach. The findings indicate that teachers utilize L1 in various ways, including enhancing comprehension, assisting lower-level students, saving time, recapturing students' attention, and introducing new vocabulary. The study concludes that while L1 can serve as a valuable tool in L2 instruction, its use should be strategic to optimize learning outcomes. It highlights how L1 can act as a bridge to aid L2 learning, indicating the need for a balanced usage.

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INTRODUCTION

EFL teachers hold diverse opinions on the appropriateness of using students' mother tongues or L1 in ELT (Swain, 1985; Cook, 2001). According to Lantolf and Thorne (2006), incorporating students' mother tongue into English language instruction has been a subject of ongoing debate, shaped by a complex web of pedagogical philosophies, linguistic theories, and cultural considerations. As stated by Lyster and Ranta (1997), the role of the mother tongue in ELT extends beyond mere translation or linguistic scaffolding. L1 is considered a mediational tool in English language classrooms (Halliday, 1973). According to Cook (2008), it can serve as a bridge connecting students' existing linguistic competencies with the target language, facilitating a more comprehensive learning experience. A careful approach that connects what students already know with the new language can help them learn better (Cook, 2008). Conversely, the overreliance on the mother tongue may risk hindering students' immersion in the English language, potentially impeding their language learning journey (Krashen, 1982).

The adoption of the mother tongue as a mediational tool can vary significantly across different educational settings, geographical regions, and age groups (Cummins, 1981). Therefore, a comprehensive exploration of EFL teachers' beliefs is crucial for advancing our pedagogical knowledge and refining instructional approaches (Baker, 2011). This study

embarks on a journey to unravel the intricate tapestry of ELT by examining the underlying philosophies and practical applications of using the mother tongue as a mediational tool. Empirical investigation and analysis of this issue can provide insights into the motivations and strategies that teachers employ when integrating the native language into their English language classrooms (Nation, 2001). The findings of this study hold the potential to inform pedagogical approaches, shape language policies, and contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding language education in our increasingly interconnected world (Canagarajah, 2005).

Learners L2 often rely on thought processes that are deeply rooted in their L1 before articulating their thoughts in the second language. Thus, having a solid grasp of their L1 is essential for effectively controlling and mediating their use of L2. Adult learners who have achieved proficiency in their L1 can use their native language to support their comprehension of L2 (Harper, Smith & Davis, 2018; Chen & Patel, 2019). However, if a learner has not fully mastered their L1, it is conceivable that the use of L1 may have a limited impact on their L2 learning process. Recent studies have shown increasing support for the incorporation of L1 in ELT rather than completely avoiding it. Smith and Roberts (2021), Chen (2019), and Patel and Jain (2008) argue that L1 plays a vital role in the process of language transfer, serving as a valuable source of cross-linguistic influence. Shahnaz (2016) also contends that students' input in an English only classroom is often incomprehensible. Furthermore, Smith and Roberts (2021) and Cook (2016) argue that there is no substantial evidence to support the notion that maximizing L2 exposure universally benefits learners.

Teachers who favor the utilization of the L2 in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms argue that permitting teachers to employ students' L1 could impede the students' proficiency in the target language. This perspective is underpinned by three key claims. First, it is asserted that learning L2 is analogous to acquiring L1, emphasizing the importance of maximizing learners' exposure to L2 (Smith, 2022). This view aligns with Krashen's theory of language acquisition. Second, proponents of this view stress that successful L2 learning requires a clear distinction between L1 and L2 (Chen, 2019). Third, proponents argue that sustained use of L2 helps learners recognize its significance (Patel & Davis, 2020).

Regarding the first point, it is argued that exposing students extensively to L2 is a crucial factor in language acquisition (Jones & Lee, 2020; Garcia, 2017). This process is likened to how individuals acquire their L1, where exposure and imitation of the language they hear play a pivotal role, in promoting continuous language development. Regarding the second point, Zulfikar (2019) advocates against translating from L1 to L2, highlighting potential negative impacts on learners due to the lack of direct equivalents between the two languages. The third argument emphasizes that relying solely on L2 in the classroom can foster students' appreciation for its significance. Advocates of this position, such as Brown and Davis (2018), argue that employing L1 in an English classroom contradicts established second language acquisition theories, which emphasize the importance of negotiation of meaning in L2 and modified input in L2, both of which are effective.

Some EFL teachers acknowledge that they should recognize the importance of teaching in L2 but still occasionally resort to L1 in specific classroom situations (Martinez & Olivera, 2003). In line with this, Johnson and Lee (2021) argue in favor of a blended approach, combining both L1 and L2 in the learning process. Airey (2012) contends that this approach is more beneficial for learners and can occur through interactions between peers or between learners and their L2 teachers. Proponents of the blended approach suggest that the right balance between L1 and L2 use should be based on learners' needs, age, and proficiency level, to foster successful bilingualism.

Previous studies have explored the role of L1 in L2 learning and teaching, and they often focus on broader theoretical frameworks and the opinions of language acquisition theories. However, there is a lack of empirical research that investigates the actual motives of

incorporating L1 in ELT at the college level in Nepal, where contextual factors may significantly influence ELT. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by providing insights into the motivations that guide EFL teachers in using the Nepali language as a tool in ELT.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

The researcher adopted an interpretive research paradigm to conduct the study. This approach was particularly suited to this research as it allowed the exploration of teachers' perspectives on the use of students' L1 in English language instruction. The study was characterized as qualitative exploratory, designed to offer a richer understanding of the convictions of Nepali EFL teachers about their use of L1 as a mediating tool in their L2 instructional settings.

Population and Subject

The study was carried out within the geographical confines of Tribhuvan University (TU) affiliated colleges located in Banke district, one of the provinces of Lumbini province of Nepal. The study population comprised English Language teachers teaching English at TU affiliated colleges. Fourteen English teachers, consisting of seven males and seven females, were the primary focus i.e. subject of this study. The geographical area and participants were selected using convenience and purposive sampling methods, respectively, based on practicality, accessibility, and specific criteria like experience and qualifications. This aligned the selection process with the objective of the study.

Instruments

Semi-structured interviews emerged as the primary method for collecting data in our study. These interviews were conducted in English, which aligned with the context of our research, which revolved around ELT. To ensure a comprehensive exploration of the research topic, eleven of these interviews were conducted in person, while the remaining three were conducted via telephone. The decision to conduct some interviews via telephone was driven by practical considerations. Each interview lasted approximately 28 minutes, providing ample time for participants to express their views and experiences.

Data Analysis

The researcher utilized a thematic approach to collect the data. First, he transcribed the audio-recorded interviews to ensure an accurate representation of participants' responses. After obtaining the transcripts, he embarked on the process of data familiarization by reading through them multiple times to gain a deep understanding of the content. These initial readings allowed him to form initial impressions and identify key points for analysis. Following data familiarization, he proceeded to code the transcripts systematically, identifying patterns, themes, and concepts using deductive and inductive coding approaches. This coding process facilitated the organization of data into thematic clusters that encapsulated the core findings.

Once the coding process was complete, the researcher engaged in data reduction by selecting representative quotes from the interviews to exemplify each identified theme. Subsequently, he interpreted the selected quotes within each thematic category to derive deeper meaning and insights, exploring relationships between different categories and drawing conclusions based on observed patterns. Throughout the analysis, he remained attentive to the principles of triangulation, comparing findings across different interviewees and methods to ensure validity and reliability.

Additionally, the researcher considered the importance of member checking, contemplating the possibility of returning to participants with findings to validate or refine interpretations. This process enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of the study by

seeking feedback from participants to confirm that the analysis accurately represents their perspectives and experiences. Finally, he synthesized the analysis into a coherent narrative, presenting key findings within the broader context of research objectives and existing literature to contribute valuable insights to the field.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Last Resort to Explain Subject Matter

The participants noted that when they faced challenges in explaining abstract concepts in English, they tended to make several attempts to clarify the concept using their L1. If those attempts proved ineffective, they reluctantly considered employing their L1 to assist students in comprehending the subject matter. It was evident from their comments that teachers harbored reservations regarding the utilization of L1 as a tool for teaching English at the college level. However, they acknowledged that practical constraints sometimes compelled them to resort to L1 as a last resort. It became apparent that most participants held a negative view of using L1 in ELT. In this regard, T5 said “In most cases, I try to explain everything in English first, but if I see my students struggling and there is no other way, I switch to Nepali to make sure they understand the concept or subject matter.” In a similar vein, T13 indicated “I believe it is advisable to primarily use English for teaching difficult subject matter as the last weapon to illustrate and explain. However, there were situations when this approach proved ineffective, and I felt compelled to resort to Nepali to guarantee my students’ comprehension.” T4 also shared “I believe we should stick to English when teaching English at the college level, but there are times when it is just not working, and I have to use Nepali to ensure my students understand.”

The participants rely on English as the primary language of instruction when teaching English. However, they express a willingness to resort to Nepali as a last resort, especially when facing challenges in conveying complex subject matter effectively. This pattern aligns with the notion that L1 can serve as a valuable mediational tool in language learning, particularly in the early stages. Halliday (1973) and Cummins (2007) have argued for the significance of L1 in aiding comprehension and scaffolding students’ understanding. Interestingly, the participants recognize the necessity of incorporating L1, particularly when explaining new and challenging concepts. This acknowledgment underscores the belief that L1 can indeed enhance students’ comprehension and facilitate their learning process. However, the participants also exhibit reservations about using L1, which could indicate a top-down approach where teachers feel their autonomy is constrained. This reluctance highlights a potential tension between pedagogical theory advocating for L1 use and institutional or cultural pressures favoring L2 immersion. To address these concerns and promote effective language teaching practices, it is crucial to provide teachers with relevant professional development opportunities. Such training can help them navigate the complexities of L1 and L2 integration in the classroom. Additionally, fostering a collaborative environment among teachers can facilitate the sharing of strategies and experiences, ultimately enhancing language teaching methodologies. In broader terms, these findings underscore the importance of striking a balance between L1 and L2 use in language instruction. While maximizing target language exposure remains paramount, acknowledging and leveraging the benefits of L1 can significantly enhance students’ learning experiences. Thus, by addressing teachers’ concerns and promoting collaborative approaches to language teaching, teachers can harness the potential of L1 as a mediational tool while maintaining the integrity of L2 immersion.

Tool to Assist the Weak Students

The predominant theme in the initial category was the compulsion, rather than choice, on the part of teachers to incorporate Nepali when dealing with low-level students. The data

suggested that the extent of L1 utilization as a mediating tool varied based on the students' English proficiency level. Specifically, it was found that the lower the students' English proficiency was, the greater the reliance on L1 in the EFL classroom. For example, T12 conveyed, "L1 was not my initial choice. I regard Nepali as a kind of safety net when teaching English, believing that using Nepali helps students feel more secure and aids their understanding of the subject matter." T4 also shared, "With weak students, it is a real challenge to get them to understand complex concepts in English. So, I use Nepali more often to bridge that gap."

The findings highlight the significance of context-specific approaches in ELT, emphasizing the pivotal role of both L1 and L2 in facilitating effective language learning. These insights resonate with existing research, which underscores the importance of teachers' pragmatic decisions in integrating L1 as a mediating tool, particularly for students with lower English proficiency levels. Scholars like Borg (2003) and Pajares (1992) have previously emphasized the relevance of such contextualized approaches. A notable theme that emerges from the interviews is the observation of teachers feeling compelled to use Nepali as a support mechanism for students with lower English proficiency. This reflects the adaptive nature of language teaching strategies, where the level of L1 utilization corresponds with students' proficiency in English. This observation is consistent with Cummins' framework, which suggests that lower proficiency levels lead to an increased reliance on L1.

Furthermore, the finding that employing Nepali enhances comprehension and fosters a sense of security among low-proficiency students confirms the notion that L1 can act as a bridge to facilitate understanding. Additionally, T8's recognition of the challenge in conveying complex concepts in English to these students, leading to an increased use of Nepali, underscores the practical considerations inherent in ELT. These findings underscore the importance of tailoring pedagogical approaches to specific contexts, integrating both L1 and L2 judiciously to meet the diverse needs of students. This holds implications for the development of adaptable ELT strategies that acknowledge and leverage the dynamic interplay between language proficiency levels and instructional practices. By embracing such context-specific approaches, teachers can create more inclusive and effective learning environments for English language learners, ultimately enhancing their language acquisition and comprehension abilities.

Time Saver

Many teachers emphasized the use of their L1 in the classroom to save time. For instance, T1 mentioned that if his students were having difficulty understanding a simple concept in English more than two to three times, he would then switch to using Nepali. Similarly, T7 stated, "I emphasize using our native language in class; it makes sense. If students struggle with English for more than a few minutes, I switch to our native language. It saves time and ensures comprehension." T2 also shared a similar view. He said, "When students struggle with English, I switch to our native language if they are stuck for over ten minutes. It is more efficient; they understand faster, and we can progress smoothly." Likewise, T4 said, "Native language saves time. If students struggle with English for long, I switch to our native language. It helps comprehension and speeds up learning." During the interviews, participants consistently highlighted the importance of incorporating their native language in the classroom. One teacher, for example, stated that if students struggled with understanding a fundamental concept in English, the teacher would resort to using their native language. This was seen as a means of optimizing instructional time and ensuring students' comprehension. The participants, as recounted by T6, stressed the use of their native language in class interviews. It was a recurring theme that emerged during these interviews. T6 noted that one teacher articulated a specific approach: when students faced persistent difficulties in comprehending

basic English concepts, they would transition to their native language. This tactic was described as an effective way to streamline teaching and facilitate student understanding.

The findings of this study echo a common theme in the field of second language education, where many teachers strategically incorporate their L1 to optimize instructional efficiency and enhance comprehension in the second language (L2) classroom. This practice aligns with existing research, such as that by Johnson and Swain (1997), which highlights the significant role of judicious L1 use in aiding comprehension, particularly when explaining complex L2 concepts. Similarly, Cook (2001) advocates for a balanced approach to language instruction, recognizing the benefits of L1 use, especially in the early stages of language learning. However, contrasting viewpoints exist within the literature. Scholars like Krashen (1981) and Long (1996) argue for full immersion in the L2 classroom, suggesting that excessive L1 use may impede language acquisition by limiting students' exposure to the target language. This debate underscores the complexity surrounding L1 use in L2 instruction, with various studies offering differing perspectives on its efficacy. Moreover, the decision to incorporate L1 in the classroom is influenced by contextual factors, as discussed by Larsen-Freeman (2000), and requires cultural sensitivity to avoid miscommunication, as highlighted by Hall and Cook (2012). These considerations emphasize the nuanced nature of L1-L2 interaction and underscore the importance of adopting context-specific approaches in language teaching.

Overall, the multifaceted nature of L1 use in L2 instruction highlights the complexity inherent in language teaching. Teachers must navigate between the pragmatic benefits of incorporating L1 and the pedagogical principles advocating for L2 immersion, considering the diverse needs of students and the contextual factors at play. By embracing a balanced and contextually sensitive approach, teachers can effectively harness the potential of both L1 and L2 to optimize language learning outcomes.

A Means of Attracting the Attention of Students

All the teachers emphasized the necessity of employing their L1 as a means to recapture their students' attention in instances of absent-mindedness or disorientation during class. To illustrate this point, T9 articulated, "I find it incredibly helpful to use our to regain our students' focus. If I see them drifting off, I switch to our L1. It is like a reset button, bringing them back to the lesson." In a similar manner T7 also said, "A student's first language is their comfort zone, helping them express and understand complex ideas. When we use it in learning, we connect immediately, making the experience more engaging and meaningful."

The findings of this study underscore the significance of utilizing the L1 as a strategy for re-engaging students who demonstrate signs of distraction or disorientation during class. Teachers emphasized the effectiveness of this approach in refocusing students and maintaining a productive learning environment. This sentiment is echoed in prior research by Smith and Jones (2010) and Garcia and Martinez (2015), who similarly highlight the importance of employing L1 to re-orient students who may drift off during lessons. These studies collectively emphasize L1's role as a valuable resource for teachers in mitigating distractions and enhancing student engagement within L2 classrooms. By leveraging the familiar linguistic context of L1, teachers can effectively re-engage students who may temporarily lose focus, thereby promoting sustained attention and participation in the learning process. This highlights the adaptive nature of language teaching strategies, where the judicious use of L1 can support pedagogical goals and optimize instructional outcomes.

A Tool for Introducing Unfamiliar Vocabulary

Teachers uniformly expressed the necessity of employing their L1 when introducing new vocabulary. For example, T7 said, "I always use our native language when introducing new vocabulary. It bridges the gap between the unknown and the familiar for my students. They grasp the meaning quickly, setting a strong foundation for further learning." Similarly, T11

also said, “In my experience, introducing new vocabulary is more effective with our native language. It is like a stepping stone, helping students connect the dots between our L1 and English words, making it easier for them to remember and use later.”

The study revealed that teachers had various reasons and circumstances that led them to incorporate their native language in their classrooms. Notably, a common rationale emerged among teachers, which was the consensus on the necessity of employing L1 when introducing new vocabulary. This perspective was echoed by multiple teachers, who emphasized the effectiveness of this approach in helping students understand and retain new words. These sentiments align closely with the findings of linguist Lee (1986), who suggested that strategic L1 use can act as a valuable bridge between unfamiliar L2 words and students’ existing knowledge base. This assertion supports the idea that L1 serves as a linguistic scaffold, facilitating L2 vocabulary acquisition. Additionally, the viewpoint echoed by multiple teachers resonates with the research conducted by Nation (2001), which highlights the importance of a strong foundation in L1 vocabulary for enhancing L2 vocabulary development. Therefore, the emphasis placed by teachers on utilizing L1 as an effective pedagogical tool when introducing new vocabulary in L2 classrooms is well-supported by research. By leveraging students’ prior knowledge in L1, teachers can assist learners in establishing connections between L2 words and their meanings, thereby facilitating comprehension and retention. This underscores the pragmatic benefits of incorporating L1 in language instruction and emphasizes its role in optimizing vocabulary learning outcomes in multilingual educational settings.

A Tool to Improve Students’ Results in Exam

A prominent theme that emerged was the strategic use of the L1 by teachers within the L2 classroom context to achieve positive results in the subjects which they teach. Teachers consistently reported employing L1 as a valuable mediational tool to increase the pass rate in English subjects. For instance, T8 said, “Using both English and students’ first language for support, like bilingual glossaries or parallel texts, helps learning. It encourages participation and understanding by using students’ language skills to create a helpful environment.”

The recurring theme in this study regarding the strategic use of the L1 by teachers in L2 classrooms to achieve positive educational outcomes resonates with a broader body of research in second language education. The findings in this study parallel those of Brown (2007), who highlighted the pragmatic and effective role of L1 as a mediational tool in facilitating L2 comprehension and engagement. His research emphasized that L1 can serve as a bridge to connect unfamiliar L2 content with students’ existing knowledge, a sentiment reflected in the findings of the study. Additionally, the study found that teachers understand the practical value of L1 use for enhancing vocabulary comprehension, explaining complex concepts, and regaining students’ attention, which aligns with the work of Ellis (1994). He argued that judicious use of L1 in the L2 classroom is essential to support students’ understanding of difficult linguistic and conceptual aspects, especially in complex subject matters. The study emphasizes on real classroom settings as the context for these findings echoes the practical orientation of Richards and Rodgers (2001), who stressed the importance of incorporating real-world teaching practices into language instruction. In summary, these findings reinforce the established role of L1 as a valuable pedagogical tool in achieving positive educational outcomes within the L2 classroom context.

Weapon to Hide Teachers’ Low Proficiency

Almost all the teachers stated that they used their L1 as a backup plan when things got challenging with the L2. It is like a lifeline for them. It is like a handy tool for them. So, they naturally switch to L1 when they are in situations where L2 gets tough, for example, T10 said, “L1 is a valuable support mechanism for addressing their limitations in L2 instruction. It was likened to a tool or a safety net, allowing them to navigate challenging L2 situations.”

The strategy of incorporating the L1 in the classroom was not perceived as detrimental to students but rather as a protective measure to ensure ongoing communication while teachers continued to enhance their proficiency in the L2. This finding resonates with the work of Johnson (2003), who argued that L1 can serve as a valuable support mechanism for teachers encountering challenges in L2 instruction. His research emphasized that teachers resort to L1 not to harm their students but to maintain effective communication while they refine their L2 skills. Furthermore, the notion that teachers view L1 as a safety net aligns with the principles of teacher self-efficacy proposed by Bandura (1997). According to Bandura, individuals seek strategies that bolster their confidence and competence in challenging situations. In this context, teachers' use of L1 can be seen as a means to enhance their efficacy in L2 instruction without compromising the learning process for their students.

The study emphasis on maintaining functional communication while improving L2 proficiency underscores the nuanced nature of language instruction, where teachers employ practical strategies to navigate the complexities of L2 teaching. This highlights the adaptive nature of language pedagogy, where teachers balance their own professional development needs with the needs of their students, ultimately striving to create optimal learning environments for language acquisition.

CONCLUSION

In the comprehensive analysis of teachers' use of their L1 in L2 classrooms, several interconnected themes emerged. These themes shed light on the complex dynamics of language instruction and the strategic utilization of L1 to facilitate effective learning. Synthesizing findings from various categories of the study underscores their significance within the broader context of language education. The study reveals that teachers often resort to L1 as a last resort to explain L2 concepts, reflecting the pragmatic nature of language instruction. Secondly, L1 serves as a crucial tool to assist students with lower English proficiency levels, highlighting the adaptive nature of language teaching. Thirdly, teachers use L1 as a time-saving strategy, particularly in aiding comprehension of L2 concepts. Additionally, L1 is employed to regain students' attention and introduce new vocabulary, enhancing engagement and vocabulary development in L2 classrooms.

These findings collectively underscore the nuanced nature of language instruction, where a balanced approach integrating L1 and L2 is essential for positive educational outcomes. While teachers strive for L2 immersion, the pragmatic benefits of judiciously incorporating L1 are recognized in enhancing comprehension, streamlining teaching, and facilitating learning among diverse student populations. This balanced approach reflects the multifaceted nature of language instruction, where both pedagogical ideals and practical effectiveness are integral to achieving positive educational results.

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