Teaching Beyond Tradition: Building Teacher Agency in Multilingual EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

This paper focuses on teacher agency for multilingual pedagogy. Drawing on the lived experiences of two community school teachers, we discuss how teachers, going beyond tradition, build teacher agency in multilingual EFL classrooms to address the needs of the students and the necessity of the classroom environment. The findings of the study reveal that teachers uniquely negotiate with the English-only policy, integrating multilingual realities of the classroom. By using learners' home language in classrooms, the teachers address various classroom challenges such as incomprehensibility of content in English-only classes, students' feeling of exclusion, and so on, and ensure the right of the students to education. The findings also reveal that teachers practice various multilingual activities (such as code switching, translation, and so on) in English classrooms. The findings further show that teachers practice such activities by utilizing their own personal and professional biographies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Having more than 123 languages spoken (CBS, 2012), Nepal presents itself as a linguistically diverse country where English is taught and learnt as a foreign language. In the context of Nepal, the teaching of English has undergone various traditions and transitions. Initially, English instruction in Nepal was influenced by the Grammar-Translation (GT) method, which emphasized translating English into Nepali, the contact language among linguistically diverse people in the country. This method allowed substantial use of Nepali in English classrooms, seemingly fostering multilingualism. However, this practice primarily incorporated Nepali, neglecting other minority languages and not fully embracing the nation's linguistic diversity. Subsequently, the adoption of the Direct Method and Audiolingual Method in language instruction led to a dominant use of English in classrooms, discouraging the incorporation of students' native languages. These methods emphasized monolingual pedagogy in foreign or second language instruction (Acharya, 2021), advocating for the exclusive use of the target

language as the medium of instruction. This perspective suggested that prohibiting the use of learners' home languages would maximize the effectiveness of acquiring the target language (Paker & Karaagac, 2015). Practice of these methods implies that English should be the language of communication and the sole medium of instruction in English classrooms for providing the learners with better opportunities to get required input and to develop greater proficiency in English (Acharya, 2021). However, more recently, some works of literature have shown that educating children in the dominant language in EFL contexts is unjust (Pillar, 2016). For example, taking the case of Nepal, the studies such as Kandel (2013), Acharya (2021), and Acharya and Regmi (2025) have shown that only use of English in EFL classrooms has excluded linguistically minoritized children from their rights to education.

Advocating justice for linguistic minorities, some other works of literature have stressed the use of learners' 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), García (2008), Pillar (2016), Felm (2017), and Cenoz, Gorter, and May (2017) have highlighted the positive role of learners' home languages in second or foreign language acquisition challenging the assumptions of the Direct and Audiolingual methods. 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 recognize a child's mother tongue, culture and context (Felm, 2017) and identify 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, quoting UNESCO (2014) reports, Acharya and Regmi (2025) argue that using learners' home languages in second or foreign language pedagogy enhances their ability to grasp academic content and acquire a second language as they can concentrate themselves on the subject matter rather than struggling to comprehend English. Therefore, Cummins (2007) suggests EFL teachers 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 conceptual framework, and taking active control over the learning process through meta-cognitive strategies.

The discussion above has shown two confronting arguments regarding teaching English in EFL/ESL contexts. On the one hand, advocates of the Direct and Audiolingual methods deny multilingual practice in English classrooms while Cummins (1979, 2007), Garcia (2008), Acharya (2021) and Acharya and Regmi (2025) advocate for multilingualism and argue that learners' languages in second or foreign language learning is not a hindrance but a foundation. However, our focus in this study was how teachers enact with ecology of classrooms addressing learners' needs, ensuring multilingualism and going beyond tradition in English classrooms despite recommendation and imposition of some scholars, theorists, curriculum designers and other policy makers to practice monolingualism denying the use of learners' home languages in English classrooms. To be specific, this study investigated the following research question;

- How do English teachers build their agency in multilingual EFL classrooms in Nepalese community schools?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ON TEACHER AGENCY

Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act through their environment rather than merely within it. It emerges from the dynamic interplay between individual efforts, the resources available to them, and the contextual and structural conditions present in a given situation (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Because a critical perspective takes teachers as agents who set their goals, actions, and destiny by examining relationships between self and the environment, we discuss what teacher agency is.

Teacher agency is a dynamic construct in which teachers play active roles to counter imposed policy by engaging available resources, institutional norms, and policies (Lasky, 2005). Teachers can take deliberate and constructive action (Calvert, 2016), which is shaped by their professional beliefs, knowledge, and goals tied to situated contexts (Weng et al., 2019). Similarly, Kayi-Aydar (2019) takes language teacher agency as "a language teacher's intentional authority to make choices and act accordingly in his or her local context" (p. 15). According to Etelapelto et al. (2013), teacher agency is mutually constituted between teachers and sociocultural conditions, which constrain or enable their agency, such as material circumstances, physical artifacts, power relations, and school cultures. Teacher agency is not something that individuals possess, but something that emerges through teachers' engagement with the environment. In fact, it emerges from the interplay of agentic capacity (individual factors such as commitment, value, role, belief, power) and agentic spaces (contextual factors such as societal change, role expectation, social network) (Biesta et al. 2015). In this sense, teachers as agents need to be seen as whole persons with their life experiences, emotions,

commitments, and concerns of their well-being and missions, identities, and role obligations in education (Sang, 2020), for example, for school improvement, curriculum development, and classroom teaching and learning. Teachers are, therefore, believed to be the agents of change, enacting with the environment against imposed language-in-education policy and prescribed methodologies of pedagogy.

3. REVIEW OF TEACHER AGENCY IN MULTILINGUAL CONTEXTS

Advocating for pedagogic shifts, recent literature has shown positive roles of learners' home language(s) in second/foreign language learning. As our focus was to explore teacher agency in multilingual EFL 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 and have encouraged teachers to build their agency in multilingual EFL classrooms addressing necessity of the environment and needs of the students. Highlighting the importance of using learners' home languages in English classrooms, Sah's (2018) study showed both students and teachers have positive attitudes towards using the Nepali language in English classrooms. The study also revealed that the students want their teachers to use Nepali in English classrooms to help them understand complex concepts and to ease them into classroom interactions.

Concerning how English teachers build agency in multilingual classrooms, Weng and Ataei's (2022) study reveals that the teacher, despite having limited knowledge of his students' L1, agentively encouraged his students to use their full linguistic repertoires for learning in class and utilized students' cultural funds of knowledge to facilitate classroom interactions, students' understanding of concepts, and their process of writing. Similarly, focusing on teacher agency in creating a translingual space in multilingual EMI schools, Phyak, Sah, Ghimire, and Lama (2022) explored how teachers can resist a monolingual ideology of an English as a medium of instruction policy to ensure students' participation in classroom activities. Their findings reveal that teachers create a translanguaging space to counter the official English-only monolingual ideology and draw on students' home languages to address their learning needs and their own pedagogic challenges. The teachers were found to demonstrate a transformative agency to create a multilingual classroom space where students feel safe to use their existing language abilities and epistemologies in the learning process. Through this study, they recommend that policymakers build on teachers' multilingual agency and their critical ideological awareness to develop pedagogical approaches that recognize students' diverse linguistic identities and learning needs.

Ghimire, Pandeya, and Gurung's (2024) study also showed that teachers in EMI implementing schools exercise their agency by employing translanguaging practices using bilingual textbooks and integrating students' mother tongues. Their findings further showed

that these strategies help teachers navigate linguistic challenges, making EMI classrooms more inclusive and supportive for multilingual students. Similarly, investigating pre-service teachers' agency to enact multilingual pedagogies in the European education system, Iversen (2024) reported that the pre-service teachers believe they need to be prepared in such a way that they can practice alternative approaches to multilingualism, addressing multilingual learners in schools despite being restricted by monolingual language policies.

Depicting the Pakistani context, Manan's (2020) study reveals that teachers (as actors) creatively negotiate institutional/organizational policies, creating substantive ideological and implementational spaces for multiple languages/cultures. His study also showed that teachers' agency can effectively dismantle linguistic discrimination and undo the English-centric monolingualism, developing potentiality to transform normative perspectives about English and native/indigenous languages. Similarly, focusing on the context of Chinese universities, Zhang, Chen, and Deng (2024) carried out a study to explore the impact of teacher education, academic titles, work experience, and agency on continuous professional development (CPD). Their study revealed that the higher levels of teacher agency correlate with higher levels of CPD. The study also revealed that teacher agency has a significant and positive influence on teachers' activities in terms of updating knowledge, reflection, and collaboration in the context of continuing development.

The studies reviewed above show positive roles of using learners' home language(s) in EFL/ESL classrooms, and teachers are suggested to play agentive roles challenging 'monoglossic' (Garcia & Sylvan, 2011) policy in education and ensuring the needs of the students and the necessity of the classroom contexts. Therefore, this study, going beyond the tradition, aimed to explore teacher agency in multilingual EFL classrooms.

4. METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Believing that meaning is socially constructed through interaction with participants, we adopted an interpretive or constructive paradigm and qualitative research. Particularly, we used a phenomenological study to explain 'being and consciousness' on the basis of 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 consciousness 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 on the 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 phenomenon. Thus, this study, as per the essence of

phenomenological research design, has attempted to draw the lived experiences of subjects on how teachers build their agency in multilingual EFL classrooms.

Believing that 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 to be used in English classrooms, we chose two community schools using a judgmental sampling procedure and two English language teachers from there. 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 on the basis of the observation, we interviewed them. To gather the required information, we observed ten 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 analyse the data collected from the sampled teachers.

4.1. Context of the Study

As per the purpose of this study, we purposively selected multilingual schools where the students are from diverse language backgrounds. One of the schools was Mahendra Saraswati Sewa Adharbhut Vidyalaya, which is located at Teku, Kathmandu. The school was not an EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction) practicing school, so Nepali was the language of instruction. There were altogether eighteen students in the observed class. Mostly, the children were from immigrant and working-class families. Some students were from India and were native speakers of Bangali, Hindi, and Urdu. Some others were from Terai, the Southern part of Nepal, who were the native speakers of Maithili and Bhojpuri. Similarly, there were students from Magar, Tamang, and Newar speaking communities. Moreover, some students were native speakers of Nepali. The teacher was also a multilingual user as he said he could understand and fluently use the languages such as Nepali, Hindi, English, Sanskrit, and Lama.

Another school was Kirtipur Secondary School, which is located at Kirtipur, the Southern part of Kathmandu. The school was an English as a medium of instruction (EMI) practicing school. There were altogether fifteen students in the observed class. The class represented a linguistically diverse context where the students were from different language backgrounds, such as Newari, Tamang, Lama, Nepali, and Magar. However, the students could understand and use the Nepali language more fluently than their own home language, except for two Lama children (who were also dressed in a Lama gown). According to the teacher, she

could excellently use her home language, Nepal Bhasha (Newari language), and also Nepali, English, and Hindi.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As the focus of study was to explore how teachers, going beyond the tradition, build their agency in multilingual classroom contexts, we, here, discuss how they did so on the basis of their lived experiences under three themes.

5.1. Negotiating with English in EFL Classrooms

As English language is becoming a global lingua franca (Tsou and Kao, 2017), there is increasing trend among non-English-speaking countries to adopt English as a medium of instruction (EMI) globally (Sah and Li, 2018) for enhancing learners' English proficiency and hence providing better socioeconomic mobility (Bhattacharya, 2013). The rapid and global spread of EMI has also influenced the Nepalese school system since 1990 (Phyak, 2016), assuming that Nepalese learners could compete in the international market and have better socioeconomic status. In practice, EMI has been implemented effectively and successfully in physically well-equipped private boarding schools, as they have been successful in providing both content knowledge and English skills (Sah and Li, 2018). However, although community schools adopted EMI to compete with private boarding schools, they have neither yet been able to provide content knowledge nor skills in English because of poor resources and low proficiency of school children, as one of the participant teachers said.

> *We adopted EMI to help our learners acquire English well so that they can go abroad for their further career development. But we have not been able to provide the required knowledge and language skills in English as in private boarding schools ... because English is a foreign language for Nepalese people and our children lack sufficient proficiency in English so that they could understand everything told... Therefore, we often use Nepali in the classrooms...* (Source: Interview with T2)

The data shows that EMI has not been negotiated according to its essence in Nepalese community schools. Although theoretically EMI recommends using the English language to teach academic subjects [other than English itself] in situations where the first language of the majority of the population is not English (Dearden, 2015), the teachers were not found to use English merely. Still, they were practicing bilingualism through English and the Nepali language.

However, the study was confined to English language teachers and their negotiation with English in their classrooms. English in EFL classrooms was found to be negotiated interestingly in community schools. Although it is recommended to use English only in English classrooms, teachers were found to be using both English and the Nepali language

simultaneously. However, the extent to which teachers were using Nepali in English classrooms varies significantly, where T1 was using Nepali about 90% of class time and content, while T2 simply was using Nepali about 5-10% of class time and content in English classrooms. The reason behind using Nepali in English classrooms was to make the learners understand the content introduced to them, as one of the teachers said.

> *We [teachers] need to use English in English classrooms. But our students do not understand when I only speak in English, so what to do? ...so I use Nepali to help them understand ... otherwise they even do not understand a single sentence... and also when they use Nepali, they eagerly participate in learning activities ...* (Source: Interview with T1)

The data shows that in spite of the recommendation of the government and society members to use English in English classrooms, teachers were found to use Nepali as well so that their students could understand the concept introduced in the classrooms easily and fully. T2 also gave a way response similar to that regarding the use of Nepali in English classrooms, which is as follows;

> *Our school has adopted the EMI policy and our institution is suggesting that us to implement it strongly ...and also I teach the English subject. So, as far as possible, I try to present my lesson and engage students in English, but in case the students feel difficult, I use and let my students use Nepali, but very less ...* (Source: Interview with T2)

The data shows that Nepalese EFL teachers, in spite of institutional force to use English in classrooms, make use of the language familiar to the students. In other words, teachers are the powerful agents in educational language policy processes (Menken and Garcia, 2010) who, in spite of governmental and institutional preference in using English, design and implement their own language policy depending upon the situation. To be specific, as the teachers experienced that their learners were from linguistically diversified backgrounds and they did not have sufficient proficiency to rely on English in classrooms fully, they were found to practice multilingualism although they were instructed only to use English in English classrooms.

5.2. Addressing Learners' Challenges in Multilingual Classrooms

Because Nepal is a societally constituted multilingual country, all the schools and their classrooms consist of linguistically diverse students. The classroom contexts containing multilingual students are "contested spaces" (Palmer and Martinez, 2013), where social relations of power are reflected and reproduced, given the status differential between the languages and cultures involved (Bourdieu, 1977). So, when an English-only policy is

practiced in the classroom, the linguistically minoritized children are found to feel excluded from school spaces (Palmer, 2011), and that is what is generally observed in Nepalese EFL classrooms. To include such linguistically minoritized children in school spaces, Cummins (2017) and Palmer and Martinez (2013) suggest that EFL teachers be the agents to transform the ideologies of monoglot purism into multilingualism in education. Similar responses are reflected from Nepalese EFL teachers, for example, one of the participants shared;

> *Nepal is multilingual country in itself. So, our classrooms consist of multilingual learners. Many students are from a minority language background ... They do not even use Nepali [the official language] well ... then English is beyond their reach. Imposing English is like grabbing their rights to education ... So, I as far as possible, help my children using the language familiar to them ...* (Source: Interview with T1)

The data shows that Nepalese EFL teachers teaching at the basic level experience that practicing the dominant language policy in multilingual classrooms is really challenging. For them, it is linguistic bias and seizing children's rights to education. To overcome this challenge, the teachers, playing agentive roles, practice multilingualism to ensure the rights of their children to education despite being oriented to teach English through English. The teachers also argued that if they enact actively respond to the children's linguistic background, they can also address the challenge of learners' incomprehensibility.

The teachers also experienced that when children are exposed to the dominant language, they [the children] find themselves being excluded from the classroom. From teachers' responses, it is evident that they are the agents for creating students' identity in the classrooms. For example, one of the participant teachers shared;

> *When we, for the first time, implemented EMI, I dominantly used English in classrooms, but I felt that our children were not enjoying it, for example, they did not patiently concentrate on the content discussed, and they did not even participate in classroom interaction. But later, when I used Nepali to support them learning content in English, they were found to be fully enjoying in English classrooms.* (Source: Interview with T2)

The data shows that the imposition of a dominant language does not even create interests in the children because of their loss of identity in the classrooms. However, when they are supported with Nepali in English, they feel interested and motivated because of their feeling of self in the classroom. This suggests that teachers have a crucial role in creating children's identity in the classroom, which in turn helps learners to understand the content. This also indicates that the teacher's role in practicing multilingualism in education also ensures children's affective needs (Mifsud and Vella, 2018) by creating children's self and creating interests in EFL classrooms.

5.3. Achieving a Sense of Agents in Multilingual Strategies

Here, we discuss how teachers achieve a sense of agency in classrooms, tackling the complexities created by multilingual learners. Theoretically, teacher agency is a construct that affects the implementation of educational policies at both institutional and national levels (Tao and Gao, 2017) and is achieved in the course of their teaching career. Regarding how teachers developed the sense of agents, one of the participants shared;

Yeah, I used to use English solely in classrooms and with my students, too. But most students failed the terminal examinations… Then, when I asked them why they did not perform better in exams, the students said that they did not understand the content in English… Then I realized the role of learners' home language in learning English…and started to use the activities accordingly. (Source: Interview with T2)

The data shows that English-only classrooms resulted in students' failure in the exams. When the teacher negotiated with students about their failure, she came to realize that her students could not comprehend everything discussed. As a result, she shifted her pedagogic strategies, integrating multilingualism and multiculturalism by analyzing her past experiences to bring something new to classrooms. This finding resembles Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson's (2015) model that posits teacher agency is achieved through their past experiences, including both personal and professional biographies situated in local ecology.

In addition, teachers were also found to view that their decisions in the classrooms are also influenced by how experienced they are. For example, another teacher said;

I think how best teachers perform in the classroom is also affected by their teaching experiences. I am too one of the examples. How I bring learner-friendly pedagogy today is different from how I used to… (Source: Interview with T1)

The data shows that the sense of teacher agency is achieved, according to how Mifsud and Vella (2018) argue, by reflecting past experiences in present performance. This also suggests that teachers often critically analyze their past and accordingly they change the governmental or institutional policies of English only classrooms to create strategies for multilingualism. To change monoglot policy into multi- or plurilingualism, teachers were found to use code switching strategy most often in the classrooms. For example, T1 used the utterance "*Ostrich euta bird ho tara yo eagle jastai aakashma udna sakdaina*". The teachers were also frequently using translation as another strategy for multilingualism, for example, the same teacher used utterance like "*Ostrich birds are the longest and largest [yo sabai bhanda thulo charo ho], … cannot fly [yo udna sakdaina]*".

Moreover, teachers were also found to use visual aids as another strategy for multilingualism. The use of visual aids does not support multilingualism directly, but we

believe that through visual aids, at least learners can bring their understanding of their home language to learning a second language. Further, the teachers were also found to utilize gestures in classrooms to support their learners in developing concepts of content introduced in the classrooms. It also does not directly support multilingualism, but at least provides the local cultural meanings.

Thus, teachers can bring a variety of strategies for multilingualism to the classrooms. And these strategies are not inborn for the teachers; rather, they develop later in the course of their teaching career.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Motivated by literature in multilingual pedagogy (e.g., Garcia, 2008; Cummins, 2007; and Cenoz, Gorter and May, 2017), critical pedagogy (e.g., Uddin, 2013), and contextualized pedagogy (e.g., Littlewood, 2013), this study aimed to explore teacher agency in multilingual EFL classrooms. To be specific, it focused on how teachers enact with local ecology and bring strategies suitable to the environment, addressing learners' diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Despite a 'monoglossic' (Garcia & Sylvan, 2011) policy in language education, the teachers shared their experiences that they practice multilingualism in EFL classrooms. The teachers also argued that they negotiate English in a unique way that they integrates multilingualism, creating space for linguistically and culturally minoritized children. The teachers, further, opined that they develop the sense of teachers as change agents by utilizing their personal and professional biographies. So, on the basis of findings, we recommend that teachers be critical of dominant language policy, seeking justice for the learners, and make pedagogic decisions by analyzing self and the environment where they are working. At the same time, we also recommend to the policymakers to redesign training courses that encourage the teachers to sense the ground reality of linguistic and cultural diversities and to make pedagogic decisions that fit the needs of the students and local ecology.

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