

Beyond English-Only: Negotiating L1, Local Culture, and Teacher Agency in Nepalese English Classrooms

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Abstract

Nepal's English classrooms are linguistically and culturally diverse, yet English-only orientations continue to influence English language teaching. This study explores how secondary-level English teachers negotiate learners' first language (L1) and local cultural knowledge in English teaching and how they perceive the contribution of these resources to learners' comprehension, participation, interaction, and meaning-making. A qualitative narrative inquiry was conducted with three experienced secondary-level English teachers from public schools in Nepal. Data were generated through three in-depth narrative interview sessions with each participant, conducted mainly in Nepali, transcribed, translated into English where necessary, and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis while retaining attention to the narrative context of teachers' accounts. The findings show that teachers used L1 selectively according to learners' English proficiency, lesson difficulty, pedagogical purpose, and classroom circumstances. Nepali was used to explain difficult concepts, clarify linguistic differences, check understanding, facilitate interaction, and encourage participation. Local cultural knowledge, including familiar foods, festivals, community practices, and everyday experiences, was used to connect unfamiliar English content with learners' prior knowledge and create meaningful opportunities for English communication. Rather than viewing L1 as an alternative to English, teachers described it as a temporary and purposeful mediational resource that could facilitate learners' engagement with English. However, they also recognized that excessive reliance on L1 could limit learners' opportunities to encounter and use English. The study thus conceptualizes multilingual English teaching as a process of pedagogical negotiation rather than adherence to a fixed English–L1 ratio. By bringing together L1 use, local cultural knowledge, and teacher agency, the study contributes a context-sensitive account of how Nepalese English teachers mobilize learners' existing linguistic and cultural resources while maintaining English as the principal target of instruction. The findings underscore the importance of teacher education that develops teachers' capacity to make purposeful, context-sensitive linguistic and cultural choices in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms.

Keywords: *L1 use, Pedagogical translanguaging, Local cultural knowledge, Culturally responsive pedagogy, Teacher agency, English language teaching, Narrative inquiry*

Introduction

English occupies an important position in Nepalese education, where it is taught as a school subject and widely used as a medium of instruction, particularly in private schools and increasingly in public schools. It is also prominent in curricula, textbooks, examinations, and

academic resources (Khadka, 2024). English is further associated with access to higher education, employment, academic resources, and wider social and professional opportunities. However, its expanding role exists within a highly multilingual and culturally diverse educational context, creating important questions about how English teaching

can respond to learners' existing linguistic and cultural resources.

Nepal's linguistic diversity is reflected in the 124 mother tongues identified in the National Population and Housing Census 2021 (National Statistics Office, 2024). Learners therefore enter English classrooms with different linguistic backgrounds and unequal opportunities to encounter and use English beyond school. In such contexts, exclusive reliance on English may create challenges for comprehension and participation, particularly for learners with limited English proficiency or limited exposure to English outside the classroom. Research on multilingual education has consequently challenged English-only approaches and highlighted the pedagogical value of learners' existing languages (Cummins, 2007; García & Wei, 2014). Translanguaging, in particular, views multilingual resources as flexible tools for communication, learning, and meaning-making rather than as barriers to target-language development (García & Wei, 2014; Tai, 2022; Wang, 2022).

Learners' resources, however, extend beyond language. They also bring knowledge of local foods, festivals, stories, occupations, family practices, and community experiences that can provide meaningful connections to unfamiliar English content. Local cultural knowledge can therefore support interpretation, discussion, comparison, and participation while providing a familiar starting point for English learning. This perspective aligns with culturally responsive pedagogy, which emphasizes the integration of learners' cultural knowledge and experiences into classroom learning (Gay, 2018). In multilingual contexts such as Nepal, L1 and local cultural knowledge may work together as forms of pedagogical mediation, helping teachers connect new English content with what learners already know.

The use of these resources also involves teacher agency. Teachers make situated decisions about language choice, classroom interaction, explanation, and cultural content while working within curricula, examinations, institutional expectations, and dominant English-language ideologies. Research in Nepal has documented translanguaging practices and teachers' agency in creating multilingual spaces (Phyak et al., 2022), while other studies have examined teachers' beliefs and language practices in English-medium education (Paudel, 2021; Sah, 2024). However, existing research has paid comparatively less attention to how secondary-level English teachers

themselves experience and negotiate L1 and local cultural knowledge together in everyday English teaching. In particular, there is limited understanding of how teachers make such choices in relation to learners' proficiency, lesson purposes, classroom interaction, and the need to maintain meaningful opportunities for English use.

Against this background, the present study explores how secondary-level English teachers in Nepal experience and negotiate the use of learners' L1 and local cultural knowledge in English classrooms. It examines how teachers make language and cultural choices in relation to classroom purposes and learners' needs, and how they perceive these practices in relation to comprehension, participation, interaction, and meaning-making. By foregrounding teachers' experiences and agency, the study contributes a context-sensitive perspective to research on multilingual and culturally responsive English language teaching in Nepal.

Statement of the Problem

Despite growing recognition of multilingual approaches to English language teaching, English-only orientations continue to influence classroom practices in Nepal. Teachers work within institutional, curricular, parental, and examination expectations that often place strong emphasis on English use. At the same time, secondary-level learners differ in English proficiency, linguistic background, and opportunities to use English beyond school. These conditions require teachers to make situated decisions about when English alone is sufficient and when learners' existing linguistic resources may be needed to support learning.

The issue extends beyond language choice. English textbooks and classroom materials may contain cultural references that are unfamiliar to learners, while their own cultural experiences remain an underused resource for learning. Although previous studies in Nepal have examined translanguaging, English-medium instruction, language ideologies, and teacher agency (Paudel, 2021; Phyak et al., 2022; Sah, 2024), less is known about how secondary-level English teachers negotiate L1 and local cultural knowledge together in their everyday classroom practices. In particular, limited attention has been given to how teachers explain their decisions in relation to learners' needs, lesson purposes, classroom interaction, and opportunities for English use.

This gap is important because multilingual teaching cannot be understood simply as a choice between English-only instruction and greater use of L1. Teachers must balance linguistic support with the need to sustain meaningful engagement in English, while also deciding how local cultural knowledge can contribute to learning without becoming disconnected from English-language objectives. Therefore, this study investigates the experiences of three secondary-level English teachers in Nepal, focusing on when, why, and how they use learners' L1 and local cultural knowledge and how they perceive their roles in supporting comprehension, participation, interaction, and meaning-making.

Researcher Positionality

The first author interest in this issue stems from more than ten years of experience teaching English in Nepal. My professional experiences with English-only instruction gradually led me to question whether learners' linguistic and cultural resources could be used more productively in English classrooms. My educational and family experiences had also exposed me to translation-oriented approaches to English teaching and strengthened my appreciation of local culture and everyday experiences as potential resources for learning. These experiences shaped my understanding of how familiar cultural references can make English concepts more accessible to learners. For example, the use of familiar local objects such as *Hadi* (earthen cooking pot) and *Ghaito* (clay water pot) in descriptive language can connect English learning with learners' everyday experiences.

My early beliefs about English-only instruction were further challenged by my professional experience. In my first teaching position at a private school, I was encouraged to maintain an English-only classroom so that students would receive maximum exposure to English. Although this approach was well intentioned, I observed that some students became reluctant to participate and often relied on memorized phrases when faced with communicative tasks. Later, professional development introduced me to Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and the Zone of Proximal Development, which encouraged me to reconsider the role of learners' existing linguistic resources in English learning.

This shift became particularly noticeable during a procedural writing lesson. My students had difficulty writing a recipe for an unfamiliar food such as pizza. I reframed the task around familiar

foods from their cultural contexts, including *Kwati* and *Yomari*. The learners first drew on knowledge and experiences from their families and communities, discussed the procedures using familiar language, and then expressed those ideas in English. This experience led me to wonder whether similar pedagogical practices occurred among other English teachers and became an important motivation for the present study.

I recognize that my professional, educational, and cultural experiences may have influenced the formulation of the research problem, my relationships with participants, and my interpretation of their narratives. I therefore do not treat positionality as a bias that can simply be eliminated; rather, I view it as an integral part of the interpretive research process that requires ongoing reflection. Throughout data collection and analysis, I remained attentive to the distinction between participants' accounts and my own interpretations. I also sought to represent their experiences as accurately and fairly as possible.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

This study aims to investigate the views and experiences of secondary school English language teachers regarding the incorporation of learners' L1 (first language) and local cultural knowledge in the teaching of the English language, and the view of the teachers perceived the role of L1 and local cultural knowledge on the classroom discourse, comprehension, participation and meaning-making of the learners. This study answers the following research questions:

RQ1. How do secondary-level English teachers describe their experiences of using learners' L1 and local cultural knowledge in English language teaching?

RQ2. How do teachers negotiate the use of learners' L1 and local cultural knowledge in relation to classroom purposes, learners' needs, and their comprehension, participation, interaction, and meaning-making?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

English is taught in Nepal in classrooms with diverse languages and cultures. Learners have different linguistic backgrounds. They also have different opportunities to use English outside school. This creates challenges for teachers who need to provide English exposure while also

responding to learners' existing linguistic and cultural resources.

Earlier approaches to English teaching often emphasized English-only instruction. Such approaches aimed to maximize learners' exposure to English and maintain a clear separation between English and other languages. Recent research has questioned this position. It has increasingly recognized learners' existing languages, cultural knowledge, and experiences as possible resources for learning (Cook, 2001; Cummins, 2007; García & Wei, 2014). The literature relevant to this study focuses on three areas: L1 use and translanguaging, local culture and culturally responsive teaching, and the Nepalese context. Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory provides the main theoretical foundation for understanding these practices.

L1 Use and Translanguaging in English Language Teaching

The role of L1 in English language teaching has changed over time. Earlier English-only approaches viewed the use of other languages as a possible limitation on English exposure. More recent studies suggest that learners' existing languages can support understanding, interaction, and participation (Cook, 2001; Cummins, 2007).

Anderson and Lightfoot (2021) found that teachers in Indian English classrooms used other languages for explanation, comparison, classroom management, and translation. However, teachers did not use these practices in the same way in every lesson. Their choices depended on the teaching purpose and classroom situation.

Neupane (2021) also reported positive teacher attitudes toward translanguaging. The study linked translanguaging with learner creativity and classroom participation. Similarly, Acharya (2024) found that teachers in Lalitpur used code-switching and translanguaging for explanation, clarification, vocabulary development, feedback, discussion, comprehension checking, and classroom management. These findings suggest that L1 use is not limited to translation. Teachers may use familiar languages to explain difficult concepts. They may also use them to clarify language differences and support classroom interaction. However, the usefulness of L1 depends on how and why it is used.

García and Wei (2014) describe translanguaging as the flexible use of multilingual linguistic and semiotic resources for communication and meaning-making. This view challenges the idea that bilingual and multilingual

learners should keep their languages strictly separate during learning. Translanguaging therefore provides a useful lens for understanding how teachers and learners draw on different linguistic resources in the classroom.

Nguyen (2022) found generally positive attitudes toward translanguaging among teachers and learners. However, the study also highlighted the continuing influence of English-only expectations. Teachers therefore need to make decisions about when learners need L1 support and when they need more opportunities to use English. Teachers' decisions are also shaped by factors beyond their personal beliefs. Tannenbaum et al. (2026) found that teachers' use of multilingual resources is influenced by educational policies and institutional expectations. Yuan and Lee (2024) similarly found that teachers' beliefs and pedagogical positions influenced their implementation of translanguaging.

These studies show that multilingual practices can support English learning when they are used purposefully. They also show that teachers' language choices depend on learners' needs, lesson goals, classroom conditions, and institutional expectations. L1, therefore, is better understood as a flexible pedagogical resource than as either a problem or a replacement for English.

Local Culture and Culturally Responsive English Language Teaching

Language learning is closely connected with culture. Learners bring their knowledge, experiences, values, identities, and ways of understanding the world to the classroom. Culturally responsive pedagogy views these resources as valuable for teach (Gay, 2018).

Culturally responsive teaching is not simply about teaching information about different cultures. It can involve connecting lessons with learners' everyday lives. Teachers may use local stories, foods, festivals, occupations, traditions, and community experiences. Such connections can help learners understand unfamiliar content. This approach is particularly relevant in Nepal. English classrooms include learners from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Many learners also have limited opportunities to use English outside school. Local cultural knowledge can provide a familiar starting point for understanding new English content. Language ideology is also important in this context. English is often associated with education, employment, social mobility, and global opportunities. Nepali and

Indigenous languages may not receive the same status in some educational settings.

Sah (2024) shows that such language ideologies influence perceptions of English and local languages in EMI contexts in Nepal. These beliefs may affect teachers' classroom practices. Teachers may value learners' local languages and cultures. At the same time, they may feel pressure to use English because of curriculum requirements, institutional expectations, examinations, or wider social attitudes. Their classroom decisions may therefore involve a constant process of balancing different demands.

Local cultural knowledge can support this balance. Teachers may connect English content with familiar festivals, foods, stories, occupations, and community practices. Such examples can help learners understand new ideas. They can also encourage learners to participate and express their experiences in English. Culturally responsive teaching does not mean replacing English or international content with local content. Local knowledge can instead provide a bridge to new knowledge. Learners can use familiar experiences to understand new linguistic and cultural ideas. They can also compare local experiences with wider cultural perspectives (Gay, 2018).

For the present study, this perspective helps explain how teachers use local cultural knowledge in English lessons. It also helps examine how teachers understand its role in comprehension, interaction, participation, and meaning-making.

The Nepalese Context and Research Gap

Nepal is a particularly relevant context for studying multilingual English teaching. English has a strong position in education. It is also associated with social and economic opportunities. At the same time, Nepalese classrooms include learners with diverse languages and cultural backgrounds. Research in Nepal has examined several aspects of multilingual education. Sah and Li (2020) explored translanguaging in Nepalese public-school EMI classrooms. They connected multilingual classroom practices with language policy, language hierarchy, identity, and access. Neupane (2021) reported positive teacher perceptions of translanguaging and highlighted its possible role in creativity and classroom participation.

Acharya (2024) provided further evidence of multilingual classroom practices in Lalitpur. The study found that teachers used code-switching and translanguaging for several pedagogical purposes.

These included explanation, clarification, vocabulary development, feedback, discussion, and comprehension checking. However, Sah (2024) showed that language ideologies continue to influence teachers' beliefs and practices in EMI contexts. English is often viewed as more valuable because of its connection with education and socioeconomic opportunities. Local languages may receive less academic value. These studies provide important insights. However, they leave some questions unanswered. We know relatively little about how secondary-level English teachers themselves explain their everyday decisions to use L1 and local cultural knowledge together. We also know less about how teachers balance these resources with the need to maintain meaningful English use.

This gap is important because multilingual teaching is not simply a matter of choosing English or L1. Teachers make decisions according to learners' proficiency, lesson difficulty, teaching purpose, classroom situation, and institutional expectations. Their choices may also reflect wider beliefs about the value and role of English and local languages. The present study addresses this gap through narrative inquiry with three secondary-level English teachers in Nepal. It explores how teachers use L1 and local cultural knowledge in English classrooms. It examines why they make particular language choices. It also explores how they understand the effects of these choices on comprehension, interaction, participation, and meaning-making.

Sociocultural Theory and Theoretical Integration

The main theoretical framework of this study is Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory. The theory views learning as a social process. It emphasizes interaction, language, cultural tools, and meaningful activity. Although Vygotsky's original work predates current ideas about translanguaging and culturally responsive pedagogy, his concept of mediation provides a useful foundation for understanding multilingual learning. From a sociocultural perspective, language is more than a means of communication. It is also a tool for thinking and learning. Learners develop knowledge through interaction with teachers and peers. They also learn through the cultural resources available to them. The Zone of Proximal Development highlights the importance of support that helps learners perform tasks they cannot yet complete independently (Vygotsky, 1978).

In multilingual English classrooms, L1 can support learning. Teachers may use Nepali to explain difficult ideas. They may use it to clarify language differences. They may also use it to check understanding and support interaction. Learners can then use this understanding to express their ideas in English. Local culture can also support learning. Familiar experiences can help learners understand unfamiliar English content. Teachers may use local foods, festivals, stories, occupations, or daily activities to explain new ideas. These connections can make lessons more meaningful.

Translanguaging provides a complementary lens for understanding teachers' use of linguistic resources. It focuses on the flexible use of multilingual resources during communication and learning (García & Wei, 2014). From this perspective, movement between English and familiar languages is not necessarily a failure to use English. It can be a purposeful pedagogical choice.

Culturally responsive pedagogy provides another complementary lens. It recognizes learners' cultural knowledge and experiences as resources for teaching (Gay, 2018). Teachers can connect new English content with what learners already know. This can make lessons more familiar and meaningful. In this study, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory is the overarching theoretical framework. Translanguaging and culturally responsive pedagogy are used as complementary perspectives. Together, they help explain how teachers use language and culture to support learning. The study does not support English-only teaching. It also does not suggest unrestricted use of L1. Instead, it focuses on purposeful language choices. Teachers may use L1 when it helps learners understand difficult ideas, participate, or interact. At the same time, they need to provide meaningful opportunities for learners to use English.

The framework focuses on three connected aspects of teachers' experiences. The first is linguistic mediation. This refers to the use of English and L1 to support understanding and

communication. The second is cultural mediation. This refers to connecting English content with learners' local knowledge and experiences. The third is pedagogical negotiation. This refers to teachers' decisions about when to use L1 and when to use English. These three aspects guide the interpretation of the teachers' narratives. They help explain not only what language teachers' use, but also when, why, and for what purpose they use it.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry design to explore secondary-level English teachers' experiences of using learners' first language (L1) and local cultural knowledge in English language teaching. Narrative inquiry was appropriate because it enabled participants to describe their classroom experiences and the meanings they attached to them within their social, cultural, and professional contexts (Riessman, 2008). The study was informed by an interpretivist perspective, focusing on how teachers understood and negotiated their pedagogical and language choices.

The study was conducted in public secondary schools in Godawari Municipality, Lalitpur; Hetauda Submetropolitan City, Makwanpur; and Kamalamai Municipality, Sindhuli, Nepal. Three experienced secondary-level English teachers participated and were selected purposively based on their teaching experience and relevance to the research questions. The participants represented different geographical and ethnolinguistic backgrounds.

Participants and Research context

Three experienced secondary-level English teachers from public schools in Nepal participated in the study. They were purposively selected based on their teaching experience and relevance to the research questions. The participants taught Grades 9 and 10 and had between 12 and 15 years of teaching experience. Each participant participated in three narrative interview sessions. Their basic demographic and professional characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1:
Participants' Professional and Contextual Characteristics

Participants	Teaching experience	School location	Grade taught	interview sessions
Participant A	12 years	Lalitpur	Grade 9	3
Participant B	15 years	Makwan-pur	Grade 10	3
Participant C	14 years	Sindhuli	Grade 10	3

Data Generation

The researcher contacted the participants directly and established rapport before data collection. Each participant participated in three in-depth narrative interview sessions, with each session lasting approximately two hours. Interviews were conducted mainly in Nepali to enable participants to express their experiences comfortably and in detail. The interviews focused on L1 use, local cultural knowledge, classroom interaction, learner comprehension and participation, and teachers' decisions regarding English and L1 use. With informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated into English where necessary. Culturally specific terms were retained where relevant and explained in English.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), while retaining attention to the narrative nature of participants' accounts. The analysis involved repeated reading of the transcripts, generation of initial codes, development of candidate themes, and refinement of themes in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework. Attention was also given to the sequence, context, and meaning of participants' experiences so that individual narratives were not reduced to decontextualized thematic fragments. Both patterns shared across participants and differences in their experiences were considered.

Research Quality and Ethics

Reflexivity was maintained throughout data generation and analysis because the researcher's experience as an English teacher in Nepal could influence the interpretation of participants' accounts. The researcher repeatedly returned to the transcripts to keep interpretations grounded in participants' narratives. Permission was obtained from the participating school administrations before data collection, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participation was

voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through pseudonyms, and research materials were kept securely. Participants' accounts were distinguished from the researcher's interpretations to support transparency and qualitative research quality (Tracy, 2010).

Findings

The interview data were organized into three participant narratives and analyzed to identify six interconnected themes, followed by a cross-case synthesis. L1 was not viewed as an alternative to English but as a pedagogically oriented language that can be utilized as a tool to understand, participate, interact and create meaning. Local cultural knowledge also served as a resource to bridge an unfamiliar English language text with learners' prior knowledge and experience. At the same time, all three agreed that there should be some meaningful opportunities for English use, and were concerned about overuse of L1.

Use of L1 in Context and According to Learner Proficiency

The teachers' narratives indicated that L1 use was not governed by a fixed proportion of English and Nepali. Rather, teachers made language choices in response to learners' English proficiency, the difficulty of the lesson, and the amount of English exposure available beyond the classroom. Participant A particularly emphasized differences in learners' opportunities to encounter English outside school:

In places where students do not get much opportunity to hear or speak English outside the classroom, I feel that they need more support in Nepali. If they are exposed to English regularly, I can use English more.

This account suggests that the teacher viewed L1 use partly in relation to learners' wider linguistic environment. Where exposure to English was limited, Nepali was perceived as providing additional support for accessing classroom content.

Participant B similarly identified learners' proficiency as an important consideration:

Before deciding how much Nepali to use, I have to see the students' level. If they are weak in English, explaining everything in English does not always help them. I give some explanation in Nepali and then continue in English.

Rather than treating Nepali as the primary language of instruction, Participant B described it as a supplementary resource that could be introduced when English-only explanation was insufficient.

Participant C reflected on a similar shift in her own teaching practice:

At first, I tried to use English all the time. But sometimes students did not understand and they became silent. Later, I started using Nepali when necessary. It helped them understand and participate.

Taken together, these accounts indicate that the teachers did not position themselves categorically as either English-only or L1-oriented teachers. Instead, they described L1 use as a context-sensitive pedagogical decision, shaped by learners' proficiency, opportunities for English exposure, and immediate classroom needs. This finding is consistent with research showing that teachers' multilingual practices are often purposeful and responsive to particular pedagogical conditions rather than determined by a rigid language policy (Acharya, 2024; Neupane, 2021; Rauteda, 2024).

L1 as Linguistic and Cognitive Mediation

The teachers' accounts further showed that L1 was particularly useful when learners encountered difficult concepts or linguistic features that were not easily accessible through English-only explanation. Participant B illustrated this through a Grade 9 lesson involving *Gundruk*:

The students knew Gundruk, but some of them could not understand how to explain it in English. I first explained the idea in Nepali and then asked them to talk about it in English.

Here, Nepali was used not to replace English but to establish an initial understanding of the concept before learners were asked to express that understanding in English. Participant B also described using Nepali for contrastive attention to pronunciation:

Sometimes I compare Nepali and English pronunciation. I explain the difference in stress or

intonation in Nepali first, because students can understand the difference more clearly.

This indicates that L1 served not only as a means of translating meaning but also as a resource for developing learners' awareness of linguistic differences. Participant A similarly described the role of Nepali in supporting access to difficult content:

If I explain a difficult idea only in English, some students just remain quiet. When I give a short explanation in Nepali, they understand the concept and then I can bring them back to English.

The phrase "bring them back to English" is particularly significant because it captures the teachers' broader orientation toward L1 use. L1 was described as a temporary mediational resource that could facilitate access to meaning before learners re-engaged with English. This reflects the concept of pedagogical translanguaging, in which multilingual resources are used purposefully to support comprehension and language learning rather than simply to substitute one language for another (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020). Similar pedagogical functions of L1, including explanation, clarification, comparison, and comprehension support, have also been documented in Nepalese English classrooms (Acharya, 2024; Neupane, 2021; Rauteda, 2024).

Translanguaging as Flexible Classroom Interaction

The narratives also revealed that multilingual practices extended beyond explanation and translation to include classroom interaction and relationship building. Participant A emphasized the importance of understanding learners' linguistic and cultural backgrounds when making classroom language choices:

We cannot teach every class in exactly the same way. We have to understand the language and background of the students. Sometimes a concept becomes clear when we use a familiar language before discussing it in English.

This account highlights the situated nature of teachers' language decisions. Rather than applying a uniform language practice across classrooms, the teacher described adapting communication according to learners' existing linguistic resources.

Participant B placed greater emphasis on the interpersonal dimension of multilingual interaction:

When I use some Nepali, students feel more comfortable talking to me. They share jokes and

their own experiences. Sometimes they are afraid to speak when everything is in English.

Participants C further explained:

I noticed that some students became more active when I allowed them to explain something first in a language they were comfortable with and then encouraged them to express the idea in English.

These accounts suggest that L1 had both pedagogical and relational functions. It could reduce communicative barriers, create a more comfortable interactional environment, and provide learners with an entry point into classroom discussion. Importantly, the teachers' narratives did not present this multilingual interaction as an endpoint. Rather, familiar-language interaction was often followed by an expectation that learners would attempt to communicate their ideas in English. In this sense, translanguaging functioned as a means of opening participation while maintaining English as the principal target of language learning.

This finding resonates with studies that identify translanguaging as a way of creating flexible multilingual spaces in which learners can draw on their available linguistic resources while engaging with the target language (García & Wei, 2014; Phyak et al., 2022).

Local Cultural Knowledge as a Bridge to Meaning-Making

The teachers' narratives showed that local cultural knowledge was another important resource for connecting unfamiliar English content with learners' existing knowledge and experiences. Participant B described the use of Gundruk as a culturally familiar starting point:

When the lesson was about Gundruk, I did not need to introduce the food as something completely new. Students already knew it from their homes. I used that knowledge and then asked them to describe it in English.

The pedagogical value of Gundruk therefore lay not simply in its cultural relevance but in its ability to provide learners with something they already knew and could subsequently discuss through English.

Participant C described a similar strategy when teaching a text about the "Battle of Oranges." She connected the unfamiliar cultural practice in the text with the familiar experience of Holi:

The students did not know about the Battle of Oranges. I asked them about Holi first. They already knew about throwing colours and celebrating with other people, so we compared Holi with the festival in the text.

She added:

When students can connect the text with something they have experienced, they have more things to say. They do not feel that the lesson is completely foreign to them.

Participant A similarly emphasized the importance of familiar community experiences:

I try to give examples from the students' own lives. If the example is familiar, they can understand the English idea more easily and they have something to talk about.

These accounts indicate that local culture functioned as more than supplementary cultural content. It served as a mediational bridge between unfamiliar English-language material and learners' prior knowledge. The teachers used familiar foods, festivals, and everyday experiences as starting points from which learners could interpret, discuss, compare, and eventually express ideas in English. This finding supports the argument that local cultural resources can provide meaningful contexts for English learning, particularly where textbook content may be culturally distant from learners' everyday experiences (Shrestha, 2016; Yusniawati & Lestari, 2021). It also aligns with culturally responsive pedagogy, which emphasizes connecting curriculum and instruction with learners' cultural knowledge and lived experiences (Gay, 2018).

Participation, Engagement, and Recognition of Learners' Cultural Resources

The teachers associated the use of familiar language and cultural knowledge with greater opportunities for learner participation. Participant C particularly emphasized changes she perceived in classroom interaction when lessons were connected with learners' own experiences:

When I connect the lesson with their own culture and experiences, more students want to speak. They have something to share because they know about it.

She also described cultural comparison as a means of generating classroom discussion:

I ask them what is similar and what is different between the culture in the text and our own culture.

Students start talking with each other because they have their own experiences.

Participant B similarly described local knowledge as a starting point for English communication:

Students may know the idea very well in their own experience, but they do not know how to express it in English. If we start from what they know, it becomes easier to move toward English.

The accounts therefore suggest that recognizing learners' existing knowledge can create opportunities for them to participate from a position of familiarity rather than uncertainty. Local cultural knowledge provided something learners could draw upon when responding to unfamiliar English content, while L1 could provide additional linguistic support when they struggled to formulate their ideas.

However, these findings should be interpreted carefully. The evidence represents teachers' perceptions of learner participation and engagement, not independently measured changes in motivation, participation, or English proficiency. The narratives therefore demonstrate how teachers understood the pedagogical effects of these practices rather than establishing causal relationships between multilingual or culturally responsive teaching and learning outcomes.

Negotiating the Benefits and Risks of L1 Use

Although all three teachers described positive uses of L1, none advocated unrestricted use of Nepali. Their narratives revealed a continuing tension between providing comprehensible support and ensuring sufficient opportunities for learners to encounter and use English.

Participant A emphasized the importance of selective use:

I use Nepali selectively. If students can understand something in English, I do not translate it. I use Nepali when I feel that it is necessary for understanding.

This suggests that the teacher viewed unnecessary translation as potentially reducing learners' opportunities to engage directly with English. Participant B made this tension more explicit:

Nepali can help students understand, but English is still the target language. If we use Nepali for everything, students may not get enough opportunity to listen to and speak English.

Participant C similarly acknowledged both the benefits and possible risks of L1 use:

Nepali helps me communicate with students and makes the classroom comfortable, but I also worry that if I use it too much, students may depend on it and become less confident in English.

These accounts reveal an important dimension of teacher agency: the teachers were not simply implementing a predetermined multilingual pedagogy but were negotiating competing pedagogical demands. They valued L1 for comprehension, participation, and interaction while simultaneously recognizing the need to protect learners' opportunities for meaningful English use. Their narratives therefore challenge both a rigid English-only position and an unrestricted multilingual approach. Instead, they point toward strategic and purposeful multilingual pedagogy, in which teachers determine when L1 adds pedagogical value and when continued engagement with English should take priority.

Cross-Case Synthesis

Across the three narratives, there was considerable convergence in how teachers understood the pedagogical role of L1 and local cultural knowledge. First, all three participants described L1 as particularly useful when learners had limited English proficiency or encountered difficult concepts. Second, they emphasized that L1 use should be responsive to learners' needs, lesson objectives, and classroom circumstances rather than determined by a fixed English–L1 ratio. Third, all three teachers described local cultural knowledge as a resource for connecting unfamiliar English content with learners' existing experiences. Finally, the participants associated these practices with opportunities for greater interaction and participation, although these perceptions were not independently measured.

At the same time, the participants differed in emphasis. Participant A focused more strongly on differences in learners' exposure to English outside school and the need for selective linguistic support. Participant B emphasized linguistic explanation, particularly pronunciation, stress, intonation, and the use of familiar cultural concepts as a basis for English expression. Participant C placed greater emphasis on classroom relationships, learner confidence, participation, and cultural comparison.

The cross-case evidence suggests that L1 and local cultural knowledge were not treated as separate or competing resources. They often worked together as forms of linguistic and cultural

mediation. Familiar cultural knowledge gave learners something meaningful to discuss, while L1 could provide temporary linguistic support for understanding or expressing that knowledge. Teachers then attempted to move learners toward English. This pattern positions teacher agency at the centre of multilingual pedagogy: teachers continuously negotiated between learners' existing resources and the institutional and pedagogical expectation to develop English proficiency.

The findings therefore point to a purpose-driven rather than ratio-driven understanding of multilingual English teaching. The issue is not simply how much English or L1 is used, but what each language is doing at a particular moment in the learning process. Within these teachers' narratives, English remained the principal target language, while L1 and local cultural knowledge functioned as contextual resources for making English learning more accessible, participatory, and meaningful.

Discussion

The findings show that multilingual teaching in Nepalese secondary English classrooms is a flexible and negotiated practice. A further contribution of the findings concerns teacher agency. The teachers did not describe multilingual practices as the straightforward implementation of a prescribed pedagogical model. Rather, they exercised situated judgment in deciding when English was sufficient, when L1 support was necessary, and how local cultural knowledge could be incorporated into English lessons. Their choices were shaped simultaneously by learner proficiency, classroom interaction, pedagogical purposes, and expectations surrounding English use. This supports an ecological understanding of teacher agency in which teachers' capacity to act is enabled and constrained by the conditions of their professional environments (Priestley et al., 2015). In this sense, multilingual pedagogy in the present study can be understood not merely as a language practice but as an expression of teachers' situated professional agency.

Across the three teachers' narratives, L1 and local cultural knowledge were used to support comprehension, participation, interaction, and meaning-making, while English remained central to instruction. Teachers' decisions depended on learners' proficiency, lesson difficulty, teaching purpose, and classroom context. This supports the view of pedagogical translanguaging as the purposeful use of learners' linguistic resources to

support learning (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020; Rauteda, 2024).

The teachers mainly used L1 to explain difficult concepts, clarify linguistic differences, check understanding, and encourage participation. For example, Participant B used Nepali to explain *Gundruk* and compare its pronunciation, stress, and intonation with English. Similar pedagogical uses of translanguaging have been reported in Nepalese EFL classrooms, particularly for explanation, clarification, interaction, discussion, and supporting learners' understanding (Acharya, 2024; Neupane, 2021; Saud, 2023). These findings suggest that the important issue is not how much L1 teacher's use, but when and why they use it.

Local cultural knowledge also helped teachers connect English content with learners' everyday experiences. References to *Gundruk*, Holi, and other familiar practices made unfamiliar content easier to understand and discuss. This supports the value of local culture in English teaching (Shrestha, 2016) and the broader principle of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018). Importantly, the findings show that language and culture often worked together: familiar cultural knowledge was explained through familiar language, creating a bridge between learners' existing knowledge and new English content. The findings also highlight teacher agency. Teachers made their own decisions about when to use English, L1, and cultural resources according to learners' needs. This is consistent with research showing that Nepalese teachers can create translanguaging spaces while negotiating English-dominant language ideologies (Phyak et al., 2022; Sah & Li, 2020).

However, teachers also expressed concern that excessive L1 use could reduce learners' opportunities to use English. This tension suggests that multilingual pedagogy is not about replacing English with L1 but about using L1 strategically to support English learning.

Overall, the study contributes to the literature by bringing together L1 use, local cultural knowledge, and teacher agency in Nepalese secondary English classrooms. The findings suggest that effective multilingual pedagogy depends on teachers' contextual judgment rather than a fixed English–L1 ratio. Teacher education should therefore prepare teachers to make informed decisions about when, why, and how learners' linguistic and cultural resources can support meaningful English learning.

Conclusion

This study explored how three secondary-level English teachers in Nepal experienced and negotiated the use of learners' L1 and local cultural knowledge in English classrooms. The findings indicate that teachers did not follow a fixed English–L1 ratio. Instead, their language choices were shaped by learners' proficiency, lesson difficulty, pedagogical purposes, and classroom conditions. L1 was used primarily as a mediational resource for explaining difficult concepts, clarifying linguistic differences, checking understanding, and supporting participation.

Local cultural knowledge similarly functioned as a bridge between unfamiliar English content and learners' existing experiences. Familiar foods, festivals, community practices, and everyday experiences provided meaningful starting points for discussion and interpretation in English. At the same time, teachers recognized the potential risks of excessive L1 use and emphasized the importance of maintaining meaningful opportunities for English exposure and communication.

The findings suggest that multilingual English teaching in these classrooms is better understood as a process of pedagogical negotiation than as adherence to either English-only instruction or unrestricted L1 use. The study contributes to research on Nepalese ELT by bringing together linguistic resources, local cultural knowledge, and teacher agency and showing how these dimensions intersect in everyday classroom decision-making.

Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations of the study. First, it aims at no statistical generalization because it is based on the stories of three secondary level English teachers. It adds a depth and contextual interpretation of participants' experiences. Second, the principal source of data was narrative interviewing and so findings are not from a direct measure of classroom interaction or learner achievement. Third, the study is limited to specific educational contexts in Nepal and should not be

extrapolated to secondary schools and/or multilingual communities in Nepal as a whole.

To support the evidence base, future studies could include methodological triangulation, based on classroom observations, audio-video-recorded classroom discourse, interviews with learners, teacher journals and documentary analysis. Comparative studies might focus on the difference between rural and urban schools, and more studies could be conducted to explore the learners' experience of using L1 and local cultural resources. There is also a potential need to explore the effects of strategically designed multilingual practices with regard to long-term improvement in English proficiency, participation, and learner autonomy through longitudinal research.

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Author Contributions

Author 1 developed the study, reviewed the literature, collected and analyzed the data, interpreted the findings, and prepared the first draft of the manuscript. Author 2 contributed to the research design and methodology, provided academic guidance, reviewed and revised the manuscript, and contributed to the interpretation of the findings. Both authors worked together on the final manuscript, approved the submitted version, and take responsibility for the content of the paper.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose that would be interpreted as bias affecting the research, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of data, or the writing of this manuscript.

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