Teacher Agency Through Translanguaging in English-Medium Community Schools

Nani Babu Ghimire

Yam Prasad Pandeya

Bhanu Bhakta Gurung

Abstract

The development of teacher agency in teaching academic subjects in English within community schools has become a critical global issue, including in Nepal. This study examines how teachers create agency through translanguaging practices while implementing the English Medium Instruction (EMI) policy in Nepal's multilingual classroom context. The study employed an ethnographic research design within a qualitative research approach to explore the ideas and experiences of three Basic-level (Grade VI-VII) teachers. Data were collected from three different EMI community schools through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and field notes. The study found that teachers in EMI community schools in Nepal exercise their agency by employing translanguaging practices such as using bilingual textbooks, integrating students' mother tongues, and facilitating comprehension during examinations. These strategies help teachers navigate linguistic challenges, making EMI classrooms more inclusive and supportive for multilingual students. The findings highlight the need for policies and professional development programs that support bilingual and translanguaging practices to enhance learning outcomes in multilingual EMI classrooms.

Keywords: Teacher agency, English medium instruction, Translanguaging, Bilingual textbooks, Community schools

Introduction

In Nepal, the adoption of English Medium Instruction (EMI) policy in community schools is a relatively new phenomenon (Sah, 2022). According to Karki (2023), "EMI refers to the use of English for teaching and learning subjects other than English in the classrooms, especially in non-native contexts" (p. 13). Many community schools in Nepal have recently implemented the EMI policy in their classroom pedagogy (Phyak et al., 2022). Moreover, the EMI policy has been adopted and implemented only by name, imitating the style of private boarding schools in Nepal's community schools (Ghimire, 2019, 2024). This is largely driven by the reproduction of neoliberal ideologies and the global influence of English as a global language (Phyak, 2016a, 2016b). The School Management Committees (SMCs), head teachers, some teachers, and the public support implementing the EMI policy in community schools. However, they have paid insufficient attention to the necessary preparations, such as improving teachers' English proficiency, providing appropriate training, or equipping schools with the required teaching-learning materials and technology for effective EMI implementation (Ghimire, 2021b; Karki, 2023; Khati, 2016). Teachers initially appointed to teach in Nepali are often forced to shift to teaching in English without adequate support (Karki, 2018; Ojha, 2018). In response, the teachers develop the agency to adapt to the EMI policy while teaching academic subjects. Reviewing articles, dissertations, and research reports revealed a significant gap in studies examining teacher agency in EMI community schools, particularly in multilingual classrooms. Recognizing this as a pressing issue, we decided to investigate how teacher agency is developed and exercised in this context in Nepal.

Teacher agency refers to the actions that teachers take in classrooms to facilitate learning. In Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech's (2021) words, agency involves selecting actions in a given context to attain the most favorable outcome for oneself, guided by rational decision-making. They further claim that language planning and policy research can also be seen as forms of agency where actors choose which languages to use in schools. It is a critical element of educational practice that contributes to effective teaching (Mifsud & Vella, 2018). Teacher agency is shaped by teachers' ability and capacity to work while considering the social and cultural factors of their environment (Tao & Gao, 2021). In EMI classrooms, teachers create their own agency by focusing on the socio-cultural context of the students and the school's policies. At the micro level, teachers develop their agency to identify themselves as teachers in English-medium schools.

Teacher agency is not static but is shaped by the collective work and discussions of teachers, students, parents, and other members of the school community, all within the socio-cultural and ecological context of the school (Biesta et al., 2015; Biesta et al., 2017). According to Biesta et al. (2015), "ecological conceptualization of agency emphasizes the importance of both individual capacity of teachers and contextual dimensions of school in shaping the agency of teachers(p.19). Moreover, teachers' capacity to take action was shaped by various internal and external factors, including their prior professional experience, beliefs,

and passion for teaching, as well as the specifics of their context (Le et al., 2021). In this context, teachers develop agency to engage students by leveraging their capacities and adapting to the school's environment. However, the process by which teachers develop agency while teaching academic subjects in English within EMI community schools remains underexplored. This gap is particularly evident in multilingual classroom contexts, where the interplay of policy, practice, and linguistic diversity demands further investigation. In these circumstances, this study aims to explore teacher agency through translanguaging practices in implementing the EMI policy while teaching academic subjects in English within multilingual classroom contexts in community schools, adopting an ecological perspective. Specifically, it seeks to address the research question: How do teachers develop agency to implement the EMI policy through translanguaging in linguistically diverse community schools?

Methodology

This study adopts an interpretive paradigm, which seeks to understand the world through individuals' perspectives and is described as the "subjective world of human experience" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 21). Additionally, it employs a qualitative approach, focusing on individuals' nuanced experiences and perspectives within specific social and cultural contexts (Hammersley, 2012). Ethnography was chosen as the research design to engage with community school teachers who implement the EMI policy, exploring and analyzing their agency in this context. Watson (2008) defines ethnography as a documented description of the cultural life within a social group, organization, or community, often concentrating on a specific aspect of life in that environment. We selected three Basic Level (Grade VI-VIII) EMI community schools from three different municipalities–one urban and two rural–in the Sindhuli district, Nepal, as our research sites. These schools were chosen due to their consistent implementation of the EMI policy for at least five years, making them ideal settings to explore the practices and impacts of the EMI policy in community schools. Three teachers with over five years of experience teaching academic subjects in English at the Grade VI-VIII level were purposively selected as participants. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used: Lalita, Prakash, and Binaya.

Data collection involved in-depth interviews guided by flexible semi-structured questions, participant classroom observations, and field notes. The semi-structured guideline questions were developed based on the study's purpose and research questions. All in-depth interviews and classroom observations were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Interviews conducted in Nepali were first transcribed in Nepali and subsequently translated into English for analysis. The transcribed data were systematically coded and categorized based on recurring patterns and similarities, leading to the emergence of key themes. These themes were then analyzed and interpreted in alignment with participants' responses and relevant literature. Throughout the study, we followed ethical considerations essential in qualitative ethnographic research, including honesty, reciprocity, ethical interview practices, confidentiality, and neutrality (Ghimire, 2021a).

Findings and Discussion

Teachers play an active role in negotiating and adapting the EMI policy, using creative strategies to balance institutional requirements with the linguistic and educational needs of their students. In other words, the teachers made an effort to modify the policy requirements in the classroom to fit their own interpretations, preferences, and circumstances (Le et al., 2021). In discovering teacher agency through translanguaging in English-medium community schools, the findings are discussed under three key themes: 'teacher agency through utilizing bilingual textbooks', 'translanguaging practices for taking and giving permission', and 'teacher agency in creating translanguaging spaces during exams'.

Teacher Agency Through Utilizing Bilingual Textbooks

The teachers create their agency to negotiate the EMI policy by using Nepali medium textbooks as supporting materials. In other words, they exercise their agency by incorporating Nepali medium textbooks alongside English medium to adapt to the EMI policy in a way that meets the needs of their students. This bilingual or translanguaging technique allows them to navigate the challenges posed by students' limited English proficiency, enabling more effective content delivery and comprehension in the classroom (Phyak et al., 2022). In order to enhance learning opportunities in the classroom, translanguaging allows the teacher to adapt the lesson to the needs of the students (Tai, 2024). By using Nepali medium textbooks as a supplemental resource, teachers bridge the gap between policy demands and the practical realities of a multilingual educational environment, adopting a more inclusive learning experience. Prakash narrated his story on the use of Nepali medium textbook:

> I was transformed this school ten years ago. I was teaching in Nepali medium at the previous school. The head teacher told me to teach science in the English medium. It was challenging for me as I studied and had also got teaching in Nepali medium school. I took English medium textbooks home and studied them. However, I found teaching difficult because it was a new experience for me. I bought Nepali medium textbooks as resource materials to support teaching in the English medium. I studied both books together to prepare the problematic content.

Prakash's experience with the use of Nepali medium textbook asserted that they survived with the EMI policy by creating their agency through the use of the Nepali medium textbook. Furthermore, his experience highlights the challenges teachers face when adapting to EMI policies, especially those accustomed to Nepali medium instruction. He bought Nepali medium textbooks to supplement his English medium resources. By studying both sets of books, Prakash developed a bilingual strategy that allowed him to overcome the difficulties of teaching science in English despite his background in Nepali medium education. This approach demonstrates teacher agency when negotiating EMI challenges. By using Nepali textbooks, Prakash effectively bridged the gap between his previous experiences and the new language policy, creating a practical solution that enabled him to continue teaching

effectively. Binaya supported Prakash's ideas and mentioned, "I have kept Nepali medium textbook at home. When I find complicated content such as words, paragraphs, and exercises in English medium textbook, I look at Nepali medium textbook as a reference material". Because of lack of English language proficiency, teachers tried to find out different ways to negotiate the EMI policy. Using a Nepali medium textbook is one of them. Binaya also creates teacher agency as the user of the Nepali medium textbook to teach the complex content knowledge of the English medium textbook. To explore this aspect, one day first author was observing Binaya's class at Marin Thakur School. He saw a Nepali textbook with him. It made him curious why he carried it. He asked him why he brought the Nepali textbook to English medium class. Binaya replied:

> I teach science. I am an experienced Nepali medium science teacher. Twelve years ago, the school introduced the EMI policy and told us to teach academic subjects in English. I did not understand many science terminologies in English. To get rid of this problem, I purchased Nepali medium science textbooks. I underlined the science terminologies and wrote their Nepali equivalent with pencils in the textbooks. Nowadays, I bring Nepali medium textbooks to the class because they are useful for me in understanding the problematic terminologies of science.

Binaya very clearly remarks that he creates teacher agency by using Nepali medium textbook to teach science in the English medium as supporting material. For Binaya, as a science teacher with experience in Nepali medium instruction, the sudden expectation to teach in English presented significant challenges. His initial struggle with English scientific terminology led him to purchase Nepali medium textbooks, which he used as a bridge to make sense of the unfamiliar English terms. By underlining the English terms and writing their Nepali equivalents in his English medium textbooks, Binaya created a bilingual learning resource for himself, blending both languages to overcome his own and his students' language barriers. This practice highlights the critical role of bilingual resources in ensuring that teachers can navigate the EMI policy effectively (Ghimire, 2024). Despite the school's monolingual policy, Binaya's use of Nepali medium textbooks is a practical strategy that allows him to continue teaching science effectively. His approach shows how teachers can use their agency to create practical, classroom-level solutions to broader policy issues that do not take their specific linguistic challenges into account (Phyak et al., 2022). Similarly, Lalita added, "I referred to my old English medium science books from my I. Sc. and B.Sc. studies. I also used Nepali medium textbooks and made sure to prepare thoroughly by studying at home". Lalita's statement reveals her adaptive strategy to manage the challenges of teaching under the EMI policy. This approach highlights the complex nature of teacher agency in navigating the EMI policy within a multilingual context.

Prakash, Binaya, and Lalita's dependence on both English and Nepali medium textbooks underlines the critical role bilingual resources play in helping bridge the gap between the EMI policy and their students' linguistic needs. Their practice exemplifies the kind of negotiation

and compromise that teachers do while teaching academic subjects through EMI in multilingual contexts. Using bilingual textbooks can be viewed as a form of resistance to the strict monolingual the EMI policy (Fang et al., 2022), as teachers like Prakash, Binaya, and Lalita rely on familiar and accessible resources to enhance student understanding. This adaptive practice emerges from the broader socio-cultural and linguistic challenges of teaching in community schools in Nepal, where many students are not proficient in English. Their experience also points to the larger issue of policy implementation without sufficient consideration of the ground realities faced by teachers and students (Phyak et al., 2022). Their approach not only supports their students' learning but also reflects the broader flexibility and agency of teachers working in multilingual EMI environments.

Translanguaging Practices for Taking/Giving Permission

Beyond classroom pedagogy, translanguaging practices are adopted for taking and giving permission in EMI classrooms. Teachers and students use their native languages when asking for and giving permission in classrooms . They find it challenging to speak in English, so they use their mother tongues for communication when they need to request permission. During my observation of Lalita's science class for Grade VI at Kamalamata school, a student named Suresh (a pseudonym) stood up to ask for permission to leave the classroom. The communication happened in this way:

Suresh: Miss, *ma bahir jane.* (Miss, I want to go outside.)

Lalita: *Kina?* (Why?)

Suresh: *Su ayo.* (To urinate)

Lalita: *Toilet jane?* (Do you want to go to toilet?)

Suresh: Yes.

Lalita: *La chhito gaer au.* (Go and come fast)

Suresh, a small boy, wanted to go outside to urinate. He had to speak in English as it is an English medium school. However, he could not speak in English and asked permission from the teacher in Nepali. The teacher also gave permission in Nepali because she also felt comfortable in speaking in Nepali. According to Rauteda (2024), "translanguaging is used intentionally and purposefully to motivate, praise, and encourage the learners" (p. 51). Likewise, in Binaya's class, the practice of taking permission occurs in learners' mother tongues because students feel easy to speak in their mother tongues. During the class observation in class three, the first author noted an excerpt from Binaya's class:

Mahesh: Sir, *mero* pen *daile lageko chha lier aau* (My brother has taken my pen. May I bring that?)

Binaya: Yes, *chhito lier aau* (bring fast).

Dolma: Sir, *ghanti bajyo. Kitab* bag *ma rakhau*? **Ghanti rapji kitab bag ri mula.** (The bell rang. May I keep books in the bag?)

Binaya: *Hunchha rakha. **mula.*** (Yes. You can).

One of the students Mahesh asked permission with the teacher in Nepali language to bring his pen which was taken by his brother. The teacher had become flexible in the medium of language because he had resisted the EMI policy as he and his students could not speak English fluently (Karki, 2023). This practice created the classroom interactive place in which teachers and students could communicate without hesitation. Dolma, a girl in grade three, used her mother tongue, Tamang in the classroom while getting permission from his teacher; as Karki (2023) suggests, teachers use translanguaging to provide instructions to students. The EMI policy is affected by the ecological aspects of the society because school is a social unit, and the socio-cultural aspects of the society always affect the use of language in the class (Sharma, 2023). Likewise, the students bring their linguistic repertoire during teaching learning process (Ghimire, 2024; Sah & Li, 2020). Further, the translingual practice can also be seen outside the classroom as observed in the following vignette.

After class observation at Marin Thakur School, we stood for some time in the school premises in which many students were playing because it was break (tiffin) time. We carefully watched the students and found that Tamang children were communicating with their friends in their own mother tongue. Although they felt hesitation to use their mother tongue formally in the class, they used it informally with their friends on the school premises. After that, we went to the staff room where the teachers were talking in Nepali language about a picnic program for going to Kalinchowk. During this period, a student came in the door of the staff room and talked to a teacher. The following was an excerpt of that interaction:

Arun: May I come in, Madam?

Sujita: Yes, come in. *Kina*? (Why?)

Arun: *Pani khana.* (To drink water)

Sujita: *Dharama chhaina?* (Is there no water in the tap?)

Arun: *Dharo banda rahechha.* (The tap has been closed). Filter*ko pani khanu paryo?* (I want to drink the water from the filter)

Sujita: *Hunchha,* (Ok) drink.

Arun: Thank you, Madam.

Not only in the classroom pedagogy, but also the teachers and students use their mother tongues in the staff room and school premises. In this concern, Binaya said, "students' foundation in English is very weak. They use Nepali in the classrooms and school premises. If we speak English to them, they just watch our mouths. They do not understand what we are saying in English." In this situation, both the students and teachers negotiate the EMI policy and use their mother tongue for making communication among them either inside or outside the classroom for socialization.

Teacher Agency as Creating Translanguaging Space in the Examination

The teachers play their agentive role during exams by translating the meaning of the questions in the learners' mother tongue through translanguaging practice. Teachers use students' native languages in classrooms to enhance clarity, confidence, and emotional engagement (Rauteda, 2024). The students had to write the answers in English for the exam. While we were observing the exam at Bhimsen School, we found that the students were asking the meaning of the question to the teacher and writing the answer in English. Moreover, the teachers were telling the meaning of the question in the Nepali language which is shown in the following excerpt.

Parwati: Sir, *Yo* 2 no. *ko prashanle ke bhaneko ho* (Sir, what is the meaning of question No. 2)?

Prakash: *Tala dieka sabda rakher khali thau bharnu bhaneko ho* (You have to fill in the blank by putting the given words).

Ganesh: Sir, *yo* tick the correct answer *bhaneko ke ho ni* (Sir, what do you mean by 'tick the correct answer')?

Prakash: *kosthama dieka madhya sahi sabda chhaner chinha lagaunu bhaneko ho* (you have to tick the correct answer by selecting the words from the brackets)

Laxmi: Sir, *yo* true/false *ma* 'A donkey carries a load' *bhaneko ke ho* (Sir, what is the meaning of 'A donkey carries a load')?

Prakash: *Gadhale bhari bokchha*.

Sabita: Sir, *yo* 7 *ma ke bhaneko ho* (what is the meaning of question No. 7)?

Prakash: *Talaka prashna ko uttar ek sabdama lekha* (Answer the following questions in a single word).

Laxman: Sir, where does rabbit live? *Bhaneko ke ho?*

Prakash: *Malie* class *ma* animals *ko bassthan padhaeko thie ni* (I had taught you about the shelter of animals). *Kharayo kaha baschha bhaneko ho* (Where does rabbit live?).

After observation of the Examination, the first author asked a question to Prakash who was an invigilator in the exam, "Do the students write in English in the exam? He said:

Most of the students do not understand the questions. When we tell the meaning of the questions in Nepali, they write the answer in English. Some students leave the questions without writing the answers even if they know the answers because they do not understand the questions. Some students write the answers in Roman as well.

Prakash's narrative demonstrates that the students could not write the answer without supporting of the teachers. Their low proficiency in English, particularly in speaking,

listening, and writing, has been observed to be posing an obstacle to implementing the EMI policy (Rai, 2024).The students usually recite the answers and the teachers clarify the meaning of the questions in their native languages and then they write them in English medium. There was translingual practice in the exam in the EMI community schools. During the exam period, the first author visited Kamalamata School and talked with students about their experiences with the exam, which was noted:

> The students were gathered in front of the school buildings. I approached them and asked about their exam. A boy immediately said they did not understand the questions and asked the teacher to explain the meanings in Nepali. After the teacher translated the questions into Nepali, he wrote his answers in English. (Field note: 12 March 2024)

The students could not write in the English medium because of their low proficiency in the English language. They could not understand English-medium questions, so the teacher facilitated them in Nepali. The translanguaging practice in the examinations assisted the students in writing the answer in English (Karki, 2023). Regarding the translanguaging practice in examination at Marin Thakur School, Binaya mentioned, "I read the questions in English. Then, I translate the entire question into Nepali, interpreting the content. After that, the students write the answer in English". Mother tongues have become a mediated tool for the students to learn English language in the English medium community schools (Phyak et al., 2022).

Translanguaging practices during classroom teaching or examinations break down linguistic barriers and increase student engagement by allowing students to express themselves and understand content in a language they are comfortable with. Binaya, Lalita and Praksh's use of students' mother tongues allowed for a smoother flow of communication, enabling students to grasp the lesson better and gain confidence in classroom activities. This practice demonstrates how translanguaging practices can support a more inclusive, interactive, and effective learning environment, accommodating students' diverse linguistic backgrounds (Phyak, 2018). It highlights that multilingual classrooms require flexibility in language use, as enforcing a monolingual EMI approach can create communication gaps and hinder student learning. Translanguaging, on the other hand, bridges these gaps and provides an environment where students can thrive academically while gradually developing their English proficiency (Probyn, 2015).

Conclusion and Implications

This study reveals that teachers in EMI community schools in Nepal actively exercise their agency to navigate the challenges of the EMI policy. By employing translanguaging practices such as utilizing bilingual textbooks, incorporating students' mother tongues in classroom interactions, and facilitating comprehension during examinations, teachers adapt the monolingual the EMI policy to suit their multilingual classroom contexts better. These practices enable teachers to balance policy demands with the linguistic realities of their

students, fostering inclusive and interactive teaching-learning practices. Teachers' use of bilingual textbooks shows a practical strategy to overcome linguistic barriers, highlighting their agency in bridging the gap between English medium policy and classroom multilingual contexts. Similarly, translanguaging practices during classroom interactions and examinations allow for effective communication and understanding, ensuring students remain engaged and confident. These adaptive strategies emphasize the critical role of teacher agency in transforming EMI classrooms into spaces where multilingual students can thrive academically. The findings underline the importance of recognizing teachers' voices and their localized strategies to mitigate the challenges posed by the EMI policy. Teachers' agentive practices serve not only as a means of resistance to monolingual constraints but also as an essential approach to promoting meaningful and inclusive learning in multilingual settings.

The study's findings suggest that policymakers need to consider the socio-linguistic actualities of classrooms while developing and executing the EMI policy. Integrating flexible, bilingual approaches into the policy framework can empower teachers to effectively address students' diverse linguistic needs. Integrating translanguaging practices for classroom instruction in teachers' professional development programs is better. Furthermore, curriculum developers and school administrations neeed to consider for creating the supportive environments that acknowledge and promote multilingual practices. Providing access to bilingual textbooks and training on translanguaging techniques can help teachers bridge linguistic gaps and enhance learning outcomes. By valuing teacher agency and fostering linguistic inclusivity, educational stakeholders can create EMI classrooms that align better with the complex linguistic realities of multilingual community schools in Nepal.

Acknowledgement

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Appendix I

Semi-Structured Questions for In-Depth Interview

1. What is your perception towards the EMI policy in your schools?

2. Does the EMI policy implement with your participation?

3. Is there any pressure to follow the EMI policy forcefully in your school?

4. How do you teach academic subjects in EMI classes?

5. How do you prepare lessons to teach in English?

6. Do you feel any difficulty to teach in English?

7. Do students use English language in classrooms?

8. I think students are from multilingual backgrounds in your classrooms. In this context, what problems do you face while teaching academic subjects in English?

9. Please tell me your efforts with some examples of negotiating the EMI policy while teaching academic subjects in English.

10. Do the students understand questions in English?

11. What languages do students use during examination?