



From Pariah to Partner: The Effect of Translanguaging on The Strategic Competence of ESL Learners in Pakistan

Aftab Hussain¹, Shahabullah², Zakir Ali³, Shan Zeb⁴

¹ PhD Scholar, Department of English Language and Applied Linguistics, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, Pakistan. sunswabi@gmail.com

² Lecturer, Abbottabad University of Science and Technology, Abbottabad. shahabullah@aust.edu.pk

³ MPhil Scholar, Department of English, Northern University Nowshera. uoszakirali@gmail.com

⁴ MPhil Scholar, Department of English, Northern University Nowshera. shahzaibyousofzai222@gmail.com

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*Corresponding author: (Shahabullah)

Corresponding Author email

Shahabullah@aust.edu.pk

ORCID: 0009-0003-6822-8001

Abstract

This study explores the impact of a translanguaging pedagogical approach on the development of strategic competence in English as a Second Language (ESL) learners focusing on secondary school students in Swabi, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Strategic competence, essential for managing communication breakdowns, remains underdeveloped in traditional monolingual ESL classrooms. This research used a quasi-experimental, pretest-posttest control group design with 10th-grade male students, comparing a translanguaging based approach with a conventional monolingual teaching model. The experimental group used their first language (L1) as a cognitive resource in language learning, while the control group adhered to a traditional approach. The findings indicate a significant improvement in the strategic competence of the experimental group, suggesting that integrating L1 in ESL pedagogy enhances communication strategies and reduces affective filters. The study calls for a shift from monolingual to multilingual teaching practices in Pakistan's ESL classrooms, advocating for the use of students' full linguistic repertoire as an asset for language learning. The findings offer insights for curriculum developers, educators, and policymakers to improve ESL education in multilingual contexts.

Keywords:

*Translanguaging,
Strategic Competence,
Monolingualism,
Multilingualism,
L1 in L2 Classroom,
Inclusive Education*

Introduction

English occupies a significant place in Pakistan functioning simultaneously as a lingua franca, medium of instruction, and a gateway to global opportunities (Ghenghesh, 2015; Haidar, 2019; Shahid et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023). Proficiency in English as a Second Language (ESL) is considered the passport of employment within the global marketplace. It also offers opportunities in matters of international diplomacy (Oducado, 2020; Plotnikova et al., 2020; Rao, 2019; Razzaq, 2023). However, the ESL educational landscape in the country, and specifically Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is dominated by educational practices which undermine the development of true communicative competence (Ahmad et al., 2022; Lashari et al., 2023; Salahuddin, 2025). ESL education has a historical base using approaches that have predominantly been used over the past forty years, especially the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) (Abbas & Asghar, 2022; Ahmad et al., 2024; Awan & Awan, 2016; Lashari et al., 2023; Leghari, 2023). GTM emphasizes rules of grammar, vocabulary memorisation, and translating appropriately, but does not develop students' ability to use English effectively and appropriately in real contexts of communication (Ahmad et al., 2024; Leghari, 2023; Mukhtar et al., 2021). As a result, many Pakistani ESL learners continue to experience difficulty with their spoken fluency and the functionality of their language despite receiving years of language education (Ahmad et al., 2023; Brown & Yule, 1983; Khan et al., 2020). Learners may be able to articulate formal language grammatical rules, yet are unable to produce spontaneous speech in an environment requiring real time communication. (Ahmad et al., 2023).

This situation creates considerable linguistic, psychological, and social issues for learners, namely, a lack of confidence, a fear of making mistakes and a general hesitancy to speak (Ajmal et al., 2020; Aqeel, 2014; Khan et al., 2020). The existing monolingual educational paradigm emphasizing the exclusive use of L2 invalidate the learners' most valuable linguistic resource, their L1 (Durrani, 2012; Rahman, 2020).

To respond to the limitations of these monolingual, structure focused paradigms, a 'multilingual turn' has emerged in applied linguistics, advocating for pedagogical approaches that acknowledge the learners' full linguistic repertoire (García & Li, 2014; Li, 2018; May, 2011; Vogel & García, 2017). At the forefront of this paradigm shift is translanguaging. As theorized by researchers such as Ofelia García and Li Wei, translanguaging suggests that multilingualism involves a single, integrated linguistic system and that multilingual individuals can use all of their linguistic resources to make meaning and to communicate (García, 2009; García & Li, 2014; Li, 2018; Otheguy et al., 2015; Vogel & García, 2017). Unlike code-switching, which can be seen as switching from one linguistic code to another, translanguaging is a deliberate pedagogical stance to support and affirm students' dynamic bilingualism as an asset for learning (García & Li, 2014; Li, 2018; Pacific Learning, n.d.).

This study stems from this pedagogical shift and its benefits to support a particular, crucial deficit in Pakistani ESL learners: strategic competence. As defined by Canale and Swain (1980), strategic competence is the ability to compensate for communication breakdowns. Strategic competence is fundamentally what allows people to effectively and appropriately participate in real world interactions even when they do not have full knowledge of the language (Bachman, 1990; Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980; Faerch & Kasper, 1983). Allowing learners to use their L1 to think, and mediate and repair communication is a powerful means of developing their strategic competence.

Problem Statement

Secondary school ESL students are faced with substantial deficiencies in their communicative competence, specifically, their strategic competence (Ahmad et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2020; Shah et al., 2024). This deficit is predominantly the result of conventional, monolingual teaching approaches often associated with an overemphasis on grammatical correctness while sidestepping the communicative fluency that the learners must develop. The invalidation of the learners' L1 as a communicative resource (Abbas & Asghar, 2022; Ahmad et al., 2024; Durrani, 2012; Leghari, 2023; Rahman, 2020) leads to the marginalization of their linguistic repertoire, which exacerbates disconnections, breakdowns in communication, social isolation, and increased anxieties about language performance (Ajmal et al., 2020; Aqeel & Sajid, 2014; Khan et al., 2020). Thus, there is a need to develop strategies that build the strategic competence of ESL learners to ensure effective communication in real life contexts. The current study explores the use of a translanguaging based pedagogical strategy in order to improve the strategic competence of ESL learners.

Research Objectives

The current study has the following objectives.

1. To examine the effect of a translanguaging based pedagogical intervention on the strategic competence of 1ESL learners.
2. To ascertain the difference in the development of strategic competence among ESL learners exposed to a translanguaging pedagogy compared to those learning in a traditional classroom.
3. To contribute to empirical evidence that can inform ESL pedagogical practices and curriculum design in Pakistan.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The current study is guided by the following research question.

RQ1: Does a translanguaging based instructional approach significantly improve the strategic competence of 10th grade male ESL learners in Swabi when compared to a traditional monolingual approach?

The current study tries to address the following hypothesis.

H₀: There is no significant difference in the mean scores of strategic competence between ESL learners learning through a translanguaging based approach and those taught through a traditional monolingual approach.

Significance of the Study

The implications of this study are anticipated to counter immense concerns for a range of stakeholders within the Pakistani education system. For ESL teachers, it provides justification for an evidence-based, asset based pedagogy that will facilitate engagement and communicative ability and will transform teacher centered and passive learner centered pedagogies to participatory practices (Lashari et al., 2018; Salahuddin, 2025). For students, translanguaging can lower the affective filter, reduce language anxiety through validation of a student's linguistic identities, and empower them with strategies for effective communication (Auerbach, 1993; Salahuddin, 2025). For curriculum developers and policymakers, it provides empirical evidence presented for a pedagogical transition away from monolingualism and into the development and delivery of principled, multilingual approaches to the national curriculum and teacher training (Durrani, 2012; Rahman, 2020; The British Council, 2022). In conclusion, this research advances the generative academic conversation of translanguaging with empirical data from the less

researched context of South Asia (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020; Mukherjee & Vasantha, 2002; Salahuddin, 2025).

Delimitation of the Study

The current study is delimited in its scope to district Swabi, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The study exclusively focuses on male students of 10th grade in the public sector schools. This study investigates the impact of translanguaging strategy on only one component of communicative competence: strategic competence.

Literature Review

The Transition from Monolingualism to Multilingualism in Language Pedagogy

For more than one hundred years, language teaching was guided by the 'monolingual principle', which is supported by Howatt (1984), and suggests that the best way to learn a second language is to not use the L1 (Cummins, 2007; Howatt, 1984; Littlewood & Yu, 2011; Yu, 2001). The language teaching methods that resulted from this approach included the Direct Method and Audio Lingual Method, and were developed in order to provide immersion into L2 learning environments without L1 use (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004; Leghari, 2023; Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Weideman, 2016). Although Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) brought a shift away from focusing strictly on linguistic form, to thinking about language in terms of communicative functions, the monolingual principle would often remain unacknowledged and taken for granted (Bax, 2003; Harmer, 2003; Littlewood, 2014; Thompson, 2019).

But, the monolingual lens has increasingly been challenged by a multilingual turn in applied linguistics (May, 2011). Critics of the concept of 'monolingualism' describe how the approach positions the L2 learner as a deficit compared to an idealized (and often unattainable) native speaker standard (Cook, 1999; Decressac, 2024; Jenkins, 2006; Sridhar, 2012). When one view the L2 learner in this frame, L2 learning does not take into consideration the L2 user's cognitive reality, as their languages are not compartmentalize but rather form an integrated system. Vivian Cook's (1991) introduction of the idea of multicompetence was the 'first substantial attempt' to suggest that the mind of the L2 user is a co-mingling of the L1 and L2, and fundamentally different than that of a monolingual user (Cook, 1991, 1992, 2003, 2016). The notion of viewing the L2 user as a 'multicompetent individual' shifts the focus away from the L2 user as a 'failed native speaker' and instead suggests that the L2 user's mind is structured differently, operating as multilingual, and does not have an equivalent in monolingualism (Cook, 1999; Cook, 2002; McCray & Hanks, 2024; Schneider, 2023).

Translanguaging: Theory and Pedagogy

Translanguaging theory, developed by García (2009) and Li Wei (2018), is the most comprehensive version of this multilingual perspective (García, 2009; García & Li, 2014; Li, 2018; Vogel & García, 2017). It expands the position of two discrete languages in the bilingual mind and suggests a unitary (or whole) linguistic repertoire (Otheguy et al., 2015; Vogel & García, 2017). Multilinguals dynamically draw from the features of their respective linguistic repertoire to make context specific meaning (García, 2014; Li, 2018). As part of this process, multilinguals do not simply switch codes, but rather they are engage in a natural sustained process of meaning making that extends to the socially constructed boundaries of named languages (Li, 2018; Pacific Learning, n.d.).

As pedagogy, translanguaging engages the full linguistic repertoire of the learner's resources for learning, intentionally and systematically (Auerbach, 1993; Bismilla, 2011; Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; Faris et al., 2023). It is a transformative practice that challenges that linguistic hierarchies are embedded in a monolingual education model towards better inclusion and equitable possible involvement for students (García & Li, 2014; Vogel & García, 2017). In an ESL class, translanguaging calls for learners to utilize their L1 to engage L2 learning. This might look something like listing ideas in L1 before doing a speaking task, discussing complicated concepts in an L1 strategy with all students in small groups, or using L1 to leverage negotiation of meaning in a communication context (Auerbach, 1993; Faris et al., 2023; Pacific Learning, n.d.). Likewise, translanguaging can deepen understanding of content knowledge, lower the affective filter of learners, and build metalinguistic awareness (Auerbach, 1993; Cenoz & Santos, 2020; Pacific Learning, n.d.).

Communicative Competence and the Role of Strategic Competence

The purpose of modern English language teaching is to develop the communicative competence of learners, which adds to grammatical knowledge by ensuring students will use language appropriately within social contexts (Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972). The framework for communicative competence provided by Canale and Swain (1980), later revised by Canale (1983) has been a major contributor for this notion. They identified four important dimensions:

- i. **Grammatical Competence:** Knowledge of vocabulary, syntax, morphology, pronunciation (Canale & Swain, 1980).
- ii. **Sociolinguistic Competence:** Knowledge of use and sociocultural rules (Canale & Swain, 1980).
- iii. **Discourse Competence:** Linking utterances together to create a meaningful whole (Canale, 1983).

iv. **Strategic Competence:** Mastery of verbal and non-verbal compensatory strategies used to compensate breakdowns in interaction and help the effectiveness of communication (Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980). Bachman's (1990) model of Communicative Language Ability (CLA) further developed these sub-competences by analyzing strategic competence into metacognitive processes (assessment, planning, execution) that regulate other aspects of language use (Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996).

Strategic competence is particularly important to ESL learners, who encounter communicative challenges, due to their developing linguistic system (Celce-Murcia et al., 1995; Koay, 2015). It is in other words, 'the ability to solve communication problems in the absence of an adequate command of the linguistic and sociocultural code' (Mariani, 1997). These strategies can be placed into two main categories (Faerch & Kasper, 1983):

Reduction Strategies: Where the learner avoid a problem by dropping the message or using a simpler message (e.g., topic avoidance, message abandonment) (Mariani, 1997).

Achievement Strategies: Where the learner attempts to solve the problem and keep the original message. These include, for example, paraphrase (using synonymous or description), borrowing from L1 (code-switching), generalization (using a superordinate term such as 'flower' for 'daffodil'), and making appeals (Mariani, 1997).

Strategic competence can build in learner operations to remain engaged in the communication, negotiate meaning, and take risks to create even more opportunities for language acquisition in different contexts (Celce-Murcia et al., 1995; Koay, 2015; Mariani, 1997).

The ESL Context in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Pakistan

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is a multilingual environment, where Pashto is the first language of the majority, and Urdu is the national language and lingua franca (Khan, 2023; Wikipedia, n.d). English is official and is considered a second language and linguistic capital for higher education and getting ahead in the job market (Khan, 2023; Raja, 2014; Syed, 2024).

As with other regions of Pakistan, public sector ESL classrooms in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa almost entirely adhere to the grammar-translation method (GTM), and primarily focus on reading and writing from textbooks so that learners can pass tests (Ahmad et al., 2024; Awan & Awan, 2016; Leghari, 2023). Examples of authentic spoken communication are rare in these environments, which leaves students with a notable gap in their speaking and listening (Ahmad et al., 2024; Haider & Sharjeel, 2020; Leghari, 2023). Elementary learners experience various challenges in reading, listening to, and interacting in English, such as a lack of vocabulary, feeling shy when they make a mistake, and low self-confidence (Ajmal et al., 2020; Aqeel, 2014; Ahmad et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2020). Learning through a translanguaging pedagogy, one that is grounded in students' lived multilingual experiences, offers a theoretically sound solution to the unrelenting problems ESL learners encounter (Salahuddin, 2025).

Research Methodology

To examine the causal relationship between the pedagogical intervention (translanguaging) and the development of strategic competence, this study employed a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest control group design (Gray, 2023; Harris et al., 2006; Hulley, 2013; Maciejewski, 2020). This design is suitable for educational contexts where individual random assignment of students to groups is impractical; instead, intact classes are selected (Harris et al., 2006). The researchers has selected two existing 10th grade classes; one as the experimental group and one as the control group. Both groups were administered a pre-test to provide a baseline level of strategic competence and a post-test after the intervention period to measure the degree of change.

Population and Sample

The population for this research included all male ESL learners in the 10th grade, studying in public secondary schools in the district of Swabi, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The sample comprised of 60 students from two intact classes at a single government high school through convenience sampling. 30 students were assigned each to the experimental and control groups.

Experimental Group (EG): One class of 30 students (n=30)

Control Group (CG): One class of 30 students (n=30)

The students' ages were between 15-16 years, the students' primary L1 was Pashto and they also had some proficiency in Urdu, the national language. The students' exposure to English was limited to the formal classroom setting.

Data Collection Tools and Procedure

The communicative task was used as the primary data collection instrument which was developed to elicit the employment of communication strategies. The communicative task was administered as a pre-test and post-test.

Instrument: The researchers used a structured role-play to collect the data. Students, working in pair, received differing information cards, and were instructed to negotiate a solution to a scenario-based problem (for example,

planning a school event with conflicting constraints). The scenarios were designed to create information gaps and possible lexical difficulties, thereby requiring the use of strategic competence.

Scoring: The role-play performance was audio-recorded, and then independently scored by two independent raters using a rubric that was adapted from previous frameworks of strategic competence (e.g., following the participated work of Faerch & Kasper, 1983). The rubric measured each student's competence based on the frequency of use, and effectiveness of the different achievement strategies, such as paraphrase, circumlocution, approximation, appeal for assistance, and selective L1 use for planning or clarification.

Procedure:

- i. **Pre-Test:** Both the EG and CG were administered the same role-play task at the beginning of the study to assess their strategic competence on a baseline measure.
- ii. **Intervention:** The Experimental Group received ESL instruction for eight (08) weeks implementing and grounded in a pedagogical translanguaging framework. The teacher was trained to strategically and systematically incorporate Pashto and Urdu to assist in learners' language learning. This entailed: allowing and encouraging students to use L1 when brainstorming and planning before speaking tasks; encouraging students to engage in L1 peer to peer interaction to clarify difficult concepts; and finally allowing students to use L1 to describe the purpose and function of the different communication strategies before practicing them in English. The Control Group received instruction based on a traditional and typical classroom method used at the school. The content and learning objectives were the same as the experimental group.
- iii. **Post-Test:** Following the 8-week intervention period both groups were administered the same role play task to measure any noticeable difference in their strategic competence level.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data from the pre-test and post-test scores were analyzed using the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

Descriptive Statistics: The Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (SD) were calculated for pre-test and post-test scores of both groups to summarize the data.

Inferential Statistics: An independent sample t-test was used to compare the mean gain scores (post-test minus pre-test) between experimental and control groups. The independent samples t-test was selected to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between groups in the improvement of strategic competence. The significance level or alpha was set at $p < 0.05$.

Key Findings

The analysis of the data resulted in the following key findings.

Pre-test Comparison: The data from the pre-test indicated that the experimental group ($M = 10.5$, $SD = 2.1$) and the control group ($M = 10.2$, $SD = 2.3$) did not differ significantly in mean scores, which affirmed that the two groups had similar levels of strategic competence before the intervention.

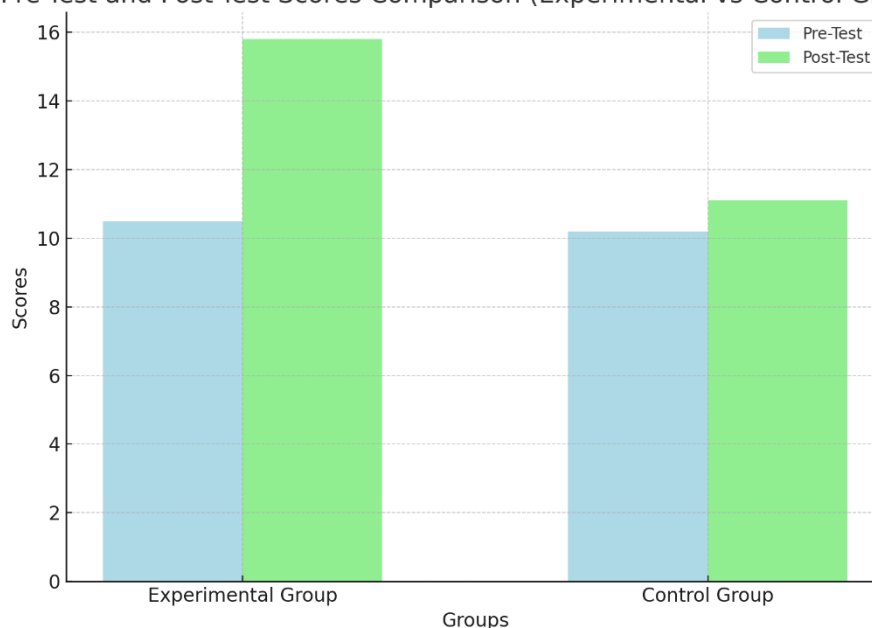
Post-test Comparison: After the eight-week intervention, the post-test scores demonstrated a significant difference between the two groups. The post-test mean score for the experimental group ($M = 15.8$, $SD = 2.5$) was much greater than that of the control group ($M = 11.1$, $SD = 2.4$).

Gain Score Analysis: An independent samples t-test conducted on the gain scores indicated that there was a significant difference between the experimental group and the control group, $t(58) = 8.34$, $p < .001$. The mean gain score for the experimental group ($M = 5.3$) was significantly greater than the mean gain score for the control group ($M = 0.9$).

Thus, the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected. Overall, the results suggest that the translanguaging-based pedagogical intervention had a significant and positive impact on the development of strategic competence of ESL learners in the experimental group. Qualitative observations made during the role-plays observed that the ESL learners in the experimental group were also more willing to take communicative risks, used a wider repertoire of achievement strategies, and indicated a lower level of communication anxiety than the learners in the control group.

Figure 1: Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores Comparison of Experimental and Control Groups

Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores Comparison (Experimental vs Control Groups)



Discussion and Conclusion

The key findings from this study provide strong evidence in support of the hypothesis, which posits that a pedagogical translanguaging approach is more effective than a traditional monolingualist approach in teaching and developing strategic competence with ESL learners in Pakistan. This research reveals substantial improvement in the experimental group, compared to the control group, for a number of reasons that align with a translanguaging theoretical framework.

First, validating the ESL learners' L1, translanguaging pedagogy reduced the learners' affective filter (Auerbach, 1993; Çelik, 2020; Krashen, 1985). The monolingual policy in the control group, on the other hand, reflected that anxiety and fear of making mistakes, could have constricted students' spoken performance as they used reduction strategies, like message abandonment to avoid an interruption in the process of communication (Ajmal et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2020). The experimental group benefitted from the pedagogical landscape as they could access their L1 to scaffold their cognition, in planning utterances; discussing difficult ideas with their peers, and finding vocabulary. This enabled them to try and negotiate more complex communication in English (Faris et al., 2023; Pacific Learning, n.d.)

Second, translanguaging provides learners with a valuable cognitive tool (Auerbach, 1993; Bismilla, 2011; Faris et al., 2023) to use their strongest linguistic resource (L1) to process complicated ideas and develop communicative strategies before carrying them out in the L2. This position aligns with the interactional view of strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Mariani, 1997) that suggests that strategic competence means working together to collaboratively arrive at a solution to an issue. The experimental group demonstrated an effective flow of communication as they were able to use their L1 to better understand prompts, better schedule negotiations, and move their cognitive resources towards achieving their communicative goals in English.

Third, the translanguaging approach acknowledged and legitimized the learners' multilingual identity (Salahuddin, 2025). Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is a multilingual and multicultural society, where students use multiple languages in their day-to-day life; however, a monolingualistic classroom is an artificial and isolating environment which does not embrace such a diversity. In contrast, a translanguaging classroom is empowering and better reflects the lived linguistic experiences of the learners. The legitimisation of the ESL learners' multilingual identity leads to an enhanced confidence and willingness to engage in the communicative tasks, both of which are essential for developing communicative competence.

Furthermore, the findings of this study challenge long held monolingual assumptions of ESL pedagogy in Pakistan (Abbas & Asghar, 2022; Ahmad et al., 2024; Awan & Awan, 2016; Leghari, 2023) and demonstrate that the use of the ESL learners' L1 is a resource and not a source of interference to L2 learning when strategically and systematically employed.

Conclusion

The current research examined how translanguaging pedagogy affects the strategic competence of 10th grade male ESL (English as a Second Language) learners in Swabi, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The quasi-experimental research design offered a clear evidence to the use of the learners' L1 (first language) as a systematic and structured pedagogical resource, yielded significantly better outcomes in strategic competence compared to a traditional monolingual approach. Based on the findings of this research, the implications for Pakistan and language education in general are of considerable importance. They suggest an essential paradigm shift away from subtractive, explicit monolingual teaching methodologies to an additive multilingual framework which reflects the sociolinguistic reality of Pakistan and language education as well as the cognitive processes involved in language learning.

Recommendations

The researchers suggest the inclusion of modules on translanguaging theory in both pre-service and in-service teacher training to prepare teachers to use students' L1 as a purposeful resource instead of a deficit. Curriculum developers are recommended to revise ESL curriculum and textbooks ensure a paradigm shift from a rigid monolingual stance and incorporate activities that promote systematic and structured translanguaging. Future researchers are suggested to study the effect of translanguaging on other elements of communicative competence, and with different populations of students (e.g. male, female, and age ranges, urban students) in Pakistan. In addition, longitudinal studies would provide further and deeper insights into the long term effects of this pedagogical approach.

To summarise, by embracing translanguaging, ESL teachers can create more equitable and effective classrooms that not only improve language proficiency but also empower learners by validating their entire linguistic repertoire. Moreover, it represents a purpose and design to bridge between knowing a language and being able to mobilize and strategically use it in the real world.

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