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Between Code and Culture: Is Translanguaging a Disruption or a Bridge in ESL?

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ABSTRACT

The use of translanguaging or also known as the strategic shifting between two or more languages has sparked ongoing debate in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. While some educators discourage its use in favour of full language immersion, others recognise its potential in supporting students with low English proficiency. This study investigates students' perceptions of translanguaging and explores the benefits ESL teachers associate with its implementation in the language learning process. Fifty secondary school students and two teachers from two schools in the Serian Division of Sarawak participated in the study. English was promoted as the primary medium of instruction with limited encouragement for translanguaging. A mixed-method approach was used for data collection. Data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with the two ESL teachers to capture their perspectives on the roles and values of translanguaging in classroom practice. Findings indicate that translanguaging practices positively influenced students' ESL development. Teachers reported using translanguaging to explain grammar rules, enhance comprehension of classroom activities, and motivate student participation, especially among learners with lower proficiency levels. The study underscores the pragmatic benefits of translanguaging as a scaffolding tool in multilingual ESL classrooms. It suggests that translanguaging can facilitate deeper understanding and learner engagement when applied judiciously rather than hindering learning. It serves as an effective pedagogical strategy for supporting low-proficiency ESL students. Recognising its value may help educators create more inclusive and linguistically responsive learning environments. Future research should examine the long-term impact of translanguaging on learners' overall language proficiency and academic performance across different educational contexts.

1. INTRODUCTION

The English language teachers' training in Malaysia has always advocated that teachers use only English in ESL classrooms. However, the teacher training approach did not acknowledge the role of literacies and the learners' attitudes shaped by their mother tongue and environment (Hazita, 2005). Besides Malay, English, Chinese, and Iban, more than 30 other dialects are the mother tongues of the 37 ethnic groups in Sarawak. In the outskirts of towns and cities in Sarawak, English is hardly spoken except during English lessons. Many low-English-proficiency students treat English as a foreign language.

Under the Malaysian Education system, English is taught as a compulsory subject from Primary One to Form Five for eleven years. English is often used to communicate in urban areas where both parents are English-educated

professionals, unlike in rural areas where the home language is often the parents' mother tongues. Malaysia has accorded English as a second language status as stated in Article 152 and given it due attention (Nor Hashimah et al., 2008). Teachers' creativity would help students with low English proficiency to become more interested in learning English and avoid boredom in ESL classes. However, there are reported cases of non-option English language teachers who negatively affect the English language performance in schools because they failed to retain interest in learning English among low English proficiency students (Dealwis et al., 2023). It was also mirrored in the results of the students' school-based assessment (Fauzi et al., 2016).

The English-only policy in the English language classrooms has not prevented teachers from using Malay and the student's mother tongues to help them understand the English language better (Dealwis et al., 2021). The feedback from low English proficiency students on how they want to learn English can provide a better understanding of their English language learning needs (Dealwis et al., 2001). According to Dornyei (2020), strong motivations by the teachers can be disrupted by lack of language proficiency among students to enable them to participate in the lesson actively. The Malaysian Ministry of Education (MoE) launched the English Language Education Roadmap for Malaysia 2015 until 2025 which marks a strategic direction in second language education. The roadmap becomes a helpful guide for English language curriculum developers and teachers to ascertain that all Malaysian students can achieve proficiency levels aligned with international standards benchmarked against the Common European Framework of Reference or CEFR (Don, 2015).

The use of translanguaging (TL) in Sarawak classrooms has yet to be thoroughly explored. This research examines how TL provides linguistic support for LEP students in the ESL classroom at two secondary schools in Sarawak. This study adopts the definition provided by Garcia and Wei (2014) which states that bilinguals operate their entire linguistic repertoire to make meaning. One is the official community language, such as Bidayuh, whereas the second is the lesson's official language. In this study, the official language for instruction is *Bahasa Melayu* and the lesson's language is English. The research questions of this study are to investigate the students' perceptions, the benefits of TL for students, and the reasons teachers use TL.

The research questions for this study are formulated as shown below:

1. What are the LEP students' perceptions of TL in the ESL classroom?
2. What are the LEP students' attitudes towards TL?
3. What are the benefits of TL for LEP students in the ESL classroom?

Definition of TL

TL differs from code-switching since TL is a conscious strategy for developing language repertoire (Garcia & Lin, 2016). The term code-switching is similar to TL in that both terms refer to the switching between languages. Garcia et al. (2006) defined TL as using several languages in a classroom while Lin & Martin (2005) explained it as using two languages. One is the official community language, whereas the second is the lesson's official language. Garcia and Wei (2014) also refer to TL as the cognitive activities of students which enable them to make meaning by using their language repertoire (Garcia & Wei, 2014). Therefore, "TL refers to new language practices that make visible the complexity of language exchanges among people" (Garcia & Wei, 2014, p. 21). Ali (2021) denoted that TL is an effective pedagogical tool teachers use in multilingual classroom settings in Pakistan to help their students learn English.

Differences between TL and Code-switching

Garcia (2006) introduced the concept of TL which was initially related to code-switching. However, the two concepts were later differentiated in theory and practice. Code-switching is considered the result of interference from a person's first language and is often viewed as detrimental to the teaching and learning of a second language (Alhawary, 2018). Despite this, it has been recognised as a helpful strategy in language teaching.

On the other hand, code-switching refers to the switching between languages in various situational contexts (Nagy, 2017). In classroom settings, code-switching has been seen as problematic, causing embarrassment, guilt, and a perceived waste of bilingual resources as the languages are seen to contaminate each other (Creese & Blackledge, 2010). In contrast, TL is viewed as adding flexibility to pedagogical approaches in the classroom by making conveying, understanding, and communicating ideas easier.

The theoretical underpinning of TL is a sociocultural theory by Vygotsky (1978). The Vygotskian-based sociocultural theory of learning focuses on the heteronomous individual whose development relies on various social structures in which the individual lives (Lourenco, 2012). Sociocultural theory believes learning is a dynamic interdependence of social and individual processes anchored in social interaction and the co-construction of knowledge (Lantolf et al., 2018). TL generates several affordances and chances for learning during students' collaborative social interactions by fusing sociocultural theory and TL practices (Rajendram, 2021).

According to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, teachers and learners' diverse language backgrounds can be utilised as resources for teaching and learning (Ngubane et al., 2020). This idea aligns with TL pedagogy, where teachers incorporate learners' linguistic abilities in the classroom to promote equal learning opportunities (Garcia & Wei, 2014).

Benefits and Challenges

The studies on TL in various educational contexts highlight both common benefits and challenges while also revealing context-specific nuances. Too (2023), Nur Sakina et al. (2022), and Nur Mazliyana et al. (2023) examined the use of TL in Malaysian ESL classroom. They, emphasised its role as a scaffolding tool in teaching and learning. While teachers in these studies utilised TL across explanatory, managerial, and interpersonal strategies, they still faced constraints due to the monolingual policies prevalent in Malaysia's education system. This mirrors the challenges highlighted in Seals' (2021) study in New Zealand which also identified the empowering effects of TL particularly for heritage and new speakers. However, Seals focused more on how TL helps integrate diverse linguistic backgrounds in a broader socio-cultural context.

Santoso's (2020) study in Jakarta, Indonesia, similarly found that TL facilitated classroom management, comprehension, and communication. His focus was on the functional and behavioural aspects of TL in higher education. Compared to the studies in Malaysia and New Zealand, Santoso's findings emphasised more immediate classroom dynamics such as controlling student behaviour and improving direct communication. Overall, all studies agree on the effectiveness of TL as a pedagogical tool but the degree to which it is adopted and the areas it influences such as policy constraints, student empowerment, or classroom behaviour vary across different educational contexts.

2. METHODS

Participant bias did not exist in the selection process because all the respondents were from two classes in two secondary schools. Fifty Form 2 students studying a second language took part in a survey using a questionnaire. In addition, two English teachers who taught these students were interviewed. The research involved selecting all the students that the two English teachers recommended to gain a comprehensive understanding of TL (Neuman, 2014). The consent to conduct the study was given by both the students and the principals in the respective schools. The students had low English language proficiency in the lower classes of two government secondary schools in the Serian Division, Sarawak, East Malaysia. This paper aimed to investigate the perceptions, attitudes, and benefits of TL on the performance of low English proficiency learners in improving their English language proficiency. The secondary focus was to examine why ESL teachers
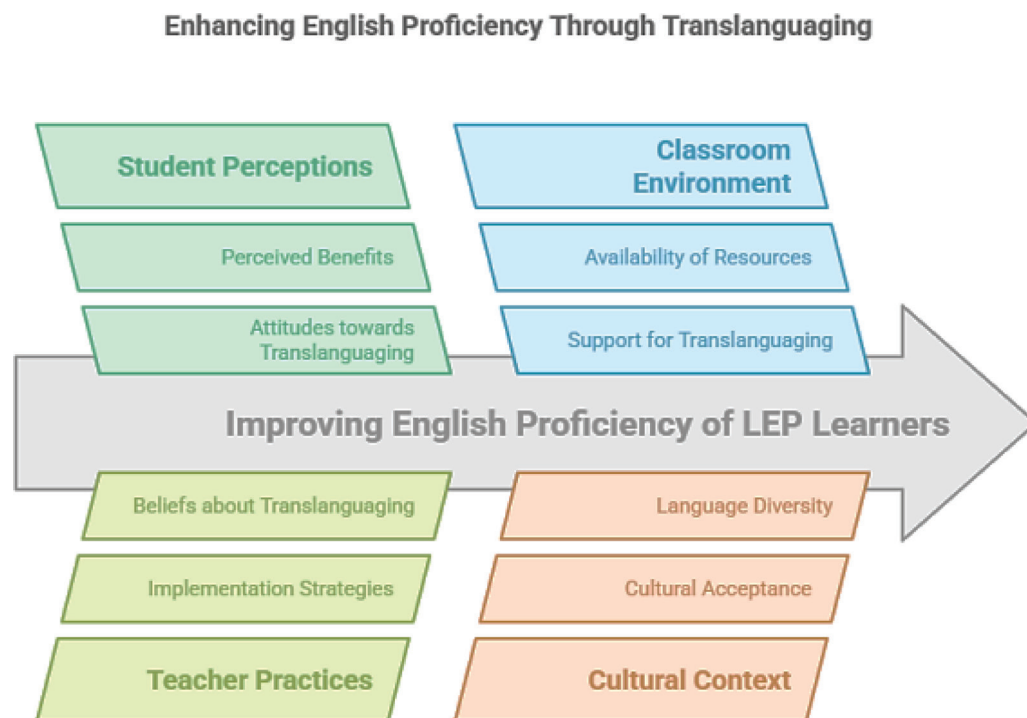

Enhancing English Proficiency Through Translanguaging

Student Perceptions · Perceived Benefits · Attitudes towards Translanguaging · Classroom Environment · Availability of Resources · Support for Translanguaging · Improving English Proficiency of LEP Learners · Beliefs about Translanguaging · Implementation Strategies · Teacher Practices · Language Diversity · Cultural Acceptance · Cultural Context

Figure 1: Conceptual framework.

recognized the significance of TL practices in the language learning process of their low-English-proficiency students.

The main participants in this study were LEP students in the schools. The students completed a questionnaire administered by the teachers and researchers. Subsequently, the teachers were individually interviewed. To illustrate, they were asked to explain why they allowed students to use TL in their teaching methods. The data obtained from the students were then shared with their respective teachers for their comments and allowing for a comparison of perspectives using the same method (Zulkefly & Razali, 2019).

3. RESULTS

This section provides the findings from the questionnaires the students completed to gauge their perceptions, attitudes, and understanding of the benefits of TL in the ESL classroom.

3.1 Students' Perceptions Towards *TL*

As illustrated in Table 1, a substantial majority of the respondents (90%) affirmed that their comprehension of English improved when their teacher allowed the use of Malay or their mother tongues in the ESL classrooms. In contrast, only 10% of the respondents occasionally expressed this view. Furthermore, 85% of the participants indicated that their confidence in using English increased when their teacher permitted them to respond in their native language, which, in turn, heightened their motivation to engage more actively in English language learning. However, 15% of the students expressed occasional alignment with this perspective.

Table 1: Students' perceptions towards TL

Statements	Yes	No	Sometimes
When the teacher allows me to use Malay/mother tongue, I can understand English better.	*90%*	*0%*	*10%*
I am confident when my English teacher allows me to respond using Malay/mother tongue.	*85%*	*0%*	*15%*
Using English mixed with my mother tongue can help me to learn English better.	*80%*	*0%*	*20%*
I am motivated to learn English when my teacher understands what I say in Malay/my mother tongue.	*85%*	*0%*	*15%*
Using English mixed with Malay/my language can help me think critically.	*70%*	*0%*	*30%*

Source: *Authors, 2024*

Similarly, 80% of the respondents believed that integrating English with their mother tongues positively contributed to their overall language acquisition process as opposed to the remaining 20% who occasionally recognised this benefit. Additionally, 70% of the students perceived that the practice of TL between English and their mother tongues fostered the development of their critical thinking skills while 30% acknowledged this belief occasionally.

These findings underscore a predominantly positive attitude among students toward TL. They firmly believed that the practice facilitated their understanding of English and contributed to increased confidence, enhanced motivation, and promoted higher-order cognitive skills such as critical thinking. This overall sentiment reflects the potential of TL to serve as a valuable pedagogical tool in ESL classrooms particularly for learners with lower proficiency levels.

3.2 Students' Attitudes Towards TL

In Table 2, all respondents (100%) unanimously agreed that having peers who spoke Malay or their mother tongues made TL in the classroom more manageable and more accessible. It demonstrates a shared belief that a familiar linguistic environment promotes smoother language communication. Additionally, 90% of the student respondents reported discomfort when trying to speak only in English which suggest that enforcing monolingualism can create a sense of artificiality and unease. In contrast, only 10% occasionally felt this way. Furthermore, 85% of the students expressed embarrassment when making errors in English and would resort to using their mother tongues or Malay when struggling for words. It proves TL as a strategy to

Table 2: Students' attitudes towards TL.

Statements	Yes	No	Sometimes
Other students in class know Malay/mother tongue.	*100%*	*0%*	*0%*
We speak Malay/mother tongue, so it feels awkward to "pretend" by speaking English only in class.	*90%*	*0%*	*10%*
It is embarrassing to say something wrong, and sometimes I don't know the words, so I use Malay/mother tongue.	*85%*	*0%*	*15%*
The English language does not always have the right word for what I want to say.	*70%*	*0%*	*30%*
I have the right to answer using Malay/mother tongue.	*75%*	*0%*	*25%*

Source: *Authors, 2024*

reduce language anxiety. Only 15% of the respondents occasionally shared this mindset.

The survey found that 75% of respondents felt comfortable answering their teacher in Malay or their mother tongues if they could not respond in English while 25% did so occasionally. Additionally, 70% of students reported that they did not always find the precise words or meanings they needed in English, leading them to rely on their native language. On the other hand, 30% of respondents only occasionally felt this way.

The overall positive attitude towards TL among the students was due to the perceived benefits of the practice. Switching between languages reduced the pressure to adhere to strict English-only rules and allowed for a more authentic learning experience. It also enables students to express themselves more fully and comfortably.

3.3 Benefits of TL for **Students**

Table 3 illustrates all respondents (100%) reported an enhanced understanding of English lessons when their teacher included other languages in the instruction. The result indicates a widespread recognition of the benefits of TL in improving comprehension. Moreover, 90% of the student respondents noted a substantial improvement in their grasp of English vocabulary and grammar through integrating other languages while only 10% occasionally observed the same advantage.

Moreover, 85% of the participants reported that their comprehension of subject- verb agreement and their English-speaking skills improved when TL was used in the classrooms. In contrast, 15% of the respondents only occasionally experienced this improvement. The

respondents overwhelmingly endorsed TL by crediting their language acquisition progress to this inclusive approach.

3.3 Student's Improvements in Self-**Expression**

Table 4 depicts all respondents indicated they benefited from greater engagement in English class when their teacher allowed them to respond in multiple languages. The flexible approach to language use promoted active participation. Additionally, 95% of the respondents reported that their ability to draw upon their knowledge of other languages, alongside English, enabled them to express their thoughts more freely and complete their tasks successfully, contributing to a heightened sense of satisfaction in learning English. Only 5% of the participants reported occasionally experiencing this advantage.

Moreover, 90% of the respondents acknowledged that incorporating other languages with English enhanced their capacity for self-expression. By contrast, just 10% of the students occasionally shared this sentiment. Similarly, 85% of the students reported that utilising both English and their mother tongues helped them to complete their academic work and highlighted the challenges of learning solely through English. In comparison, 15% of the respondents sometimes experienced this benefit.

Overall, respondents perceived significant advantages from TL particularly in terms of enhanced self-expression and engagement in the classroom. The flexibility to articulate thoughts using a combination of English, Malay, and their native languages provided

Table 3: Benefits of TL for students.

Statements	Yes	No	Sometimes
I speak English better when I mix it with other languages.	*85%*	*0%*	*15%*
I understand the English lesson better when the teacher mixes with other languages.	*100%*	*0%*	*10%*
I understand the English vocabulary better when the teacher mixes with other languages.	*90%*	*0%*	*10%*
I understand English grammar better when the teacher mixes with other languages.	*70%*	*0%*	*30%*
I understand the subject-verb agreement better when the teacher mixes with other languages.	*85%*	*0%*	*15%*

Source: *Authors, 2024*

Table 4: Improvements in self-expression.

Statements	Yes	No	Sometimes
I can use my knowledge of other languages mixed with English to describe freely what I can do.	*90%*	*0%*	*10%*
I can use my knowledge of other languages mixed with English to freely describe what I think.	*95%*	*0%*	*5%*
I can use my knowledge of other languages mixed with English to show that I can understand the difficulty of learning only using English.	*85%*	*0%*	*15%*
I can use my knowledge of other languages mixed with English to complete my work.	*95%*	*0%*	*5%*
Teacher's acceptance of my answer in mixed languages make me want to be active in English class.	*100%*	*0%*	*0%*

Source: *Authors, 2024*

students with valuable opportunities to express themselves more fully during English lessons, enriching their learning experience.

4. DISCUSSION

TL practices have shown to be advantageous for learners with low English proficiency by significantly improving their comprehension and communication skills while learning English. The teachers expressed comparable views on the importance of TL practices in their student's language learning journey. The two teachers participating in this study employed TL to teach their students English as a second language. During the semi-structured interview, the teachers indicated that the LEP learners engaged more during the TL lessons. Their approaches to TL in ESL classrooms focused on clarifying grammar rules, vocabulary items, and reading texts to facilitate student comprehension and promote English language acquisition. The aim is to align the findings with the research questions to gauge the low English proficiency students' perceptions, attitudes, and understanding of the benefits of TL in the ESL classrooms. The findings are detailed under three main thematic subheadings, as shown below.

a) To explain linguistic structures

The teachers wanted to make it easier for students with low English proficiency to understand the grammatical functions and vocabulary of the English language so they could write and speak more using English. According to Teacher 1, *"I have to explain the grammar during English language teaching. The TL approach helps me easily explain the English vocabulary items and grammar structures to low English proficiency students."* Both teachers were often frustrated when they were told that they had to teach using English only when the weaker students mostly did not understand what they were saying in the ESL classroom. They were fully aware that the English language has a system of grammar rules that low English proficiency students could not understand unless explained using the language most accessible for the students to understand, i.e., *Malay*.

Teacher 1 added, *"Teaching students with low English proficiency grammar rules requires me to have greater empathy and patience toward these students. I always try to place myself in the student's position. After all, English teaching aims to enable these students to use the English language correctly."* The TL approach required the ESL teachers to understand the Malay grammar rules and the student's mother tongue (Bidayuh) within the classroom. In the present study, all the students spoke fluent Malay, the language of school instruction. The Malay students spoke the Sarawak Malay dialect, and

the Bidayuh students spoke the *Bukar-Sadong Bidayuh* dialect at home, respectively. Both the ESL teachers were *Bidayuh* and could also speak *Malay*.

According to Teacher 2, *"Some untrained English language teachers asked their students to memorise the grammar rules. This is difficult for weaker and less proficient students. Soon, the students give up. By using the TL approach, I can make my students feel that they can also participate actively in learning English."* Both ESL teachers agreed that teaching reading was also challenging for them especially when the students had low English proficiency. However, teaching reading using the TL approach was an alternative to engage such students in their language-learning process. Teacher 2 added, *"How can I speak in English and expect my students to respond in English when they do not understand what I read? First, they must know enough English to be able to respond. For them to respond using English can be a daunting task. But, allowing a TL approach does help my students to understand the reading text."* The low-English proficiency students were encouraged to acquire a basic understanding of English.

It highlights how teachers use TL to explain linguistic structures, particularly grammar and vocabulary, to low-proficiency English students. Both teachers emphasised the need to use Malay, the students' familiar language, to clarify English grammar rules and vocabulary, as the students struggle to grasp these concepts solely in English. They pointed out that the TL approach facilitates a more precise explanation of grammar structures, reducing student confusion and enabling them to better comprehend and apply these rules in their writing and speaking. It contrasts with the conventional English-only method which frustrates teachers and students particularly when weaker students need help understanding. Considering the students' linguistic backgrounds, the teachers' empathetic approach further supports the idea that TL can aid in scaffolding language learning. These findings follow Garcia (2014) who stresses the significance of an effective pedagogical practice in a variety of educational contexts for language instruction.

b) To enhance learners' understanding of the English language

The TL approach effectively improves students' English language skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. It has provided a strong foundation for successful language learning among students with low English proficiency. By utilising their mother tongues and the language used as the school instruction medium, students with low proficiency could better comprehend the content through TL practices. This understanding

is crucial for ESL teachers to achieve their teaching objectives in English lessons.

Teacher 1 emphasised the importance of TL in English lessons to help LEP learners maintain their interest in learning the language and improve their proficiency. TL helps students engage in the learning process and carries a humanistic concept by showing empathy towards weaker students. This approach is crucial especially when English is difficult compared to the Bidayuh dialect and Malay. Teachers can boost students' interest in learning a challenging language by incorporating TL. As a result, ESL teachers need to recognise the value of TL and incorporate it into language learning in the classroom.

Teacher 1 responded further, *"As you can see from the students' responses, there is a significant number of participants in this study who not only preferred* TL *but also found that* TL *is more engaging than hearing their teachers speaking alone using English. It allows students with low English proficiency to guess their way correctly during an English lesson."* The TL approach will not be able to be conducted properly if both students and teachers contribute no solid effort. Foremost, the teachers must also have good knowledge of the student's linguistic repertoire. In this study, the teachers have good knowledge of *Malay*, the school medium of instruction, and the Bidayuh dialect, as both teachers are also *Bukar-Sadong Bidayuh*. The students can participate and achieve better when the teacher allows the TL approach. TL approach principle of teaching English to low English proficiency learners is to support and assist them in learning English by adapting to the other familiar languages.

Teacher 2 emphasised that allowing TL such as code-switching in English classes can help low English proficiency students better understand the material. Despite the silence on TL in the Malaysian English Only policy, many ESL teachers have been using it to assist low English proficiency students. Teacher 2 also stated that encouraging students to use their prior knowledge can create a more welcoming and less intimidating environment for low-English-proficiency students. Students who spoke *Bidayuh* and Sarawak *Malay* dialects as their mother tongue had to learn formal *Bahasa Melayu* or *Malay* as the language of instruction, which made learning English daunting for them. TL helped maximise the teaching and learning of the language for these students.

The TL approach is analysed as a highly effective strategy for enhancing students' understanding of English particularly for low-proficiency students. By allowing students to use their mother tongues, such as *Malay* or *Bidayuh*, alongside English, teachers can bridge the gap between their prior linguistic knowledge and the new language they are learning. The approach facilitates comprehension by making complex English language structures and content more accessible. Thus, TL enhances comprehension by leveraging students' linguistic repertoires as valuable tools in the learning process. These findings are in accordance with Garcia and Wei (2014) who defined TL as improving learners' ability to comprehend, use, and produce the English language effectively.

c) To encourage the learning of English language

The TL practices were spontaneous and valuable as a pedagogical tool that encouraged learning, especially for low English proficiency students. Teacher 1 said, *"Although learners engage more in the Malay language in the English class, they are trying to understand and use English as much as possible. As a teacher, I also observed that* TL *encourages weaker students. This* TL *allows my students to bring their communication practices in their daily lives into the classroom. In my school, most students speak Sarawak Malay dialect and Bidayuh."*

Nevertheless, the ESL teachers needed clear guidelines and resources to implement TL. Instead, they felt guilty for not adhering to the English-only policy prescribed by the Ministry of Education. Nevertheless, the teachers concerned agreed that TL was an excellent learning approach for the low-proficiency students in their English classes. Teacher 1 said, *"My school is a tapestry of multilingualism so I will not discourage my students from utilising the languages they are more comfortable with. I notice that my support has helped them learn English. The language they are most comfortable with and most competent to express will make them feel encouraged and at ease to learn more."*

Due to the English-only policy, both teachers were initially not keen to use the TL approach as it could affect the perceptions of the headmaster towards their ability and proficiency in the English language. In order to achieve the objectives of the lesson, the low English proficiency students wanted to be allowed to use a language that they were comfortable with in learning. Teacher 2 said, *"However, not all Bidayuh students are proficient in Sarawak Malay dialect either because it is not their home language. Even the Malays speak the Sarawak Malay dialect at home, and the standard Malay is not used as the medium of instruction. The students do not feel unmotivated to learn English."*

Bidayuh and Sarawak Malay were the dialects the students spoke at home and during their social interactions in and outside of school. In the classroom, the students struggled to concentrate on learning the English language and were not motivated to learn grammar and
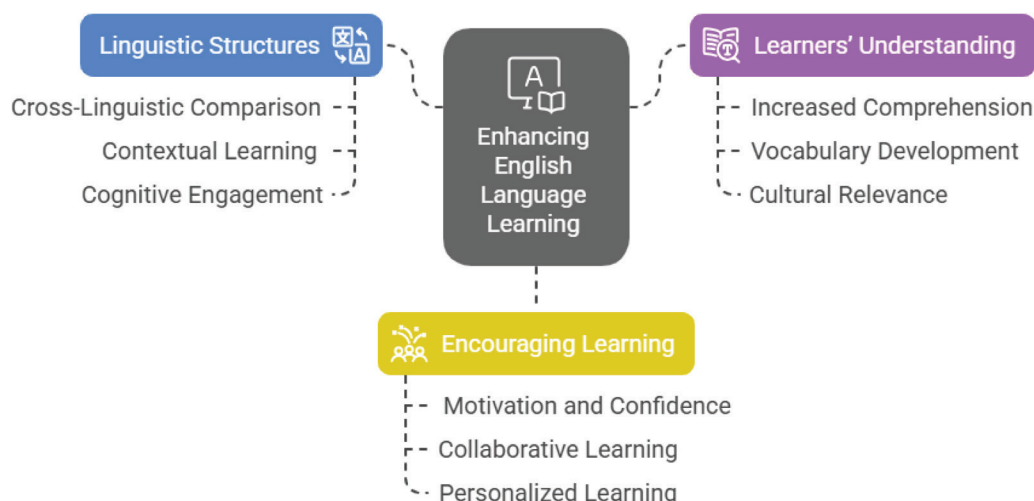
Figure 2: Summary of TL benefits.

language skills seriously. Such learners lost concentration and ignored the ESL teachers' content. Therefore, the ESL teachers allowed the TL approach to motivate the low English proficiency learners and stirred interest in learning English.

Teacher 2 said, *"For me, the biggest hurdle for ESL teachers in the classroom is ensuring the learners are keen to learn English. Should or shouldn't I, as the English teacher, come down to the level of students' proficiency in English to motivate their interest in learning the difficult language? No doubt* TL *is one good way to encourage students as it creates new learning patterns in learning English. The ultimate goal is for the students to always be motivated and concentrate on ESL learning."* According to the teachers, the low English proficiency learners thought English was dull and involved uninteresting activities. Both ESL teachers knew that the tasks the low English proficiency students were engaged in in traditional classrooms were dull. They also agreed that the traditional language teaching styles were too rigid when the LEP students could not speak other languages to understand the English lessons better. In real-life situations, the LEP students always did not speak English. Therefore, the English-only approach lesson plan in the traditional English lesson caused many low-English proficiency students to lose interest and feel less motivated to learn English.

The analysis of the information emphasises TL as a vital tool for encouraging the learning of English, particularly for low English proficiency (LEP) students. Using students' familiar languages provides them with comfort and confidence which allow them to engage more actively in the classroom. The teacher observed that TL motivates weaker students by integrating their daily communication practices into the learning environment and helping them bridge the gap between their native languages and English. This approach fosters a more inclusive and less intimidating atmosphere where students feel encouraged to learn rather than discouraged by the challenges of an English-only policy.

5. CONCLUSION

TL is an effective pedagogical tool in enhancing the learning experience and language acquisition of low English proficiency (LEP) students in Sarawak's ESL classrooms. By integrating students' mother tongues and familiar dialects, such as Malay and Bidayuh, into English instruction, teachers could make complex linguistic structures more accessible, foster deeper comprehension, and create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. TL improved students' understanding of English grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension and boosted their confidence, motivation, and critical thinking skills.

The findings reflect the significant roles TL play in overcoming the limitations of the English-only policy which often alienates low-proficiency students and creates a barrier to effective learning. Both teachers and students acknowledged that using familiar languages facilitated a smoother transition to English proficiency and provided a much-needed sense of comfort and engagement in the classroom. It fosters a dynamic and empathetic learning environment where students feel encouraged to participate and take ownership of their language learning journey.

The findings of the study align with national ESL goals in the implementation of the Common European Framework (CEFR) whereby it encourages communicative and student-centred approaches. This study has shown that English language learning could become more engaging and interactive by utilising the languages that are widely used in the students' linguistic environment.

In conclusion, TL is a valuable strategy for ESL teachers especially in multilingual settings like Sarawak, where linguistic diversity is the norm. By embracing students' linguistic repertoires, teachers can enhance language acquisition and create more inclusive, motivating, and compelling learning experiences for low English proficiency students. Thus, TL should be considered an essential component of ESL teaching in multilingual classrooms particularly for learners struggling with English proficiency. Future studies could explore the long-term effects of TL on students' English language proficiency and academic performance across different educational settings and grade levels.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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